

Norden, Reframed

By Stuart Burch

Abstract

This paper calls for Norden to be understood as a *metaframe*. Related formulations like “Nordic art” or “Nordic welfare” function as *mesoframes*. These trigger multiple *framing devices*. A cache of related framing devices constitutes a *framing archive*. Framing devices work best when operating unobtrusively such that inclusions, exclusions and inconsistencies are condoned or naturalised. Their artifice, however, becomes apparent whenever a frame is questioned. Questioning or criticising a frame gives rise to a *framing dispute*.

The theoretical justification for these typologies is provided at the outset. This schema is then applied to a select range of empirical examples drawn largely from the *disciplinary frames* (Ernst 1996) of art history and museum studies. Despite this specificity it is envisaged that the general principles set out below can and will be used to address a variety of devices, disputes and archives in Norden and beyond.

Keywords: Art, Baltic, frame, framing, museum, Norden, Nordic, Scandinavia.

Setting the Frames

The literature on framing is as vast as it is amorphous (Entman et al. 2008: 175). This is ironic given that the very purpose of a frame is to bring order and focus. A frame is a filter, seeking to include only that which is deemed to be relevant whilst excluding or marginalising all else (Bateson 1954: 187; Schön & Rein 1994: 26; Snow 2004: 384). Some of the ways in which this operates in practice are explored by Erving Goffman in his seminal book *Frame Analysis* first published in 1974. It demonstrates how frames enable individuals and groups “to locate, perceive, identify and label” aspects of the real world (Goffman 1974: 21).

Deborah Tannen’s edited volume *Framing in Discourse* (1993) charts how Goffman’s sociological study had informed two decades of research into an array of subject areas ranging from linguistics to anthropology, artificial intelligence to cognitive and social psychology, and indeed any field that seeks “to investigate the socially constructed nature of reality” (Tannen 1993: 5–6; Tannen & Wallat 1993: 60).

This is elucidated further by the associated discipline of critical discourse analysis. Here a frame is understood as “a cognitive model” (Bloor & Bloor 2007: 11). Made up of “broad, culturally shared systems of belief” such a paradigm establishes the mental connections that are needed to make sense of the world around us (Schön & Rein 1994: 32; Lakoff 2004: xv). Bateson (1954), Tannen (1993) and Schön & Rein (1994) have differing idioms for this overarching frame or “message”, but all share the prefix “*meta-*”. This, plus the existence of a cognate term such as “metaculture” (OED 2010), has prompted me to adopt the concept of a *metaframe*. There are precedents for this, as when Gold (1993: 123) uses it in relation to the “expository model” of the museum. Norden’s status as a metaframe will be addressed in detail shortly. As understood here a metaframe provides the essential context to all forms of communication and meaning-making (Snow 2004: 384). Bloor and Bloor (2007: 11) note that such a frame “operate[s] automatically” and is habitually “accepted as everyday common sense”. Its tacit acknowledgment means that this primary frame of reference is normally overlooked and rarely questioned (Schön & Rein 1994: 23).

Under the mantle of this metaframe are a series of middle or intermediate *mesoframes*. These are fundamentally discursive entities: defined concepts that carry meaning within specific disciplines. A mesoframe seeks to delineate a distinctive subset of a given specialism. A clear demonstration of this is the “Nordic” tag applied to architecture (Lund 2008), music (Yoell 1974), literature (Grønn 2005), landscape (Jones & Olwig 2008) and so forth. Functioning as both bracket and modifier these mesoframes seek to verify the claim that the associated metaframe – Norden – has a distinctive and special contribution to make.

These discursive forays are invariably accompanied by more tangible corollaries. In the case of visual art such devices commence with borders around

paintings and go on to encompass museums and organisations; exhibitions and catalogues; awards and grants etcetera (Oberhardt 2001; Carter & Geczy 2006: 164ff). Each device is delineated in some way and underpinned by the accepted truths or generally held assumptions that make up a particular metaframe. Every time a recurring device is reintroduced or a fresh one implemented, another layer is added to the *framing archive*. The mediation and consumption of this store of devices occurs at the discursive level of the mesoframe, which in turn both sustains and replenishes the overarching metaframe.

Explicit and indirect connections are fostered across this compendium of frames. This occurs through a complex chain of “generative metaphors” (Schön & Rein 1994: 26–27). New framings will draw on the meta- and mesoframes and their associated archive. Novel insights are engendered through such strategies as innovative inclusions or unconventional omissions. The resulting devices lead to inventive interpretations that their instigators hope will be praised for casting “new light” on a familiar subject – as we shall see in the case of the mesoframe that is “Nordic art”.

