

Ulla Ryum

The Dance of the Polar Bears

For the second day in a row, I have gone up to the top of a snow-free little cliff behind the town. From here I can see over the entire bay to the unapproachable ice-covered mountains on the other side. The town lies beneath me, doggedly clinging to a round clay bank which is covered with a thin layer of earth and a striking number of pebbles. Far beyond the cliffs I can see the ice field and a tremendous iceberg, which has apparently run aground and for several days has not moved a millimetre, even though the southern current will soon set in for real and break up the ice.

It is spring; the sun has grown more powerful and the sled tracks on the ice covering the bay have started to become wet with slush and heavy to drive along. But the most important sign - the one that brings joy to everyone's face - is that the snow bunting has arrived with the Lapland bunting. Everyone goes outside as soon as they can and sniffs the air, watching the wet snow glide down over the cliffs, and following the small round birds on their hunt for something edible in the withered yellow grass, which here and there pokes up through the snow.

Up here I imagine I see two of the most dramatic local contrasts: the town's entirely frozen harbour with five small red coastal ships crammed in between the ice packs, and the first strip of black ocean, which in some places has broken free of the ice field outside the protected harbour. I can see some other people on the cliffs further out toward the bay's opening to the ocean. They are waiting, as I am, for the particular sound of the breaking up of the ice; they look after the meteorological observation post, and are waiting to be able to send the last ice reports down along the coast. It is something special that everyone is waiting for now: liberation from eight months in the grip of the ice.

It was the old, traditional, house-builder and storyteller, Ethel, who, in response to my question about what she would tell her children if they wanted to hear something very important and necessary from up here, answered: "the sound of the first opening in the ice". Is that a story, I heard

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myself ask, and with a big toothless smile she answered that it was easier to talk about the hunter who married his daughter to a dog, or about the skua's sunglasses. Now you must go up and listen for yourself, so you can maybe tell the story. And after a long pause, in which she thoughtfully dipped cookies into black coffee, she said that there was always something that could only be remembered and nothing else. She looked at me sceptically, as if she was not sure I understood the weight of what she had said. Her words were followed by the special expression for that which lives in the memory, or possibly in the soul: both hands covered her face, the left over the uppermost part of her forehead, resting on the hairline, and the right over her eyes. Her posture was so meaningful that I did not let myself be distracted by the half-softened cookie she still held between the fingers of her right hand.

And now, after nearly two hours on my little summit, I have at last heard the sound of the opening of the ocean, overwhelmingly distant and in a strange way so present, so encompassing, that it is as if the air is being pressed up into the sky. In the next moment two new crevices break open and suddenly it becomes the wholly normal sound of breaking ice, a sound which closely answers what one's eyes can assure one of - that the water crashes up over the edge of the ice only to be once more dragged down into a narrow roaring channel, coal black and threatening.

The sun has moved and it is beginning to get quite cold. Four people are getting a couple of dog sleds ready down by the harbour; the sled tracks on the bay are freezing, so they want to make use of the last few hours of sunlight in the afternoon. I am so cold that my fingers have difficulty holding a pen, and I want to go home and try to write about what perhaps can only be

remembered. It hits me that it has already become an entirely normal event, a long awaited moment of departure and change, which repeats itself year after year, after year, after year, even though it is never quite the same as the previous year. The sound of the breaking up of the ice and the black ocean that roars out is embedded in my memory, and Ethel is right: it is easier to talk about why the skua has to hide its gaze behind sunglasses.

At the moment of writing, I share the view that actions can only be performed or performed again, if that is possible. An action can never be repeated, and it usually loses its special meaning when it is only described. Events, on the other hand, can be told and retold - almost to the point of confusion - and without particular differences, even if the telling is naturally a misrepresentation, for the space around the telling will necessarily be new. The difference between an action and an event is that an action is embedded in the moment in which it unfolds - even if it is only spoken - whereas an event refers to something which has not necessarily occurred, but which could possibly take place. Yet events will not occur in such an unknown, unpredictable, and often dangerous space as that which contains important actions between people, between animals and people, and between nature and people: nature's play.