This, however, leads to an innate tension between continuity and change. It is when the latter takes precedence that a *framing dispute* is likely to occur. As a result the frame itself shifts into focus (Tannen 1993: 4). Such disagreements are most evident within the frame of party politics and policy controversies (Schön & Rein 1994; Klandermans 2004: 368; Snow 2004: 384–5). It is for this reason that frames play such an important role in protest movements. Campaigning groups thus do what policy makers do: frame reality to match their beliefs (Snow 2004: 384). Hence Lakoff’s (2004: xv) pithy observation: “Reframing *is* social change”.

So, despite a metaframe’s regulatory function, the meaning of objects and ideas couched within is neither inherent nor fixed. Significance is instead determined by the mode of framing. With each reframing different aspects come to the fore, altering the relationship between actors and objects (cf. Snow 2004: 384). Framing devices are thus cognitive strategies. They compete symbolically for legitimacy in relation to the archive of other framing devices – both of the past and of the present. Each new device seeks to influence the future trajectory of that archive, its mesoframe and, ultimately, its metaframe (cf. Bourdieu 1985: 728).

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This intentionally concise and consciously partial overview of a select range of texts dealing with frames and framing has enabled me to construct a typology of devices, archives and disputes encapsulated by an overarching metaframe and at least one intermediate mesoframe. In the next section I will begin to apply these to my empirical material. Prior to doing so, however, it is perhaps instructive to foreground the main tenets of my argument. It centres on the word *Norden*, the literal meaning of which is “the North”. *Norden* will be treated as a *metaframe*: an endemic condition that serves as a point of reference and recognition for multiple *mesoframes* and an extremely diverse *archive of framing devices*. These devices

are “articulation” or “focussing” mechanisms (Douglas 1984: 64; Snow 2004: 384). They operate like a frame around a painting, valorising what is enclosed within its borders and channelling a viewer’s perception accordingly. Such frames are meant to be subordinate but they play much more than simply a marginal role (cf. Penny 2005: 6). This becomes evident whenever a frame is *disputed*. It is then that the frame comes into its own, emerging like an exoskeleton to be defended or undermined.

Framing is, in short, essential to meaning-making. There is of course a neat irony that this assertion should appear in a journal entitled *Culture Unbound*. Culture is *always* bound. For, as John Cage (1939/1973: 113; Springfield 1982: 115) put it:

Structure	without life	is dead.	But Life	without
structure	is un–seen	.		

It follows therefore that Norden and the suite of devices of which it is composed is an impossibility without being placed within some sort of bounds, structure or – as it is named here – frame. Yes, Norden can, and frequently is, reframed. But it is *never* unbound.

Applying the Frames

If one accepts the premise – Norden is a metaframe – what “broad, culturally shared systems of belief” does it connote? Well, when it comes to “northern Europe, stereotypes of untouched nature, clear light, cool oceans, melancholy and mythical figures often dominate the picture” (NIFCA 2000; cf. Palmqvist 1988: 9). For additional “mental connections” we need look no further than this special issue of *Culture Unbound*. Under the title “Uses of the Past – Nordic historical cultures in comparative perspective”, the guest editor, Peter Aronsson, chose to begin his call for papers as follows:

Nordic cultural representations have a historical reputation that stretches from an older bellicose layer to a modern welfare dimension. Images and narratives span the Vikings and the Thirty Years’ War to a Nordic welfare state characterized by a generous public sector, gender equality, strong child protection and so on – all of which are communicated within Norden and abroad.

Present-day notions of “the North” are thus built on conceptions and associations that are as longstanding as they are divergent. In a certain context and at a particular historical moment Norden connotes conflict (“an older bellicose layer”), whilst in another it equates to childcare (“a modern welfare dimension”). Paradoxically enough, these and other inconsistencies confirm rather than counter Norden’s status as a metaframe. It is so entrenched that incongruities and contradictions can be enlisted in its defence. Each and every intimation or refutation of Norden – including the very article you are reading – makes it “real”.

This Nordic-themed special issue of *Culture Unbound*, like all such framing

devices, builds on and augments the metaframe that is Norden. New formulations overlay those that have gone before in the framing archive. This explains why Stephan Tschudi-Madsen (1997: 8) chose to begin his introduction to the UNESCO book *Our Nordic Heritage* with reference to Pytheas, Pliny the Elder and Procopius and their ancient notions of “Thule”. This Greek and Latin name for what Pytheas took to be the northernmost region in the world was revived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nilsson (n.d.) charts this through the writings of Goethe and the landscape paintings of Caspar David Friedrich to its “ultimate perversion during the Nazi regime” and then, in the post-war period, an internal strengthening of a shared Nordic sensibility “with new financial, political and cultural networks.”

A pivotal player in such networks is the Nordic Council and its related institutions (Jones & Hansen 2008: 566). Formed in 1952, this body, through the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers, is responsible for co-operation between the five states and three semi-autonomous areas that make up Norden as it is most commonly understood. These are respectively Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden plus Åland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Scandinavia, meanwhile, is a more geographically circumscribed frame, referring as it does to Denmark, Norway and Sweden or, less frequently, the peninsula made up of Norway, Sweden and the north-western part of Finland (Grønn 2005: 4).

The Nordic Council facilitates the furtherance of Norden “from above” by fostering activities and sentiments that sustain it “from below”. With reference to the latter, Henrik Stenius (2003: 21) has opined that “Nordic citizens feel that they are members of an (invented) Nordic family”. Jonas Thente (2010) has recently speculated that, whilst this familial sentiment is arguably evident among older residents of the Nordic region, the same cannot be said for younger citizens of an increasingly mobile, interconnected world. It is notable, however, that Thente’s cautionary remark came as he reported on that year’s Nordic Council Literature Prize. Thente allayed his concerns about the diminution of Nordicity by looking upon this prize as a token of togetherness: Nordic affinities might well be being eroded, fretted Thente, “but at least we have the Nordic Council Literature Prize in common” (Thente 2010).

Intended to “increase interest in the literature and language of the neighbouring countries”, the Nordic Council Literature Prize dates back to 1962 when it was first presented to the Swedish author, Eyvind Johnson (1900–76). Three years later his compatriot, the composer and conductor Karl-Birger Blomdahl (1916–68) became the inaugural winner of the Nordic Council Music Prize. In 1995 these awards were complemented by the Nordic Council Nature and Environment Prize and, a decade on, the Film Prize. The Nordic Council is not the only organisation to oversee such competitions. A case in point is the Carnegie Art Award established in 1998 “to promote Nordic contemporary painting”.

Jonas Thente is surely correct to look upon these devices and their associated mesoframes – Nordic art, Nordic literature, Nordic music – as strategies for sustaining a northern kinship. The debates triggered by the conferral of each and every “Nordic” award guarantees the prolongation of Norden. Thanks to them its future is assured, even if the art, literature or music being discussed are devoid of any purported “Nordic” traits that might be associated with that metaframe.

This becomes a bone of contention, however, whenever attention shifts from the Nordic parameters of a given prize to the Nordic credentials of its contenders: an action that often leads to much soul-searching about the particular Nordic qualities of whatever cultural manifestation is being scrutinised. Thus the Carnegie Art Award of 2008 sparked off the oft-asked question: “Do we have contemporary Nordic art?” (Kristensen 2007). Ten artists featured in that year’s competition were quizzed about this. Two were categorically of the opinion that it did *not* exist. Three more were uncertain. Another felt that contemporary Nordic art probably *did* exist, but that it was of no interest. Three answered in the affirmative, although they each found it “difficult to say what it is”. The Norwegian, Tor-Magnus Lundebj, for example, was unable to decide if Norden’s aesthetic imprint stemmed from site-specificity or some sort of ill-defined Nordic temperament.

Of the ten shortlisted artists probed about their views on Nordic art, it was the Finnish painter Silja Rantanen who provided the most emphatic response: “Contemporary Nordic art is art made by Nordic artists” (cited in Kristensen 2007: 10). She went on to add that what bound these artists together was the shared experience of living in countries that are inhabited sparsely by wealthy, educated people. Yet even she discerned aspects of these “caring” societies that, in her opinion, fail to manifest themselves in the art produced there. Rantanen was also uneasy about making generalisations, cautioning that they tend to lead people to resort to “ready-made interpretative models” (i.e. *frames*) rather than “looking at individual works”. This can be construed as meaning that critics and other commentators have a tendency to seek out *a priori* qualities framed as “Nordic”. The resulting findings are then used as evidence to support the framing thesis: “Yes, we *do* have Nordic art”.