Nature does not act; it is we who are forced to carry out a series of actions in order to survive nature's unpredictability, its climate, its weather. It is probably for this same reason that a concept such as "nature" is virtually unknown in many partially oral cultures. Only specific names for animals, places, rivers, lakes, wind directions, rain, snow, and so on are found.

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to either polar or grizzly bears. The movements in the polar bear dances are shaped by a cold climate, where deep snow, large ice formations, and movement impeded by bulky hoods give characteristic "bumpy" motions. The grizzly dances, however, have gently waving arm movements with claw-like hand positions, and take place between trees and cliffs, the dancers' bodies weaving freely between dense trees. The central moment of action in the polar bear dance is the bear's fall to the ice. In the grizzly dance it is often two or three hunters who, so to speak, bring down the animal, while the polar bear hunters slowly and attentively circle in on the fallen animal.

It is my experience that these movements, sometimes quick and sometimes very slow, can be read as a series of descriptions of things that happen in a warm or cold climate. In this context we can see that the first thing that is forgotten when a group of people are forced to change their place of residence or their climate are all the movements that are precisely determined by climate and form the meaning-giving accumulation of events around the central action.

In Winnipeg, Canada, I took part in a meeting where a group of elders from the Cree Nation had taken it upon themselves to pass on a more or less forgotten dance-story to very young children, because it is now recognised that these stories are important for the restoration of mental health, and therefore necessary for the children's cultural, social and mental survival. Similar problems can be observed among immigrants and refugees in Denmark. It seems in many instances that it is the human fight for survival with climate and nature - or the absence of those things - that causes cultural expression.

It has become clear to me through my many periods of residence and travel in

climatically extreme geographic regions, where the inhabitants, so to speak, live on their fate-lines: in a hard climate, in a difficult area, there really is talk about action for survival. This probably can only be remembered and reenacted under the right circumstances and with carefully prepared stories. It is my experience that life-significant forms of art about survival form the core in the majority of these peoples' staged events, for instance, dance, storytelling, displays of sport, and so on.

In the same way, a core of Ur-dramatic art can be hidden inside classical Greek drama, which is still constantly performed. These previously mentioned "right circumstances" seek to activate all the forms of knowledge, which must be accessible between people in the culture in question, that is to say, that which can be remembered, and which in oral cultures can only be accessed through a series of narratives which must be retold before the actual reconstruction of a little piece of survival action can take place. This often revolves around wordless dance: reconstructions of steps and movement, in which it is often easy to identify essential work movements, especially the grip on a weapon and other hunting tools, eventually accompanied by lulling imitative sounds in connection with hunting dances or reproduction dances.

I have sometimes had difficulty discerning the highpoint of these performances, the magical movements, because they can be very concise. The introductory narrative is basically entertaining and is told in a way that is full of life, with interruptions, many explanatory movements, and a lot of participation from the audience. Therefore the dramatic reconstruction of the truly magical movements of life and death is interwoven with a wonderfully undramatic (in our use of the concept of dramatic) little series of movements and

steps, although it is carried out with silent attention on the part of the audience. Quite often there is no actual transition between the different movements and steps; all the dances follow one on top of the other.

After a bear dance in a small Inuit community on the southern coast of Banks Island, north of the Alaskan coast, I once asked why it seemed as if the performers were suddenly so busy. The answer was totally logical: now the snowmobiles and boats had to be made ready, because it had been a very good and effective performance - or perhaps I should call it an invocation. The local shaman had announced it with the drum, even while the last step was being performed. This was not the first time my deeply ingrained western dramaturgical understanding of a "scene" or a "play" had to be thrown out of exactly that, the play.