The final word on the existence or otherwise of contemporary Nordic art goes to Fie Norsker from Denmark. If forced to select just a single “common element”, Norsker mused, “it would probably be [an] interest in art outside the Nordic countries” (cited in Kristensen 2007: 10). This amounts to a negative affirmation of the Nordic frame.

Norsker is far from alone in being coy when it comes to (not) defining contemporary Nordic art. Nordic-themed exhibitions and their accompanying texts distinguish themselves by their equivocation on this very matter. More often than not they end up reaching conclusions that “point in several different directions” (Gether & Helveg 2008: 16). Other devices take this a stage further by

sustaining the Nordic metaframe through overtly questioning, fragmenting and undermining the very homogeneity that one might think was essential for it to retain any semblance of unity based on thematic or stylistic equivalence (see e.g. Grønn 2005). As intimated above, however, equivocations and flat denials, paradoxically enough, play a crucial role in populating the mesoframe of “Nordic art”, enhancing its archive of framing devices and reinforcing the commonsense notion that Norden is something palpable, if not exactly definable.

This is not to say that all attempts at definition are lacking. Take, for instance, the catalogue to the 8th International Watercolour Festival of 2007. In it, Piet van Leuven, the coordinator of the European Confederation of Watercolour Societies, set himself the task of characterising “Nordic watercolour”. His “personal opinion” was that paintings that fell into this category were marked by informality, experiment and unorthodoxy. Van Leuven (2007: 6), seemingly without a trace of irony, professed his uncertainty as to whether the latter stemmed from the fact that a formal society for Nordic watercolour had only been in existence since 1989 or if unorthodoxy was “an atavism engendered by fierce, world-exploring Scandinavian ancestors”.

Another thing that struck van Leuven (2007: 6) was the Nordic watercolourist’s predilection for the extreme use of light and dark. Was this, he speculated, a result of “climatic conditions”? Whilst this question went typically unanswered, one thing is certain: light serves as an essential point of reference for all so-called “Nordic art”, whether painted in watercolour or oil. For many art critics and art historians, light is Nordic art’s *leitmotif*. A point of origin for this was the 1982 Brooklyn Museum exhibition “Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880–1910”. In the wake of this show the Swedish art critic and curator, Sune Nordgren (1983: 43) credited its American initiator, Kirk Varnedoe, with “cast[ing] a new light over all our national painters.”

Over a quarter of a century later, light continues to shine as a trademark for the art of “the North”. Two recent examples, both from Great Britain, illustrate this and show how light is used as a metonymy for Nordic art on a variety of scales. First, “Northern Lights: Swedish Landscapes from the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm” mounted by Birmingham University’s Barber Institute in 2009. Here a single Nordic nation – Sweden – came under the spotlight (Burch 2009: 334–335). A year later the national galleries of London and Edinburgh collaborated to bring “Christen Købke: Danish Master of Light” to a British audience. In this particular instance the gilt-framed canvases of a solitary Nordic artist exuded and radiated the “clear light” of Norden. And, as was noted at the start of this section, “clear light” is seen as a hallmark of this metaframe.

“Northern Light” – this time in the singular – has also been used to market Swedish art for an Australian audience (Cross 1997). This, plus the two examples mentioned above, pay testimony to the enduring legacy of Kirk Varnedoe’s “Northern Light” exhibition of the early 1980s. This was reinforced by his

subsequent book, *Northern Light: Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century*, published in 1988. The shift from “Scandinavian” to “Nordic” in the subtitles of the exhibition and book reveals the flexibility of the terminology at play when it comes to the art of “the North”. The constituent parts are equally fluid, as is apparent from the trend for travelling, temporary displays of fine art from the Nordic region that came in the wake of the Brooklyn Museum show. Subsequent manifestations, such as the London Hayward Gallery’s “Dreams of Summer Night” (1986) and, more recently, “A Mirror of Nature: Nordic Landscape Painting, 1840–1910” (2007) can and should be seen as subtly different manifestations of the archive of framing devices that articulates and animates the mesoframe that is Nordic art.

These and other shows tour Norden’s museums and, very often, incorporate a more far-flung destination in their itinerary. Thus, during the period spanning the Spring of 2006 and January 2008, “A Mirror of Nature” moved around the national museums of fine art in Finland, Sweden and Norway. It then relocated to Minnesota in the American Midwest before coming to a close at Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen. This diversion over the North Atlantic marked an anniversary: for the same destination – the Minneapolis Institute of Art – was one of the venues for the “Northern Light” exhibition of 1982–83.

This confirms Peter Aronsson’s point about Nordic cultural representations being “communicated within Norden and abroad”. An exhibition such as “Northern Light” provides a means of marketing Norden to the world. The true promotional potential of this was realised in the “Scandinavia Show”, a two day showcase of “Scandinavian design, travel, lifestyle, fashion and food” held in central London in October 2010 (Scandinavia Show 2010). This event demonstrated how the Nordic fellowship accords the sparsely populated nations of northern Europe a platform on the global stage. Recalling Erving Goffman it is possible to consider Nordic-branded culture as a frame for locating, distinguishing, identifying and labelling Norden in the international marketplace. And – to echo John Cage – Norden’s Nordic art provides a convenient structure to make it “seen”.

Brooklyn Museum’s “Northern Light” exhibition is a particular effective illustration of this because its display of nineteenth and early twentieth century painting was part of a wider initiative entitled “Northern Visions”. This featured solo exhibitions of contemporary art by Asger Jorn and Öyvind Fahlström as well as *Sleeping Beauty – Art Now: Scandinavia Today*, a group show first presented at the Guggenheim in New York before travelling to Philadelphia and Los Angeles. The fact that these coincided with Brooklyn Museum’s “Northern Light” cultivated a link between the art of the past and the art of the present. They were thus vehicles for the continuance of a tradition and strategies for consolidating its archival inheritance.

A central component of that archive is a careful selection of artworks painted around the turn of the twentieth century, a period when the art of “the North” was first codified (Burch 2009: 336). The supreme example of this is Richard Bergh’s painting *Nordic Summer Evening* (1899–1900, oil on canvas, 170 x 223.5, Göteborgs Konstmuseum). This rendering of “light and landscape... [and] psychological tension” (Varnedoe 1982: 83) is iconic precisely because it distills the Nordic metaframe. And it continues to act a catalyst for Nordicity. One of its many reframings includes being reproduced in the catalogue to the 2006 exhibition “Bent: Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Scandinavian Art” where it appears alongside Annica Karlsson Rixon’s photographic series *Nordic Light* (1997–98) (Chadwick 2006: 12). This juxtaposition visualises the metaframe of Norden and the mesoframe of Nordic art: frames that habitually evoke expansive landscapes, light summers and dark winters, nature – and introspection. In *Bent*, the latter quality is highlighted and used to connect with Eija-Liisa Ahtila, a contemporary Finnish video artist whose work apparently “shares an introspective tradition among earlier Nordic artists from Edvard Munch and August Strindberg to Ingmar Bergman” (Chadwick 2006: 13). These supposedly inherited qualities can and should be seen as the sorts of “generative metaphors” that are instrumental to the articulation of Norden’s archive of framing devices.

The curator of “Bent” was Whitney Chadwick: a sort of Kirk Varnedoe for a new generation of consumers of Norden. However, unlike her predecessor, Chadwick was eager to point out that, in choosing her artists, she was not aiming to seek out “a shared or ‘authentic’ Nordic or Scandinavian sensibility in their work” (Chadwick 2006: 9). But this did not stop her alluding to familiar tropes voiced years earlier in Varnedoe’s “Northern Light”.

It is not unusual to come across instances where Norden is invoked – and then almost immediately disavowed. A further example is *Like Virginity, Once Lost: Five Views on Nordic Art Now* (1999). Its authors, lest we be misled by the book’s title, stress that their initiative did not seek “to define a geographical region” or even “contemporary ‘Nordic art’” (Birnbaum & Nilsson 1999: cover & 9). A similar incongruity occurred nearly two decades earlier in the form of the previously mentioned “Northern Visions” project – an archival antecedent that is actually cited at the start of *Like Virginity, Once Lost*. Its co-commissioner, the Swedish curator and museum director, Pontus Hultén was almost apologetic about the regional grouping he had helped facilitate. He urged that any Nordic similarities that might be sensed were illusionary and merely the result of looking at the countries of northern Europe from the distant vantage point of North America (Hultén 1982: 11).

Hultén’s compatriot, Sune Nordgren would make a similar remark some years later when he dismissed the so-called “Nordic fellowship” as a “fabrication” only given credence by “New World” curators such as Kirk Varnedoe. Nordgren,

writing in 1990, considered the construction “Nordic art” to be “no longer something worth pursuing”. It was, and always has been, “a case of romantic self-deception... that has never functioned... [and that] is kept alive today by means of artificial respiration” (Nordgren 1990: 7).