Both in tropical and arctic regions it seems to be the rainfall in the area in question which determines the movements and the linguistic displays. In other words, the more desert-like a climate, whether it is arctic or tropical, the closer the relationship is between the movements in the dances and the climate and landscape, and the more one can speak of pure magical actions, surrounded by a sequence of meaning-giving events. With consideration of shamanic practice, the invocation of rain is essential, and now, for example, when drastic climate changes threaten floods, there are people working on finding events from previous history that could be effective against the new threats. It is therefore my experience that the level of moisture in a climate is a greater determining factor for narrative structure than whether it is warm or cold. The biggest problem is still that people in these areas are so thoroughly subordinate to nature's unpredictability.

In an old written culture such as ours,

we maintain tradition, peace, and order through an undiminished trust in the written word. We truly possess a great narrative treasure of descriptions of events and of descriptions referring to actions. Luckily they are written down, so we do not need to strain our memory by retaining them until the moment of telling. But despite our almost sacred faith in, for instance, an action's potential to be transformed into something spoken aloud - in other words, to a speech act or to lines of a play - people are greatly surprised when I tell them this.

The persistent question is whether our words are strong enough to work. And when it is asked in this way, then it is the concrete results that are interesting. I answer that we too have prayers and possess a number of strong movements and physical expressions, that can work as a blessing, or as exactly the opposite. These can be so strong that they immediately trigger a punishment, for instance when "giving someone the finger". This is immediately understood, and so the subject is soon abandoned as something that despite everything seems too strange.

It is my hypothesis that, in the course of all stage drama that grips and moves the audience, there must be a little kernel, a little fragment of these original survival actions, or perhaps rather summonings. They are always closely interwoven in many introductory narratives, which, as a rule in a stage drama, appear as events, so they are not as laden with meaning as the actual core, or the survival actions themselves. What we call catharsis is probably the closest we can come to an experience of the full effect of magical movements. But this experience cannot take place if "the right circumstances" have not been established.

Another doubt rises automatically when we talk about "magic" movements. Out of habit I think that they are necessarily the common property of the group in question.

In many instances this knowledge is hidden, but if "the right circumstances" are found, then the events become quite clear, and yes, even absolutely logical, even for a stranger like me, who has to have all the statements and movements explained in a foreign language.

When I later read Aeschylus' *The Persians* and Euripides' *Hippolytus*, it hit me that Aristotle's knowledge of an Ur-dramatic-conjuring series of (survival) movements in his era was not so distant, but certainly was already being hidden, intentionally and with clear thinking, in the self-confidence of written language. The "Aristotelian development of action" in its simplest form is probably not unknown in other oral and semi-oral cultures. That it is only in a very few old written cultures that storytelling has developed so far, as may be said to be the case in ours, is due to the incredible ability of written language to "remember" for us.

In partly oral communities the telling of all events must still be remembered, or at least told, for relatively few meaningful survival movements can function as magical action: an invocation or a conjuring or a life-sustaining activation of our most deeply embedded images. Deep down in our memory's deepest layer of images, the most powerful metaphors are found which keep written language alive, even if they have long since run aground, to use a metaphor from our own Danish dependency on fjords and the ocean.

Another explanation could be that the legalistic, individualistic need for explanation or proof, as well as a politically more usual use of drama, seems to have developed

in parallel over the course of many years in the history of classical Europe. The big mistake today seems to lie in the fact that there are not enough event-narratives for a central survival action to take place. The right circumstances are simply never created. The audience is abandoned with the grotesque sense that no one from the stage seeks to activate their memory or their thoughts. Possibly they are kicked out after having experienced a few easy feelings, if all goes well. In these plays, an apparently mechanical series of actions becomes an impoverished and stressful piece, which stirs up only ashes. Perhaps at best they become a brutal little nothing up on the stage. Lars Norén is one of the very few contemporary playwrights who can create metaphorically speaking "rich drama" where "the right circumstances" are in place.

Translated from Danish by Emily Warne

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