Sune Nordgren, it must be stressed, was the exact same person who had praised Varnedoe for reframing Nordic art back in the early 1980s. Even after voicing his trenchant criticisms, Nordgren seemed happy to continue his involvement with Nordic-themed exhibitions, penning articles perpetuating Norden’s reputation for “barbarians and vandals” (Nordgren 1993).

This schizophrenic attitude towards the “fiction” that is Norden is par for the course (Per Unckel cited in Halén & Wickman 2006: 5). No wonder then that even a journal devoted to all things Nordic is able to conclude that Norden exists whilst not existing (Frenander 2009: 4). Such bewilderment is a confusion brought about by staring fixedly at the picture whilst overlooking the frame. This is because the images on show are contingent, capricious and cloaked in obfuscatory “explanations”. Sune Nordgren was right to talk of “artificial respiration”. But he failed to grasp that these respirators are frames: the very lungs that breathe life into Norden. Without them Norden would expire. That’s why Norden appears to fight for breath every time a framing dispute threatens to constrict its airways – as we shall see in the next section.

Disputing the Frames

During the period 2007–2009 the Nordic Council sought to use its “Art and Culture Programme” to “renew and revitalise the Nordic art and culture co-operation in the Nordic region” (Nordic Culture Point 2007). Knowing as we do that “reframing is social change” (to recall Lakoff 2004: xv), this seemingly unremarkable assertion of rejuvenation is indicative of more than a mere administrative or discursive shift.

The reframing led to the termination of NIFCA, the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art. This was the Nordic Council of Ministers’ “expert organ for visual culture” from 1997 until 2006 (Gelin 2006: 6). An indicative example of the sorts of activities supported by this organisation was Kunsthalle Wien’s *Norden: Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Nordeuropa* (Folie & Kölle 2000). NIFCA’s leadership used this ambitious survey of contemporary practice as evidence that Nordic art had “moved into focus more than ever” (NIFCA 2000). Those in power at the Nordic Council clearly had other ideas, however, when they chose to disband what had hitherto been one of its principal policy or “action” frames (cf. Schön & Rein 1994: 32).

A flavour of this framing dispute is evident from Cecilia Gelin’s (2006: 6–7) foreword to the book *Art and Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations*. In it Gelin announced the imminent demise of the organisation

she had led in its final years. NIFCA's cessation was part of the above-mentioned "renewal" process that would, according to Gelin, see the closure of nine of the twenty-one Nordic Council organisations and committees concerned with cultural collaboration. Gelin was at the time unaware of what was going to replace them. She was, however, certain that the "programming" of the new structure was going to be "decided by politicians". Gelin's framing of the situation led her to interpret this as further confirmation that "institutions and spaces for thinking processes and critical discourse are gradually [being] squeezed out of societies in the Nordic countries" (Gelin 2006: 6).

Whilst Gelin might have opposed the decision to end NIFCA, she did concede that cultural collaboration in Norden was in need of overhaul (Gelin 2006: 6). NIFCA's successor as the "counterpoint" for such co-operation was *Kulturkontakt Nord*. The evidently acrimonious realignment that led to this change confirms Schön and Rein's (1994: 29) point that "[f]rames are not free-floating but are grounded in the institutions that sponsor them, and policy controversies are disputes among institutional actors who sponsor conflicting frames." With this in mind it is pertinent to examine how *Kulturkontakt Nord* characterises Norden. It is notable, for instance, that an expanded concept of Norden is promoted from the very moment that one accesses its website (*Kulturkontakt Nord* n.d.). Its homepage features a map plotting the various "Nordic Houses" and "Nordic Institutes" in Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Finland and Åland as well as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This can be interpreted as an attempt to realise some of Cecilia Gelin's aspirations voiced as the curtain fell on NIFCA. She had urged for a transnational approach, shifting the focus to "the so-called peripheries" in an effort to scrutinise "the history of colonialism in the Nordic countries" (Gelin 2006: 7).

Kulturkontakt Nord's elevation of the Baltic States and the semi-autonomous components of the Nordic region is not the only instance of an expanded, "post-colonial" treatment of Norden. In the process of researching this paper another Nordic-themed house – Voksenåsen in Oslo – hosted an exhibition featuring "ten artists with an immigrant background from Norway, Sweden and Denmark" (Leadership Foundation 2010). Its title – "New Nordic Art" – is indicative of an incipient process of reframing. The same phrase features in the promotional material of *Muuto*, a business that likes to promote itself as a unique proponent of "new Nordic design" (Danish Edge 2008). The company states that its designers "are striving to expand the Scandinavian design tradition with new and original perspectives." This is confirmation that naming and framing are complementary processes (Schön & Rein 1994: 26) given that *Muuto* is derived from *muutos*, a Finnish word meaning "new perspective" (*Muuto* n.d.).

Muuto represents a practical example of a "generative metaphor" whereby "a familiar constellation of ideas is carried over... to a new situation" (to recall Schön & Rein 1994: 26–27). The term "Scandinavian design" was first coined in 1951

(Halén & Wickman 2006: 15) and is by now a well enough established mesoframe to tolerate novel adaptations. Its frames are tested to the limit by the emergence of the design store *Nu Nordik* in the Estonian capital, Tallinn. The firm's founder, Anu Samarüütel, chose this name based on her belief that "Estonian culture and attitude is closer to that of the Scandinavian countries than to Eastern Europe" (cited in Charles & Marie 2008). This contentious claim is part and parcel of the reorientation of the so-called Baltic States in the final years of the twentieth century. Their shift from the Soviet Union to the European Union and the impact of geopolitics on the makeup and role of "northern Europe" marks a process of reframing on a continental scale.

Belonging to a region – or being so framed – can be a positive or negative thing. Indeed, framing forms a distinct strand in international relations literature (see e.g. Mintz & Redd 2003). A good example of this is the mesoframe "Eastern Europe". Webb (2008: xi) explains that this term was used between 1945 and 1990 to describe the then Soviet bloc countries, but that it did not include the Soviet Union itself. Czepczyński (2008: 3) in his book, *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities* notes that, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, many commentators from the newly independent states of Europe have expressed their dislike for the label "Eastern Europe" given its connotations with "the Soviet empire and Russia". By this logic, "Eastern Europe" means "post-Communist" – an equally contested term. Czepczyński (2008: 149) favours "Central Europe" or the "re-branding of the region" as "New Europe". But in doing so he almost entirely occludes the three Baltic States from his study. They clearly fall outside his framing of "Central Europe". But if this is so, and if Webb is correct to say that "Eastern Europe" described the Soviet bloc but "normally excluded the Soviet Union itself", where does this leave the former Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic?

Such uncertainty and the negative connotations of being categorized as "Eastern European" or "post-socialist" helps explain why Estonia's current president, Toomas Hendrik Ilves has sought to frame his re-independent nation as a *Nordic* rather than a *Baltic* country. For Ilves (1999), the Baltic States were united only in misery: if the Baltic metaframe is evocative of anything, he argues, then it is the shared memory of military occupation by hostile powers.

However, it seems that "occupation" is not always something to be lamented. In stark contrast to attitudes concerning the belligerence of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, present-day Latvia and Estonia look back on the seventeenth century as the "happy Swedish time" (Burch & Smith 2007: 920; Burch & Zander 2008). Such munificence towards Sweden's long-gone imperial heyday explains – in part at least – the re-branding exercises that occurred in the run-up to two events in Estonia's recent history: the first relating to the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest held in Tallinn; the second concerning Estonia's accession to the European Union two years later. Under the mantra "positively transforming",

Estonia sought to divest itself of its Soviet heritage by completing a “return to Europe”. A means to this end was the decision to market Estonia as “a Nordic country with a twist”. This, it has been argued, represented an attempt, not only to embed Estonia in Norden and free it from its Soviet past, but also to differentiate it from present-day Russia to the east *and* its Baltic neighbours to the south (Jarvis & Kallas 2006: 161). So, whilst differentiation is essential to destination branding, identification with others – i.e. Norden – is equally important.

Of course, Estonia could hardly pretend to be exactly the same as the entrenched members of Norden. Instead, access was sought through humour and the gentle disparagement of its privileged neighbours to the north. One advertisement (i.e. framing device) drew on Norden’s metaframe of accepted images and ideas in order to subvert them:

You like a stormy view, rough coastline, snowy forests, minimalist churches, clean streets, well-groomed gardens, intriguing stone architecture or modern glass edifices, and many blondes – but you know that Scandinavians may be so boring and sterile. Come and see the effect of a dose of extravagance, irony and experimenting in Estonia. (cited in Priks 2008)

Here we have an alternative and less immediately favourable inflection of Norden: not so much a case of Scandinavia than Blandinavia (cf. Foreman 2005). Estonia has sought to position itself as a potential antidote to this by arguing that the staid Nordic brand would be refreshed and reinvigorated by its inclusion. With this in mind, Estonia could be seen as a foil to Norden; a sort of “borderzone” or “bufferstate” perched on its edge – its *frame* (cf. Hjort 1991: 37).

Whether Estonia remains a peripheral Nordic “outpost” or becomes conceptually manoeuvred to Norden’s core will say a great deal about future framings of Europe (cf. Pousette 1993: 5). What *is* clear is that the Norden of tomorrow will differ in all sorts of major and minor ways from the Norden of the past and, indeed, the present. By excavating the layers in the framing archive and honing in on disputes and reframings it becomes possible to chart the mutations of this metaframe. In so doing we will be able to detect aspects that differ from today’s commonsense associations. After all, “whatever happened to sex in Scandinavia” (OCA 2008)? Will it always be possible to speak of a distinct “Nordic model” when it comes to the welfare state? And how will Norden’s reputation for democracy and equality fare given that, as I write these words, the world’s media is training its lens on the electoral successes of the far-right in Sweden? The last of these speculations reminds us that we should be mindful of our frames, otherwise we may well find that groups less palatable than our own will do the reframings for us.

Reframing the Frames

This paper has made the case for the framing of Norden. The schema presented here incorporates a diversity of tangible and discursive frames under one

overarching metaframe. Evidence for this has come in the form of multiple framing devices, a small sample of which has been addressed above. However, whilst this archive of devices helps substantiate the claims made about Norden, it needs to be stressed that this metaframe fits within an even more pervasive “system of belief”: the metaframe of nationalism. It is this that is the true “endemic condition” in northern Europe as everywhere else (Billig 1995: 6). Even the most ardent expression of Norden is framed in national terms. The inaugural Nordic Art Triennial held in the Swedish city of Eskilstuna in 2010 was organised, implemented and presented along national lines (Pantzare 2010). This was equally the case in 1982 when the Guggenheim structured its “Sleeping Beauty” exhibition around an equitable selection of two artists from each of the five nations of Norden (Hultén 1982: 14).

Analyses of Nordic sentiment and understanding confirm it to be subservient to that even more powerful framing construct: the nation (Frenander 2009: 4). Indeed, one of Norden’s strengths is its subservient status. It does not impinge in any serious way on the metaframe of nationalism. Estonia’s Nordic ambitions are undertaken to strengthen not diminish its national identity. Kirk Varnedoe might have “cast a new light” over Norden’s “national painters” with his “Northern Light” exhibition. But these artists remain national first, Nordic second. The exact same artworks enlisted to Norden’s cause slip seamlessly back to where they “belong”: the national canons and national museums of Norden’s constituent states and autonomous regions.

Put harshly, Norden is an add-on; a pleasant diversion; a convenient tool for marketing and a means for the affluent nations of northern Europe to have a profile that belies their international importance. But this is not to belittle the significance of Norden as a subject for study. Indeed, the fact that Norden can accommodate so many inherent contradictions makes it a fascinating topic for analysis. Any such investigation will surely conclude that Norden is a very flexible phenomenon. Funders and policy makers ought to recognise this so as to avoid repeating humdrum framings. That Norden can tolerate all manner of divergence should give scope for inventive reframings by curators, scholars and sponsors alike. The Nordic Council has opened the way for a more expansive definition of Norden – and with it the frames will follow. If this leads to frame disputes then that is all well and good, for they will help expose Norden’s fault-lines and delimitations.

Yet for these flaws to be properly appreciated we must sharpen our framing faculties. This will dispel many misconceptions held even by those driving the framing devices. It is, for example, troubling that the instigators of the first Nordic Art Triennial could claim to have approached Norden “as a nought, as an unwritten sheet” (Pantzare 2010: 10). Equally problematic is the fact that the authors of *Like Virginity, Once Lost: Five Views on Nordic Art Now* could countenance their vision of Norden as “a fantasy that lives only within these

pages” (Birnbaum & Nilsson 1999: 9). These assertions are indicative of serious and fundamental misunderstandings. The exhibition and the book are only explicable because of a vast and multifaceted pre-existing metaframe constituted of an ever-expanding archive of devices and disputes.

To really grasp the framing features of Norden one would do well to consult the writings of Gregory Bateson, an early exponent of frame analysis and author of “Theory of Play and Fantasy” first published in 1954. This makes plain that, in order to assess the “semantic validity” of the sort of “fantasy” put forward by Birnbaum and Nilsson, we must “examine the nature of the frame in which these interpretations are offered” (Bateson 1954/1972: 184). This is precisely what I have endeavoured to do in this playful paper.

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