

# “Winterreise”. Sci-Arts Winter Season Journey Through the Human-Nature Relationships of the Land-Sea Continuum, from North Sea to Baltic Sea

Anatole Danto  
Tartu Ülikool, Eesti

**Abstract** Crossing art and science, this text explores topographically the category of Land-Sea, both in the field, during collection phases, and from a more analytical point of view. To this end, it draws on collective surveys carried out between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, focusing in particular on the question of the winter season. This article thus engages in a methodological and analytical dialogue between different complementary approaches, with the aim of deciphering, in depth, territorial socio-ecosystemic complexities, between mutations and perpetuations.

**Keywords** Land/Sea. Social-Ecological systems. Nature/culture. Europe. Sci-arts. Winter season.

**Summary** 1 Coastal Socio-Ecosystem Topographic Journey. – 2 Synchronic Alliances Between Humans and Birds. – 3 Nourishing Nature: The Eternal Restart of the Cut and the Regrowth. – 4 The Nomadism of Non-Human Societies: Birds and Fish Establish Their Camps. – 5 Translation of a Changing Coastal Boreal Social-Ecological System.



Edizioni  
Ca' Foscari

Submitted 2024-05-28  
Published 2024-07-08

**Open access**

© 2024 Danto | © 4.0



**Citation** Danto, A. (2024). ““Winterreise”. Sci-Arts Winter Season Journey Through the Human-Nature Relationships of the Land-Sea Continuum, from North Sea to Baltic Sea”. *Lagoonscapes*, 4(1), [1-12] 219-230.

**DOI** 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2024/01/011

## 1 Coastal Socio-Ecosystem Topographic Journey

During a geo-ethnographic field mission, a geo-anthropologist and a painter worked together on a sensitive collection of field materials. The field survey was devoted to the environmental, socio-economic, and political changes that have affected the rural coastal territories from Germany to Estonia since 1990, from North Sea to Baltic Sea. It took place during several winter seasons, until the arrival of springs. This common ground, carried out as a multidisciplinary collective survey, made it possible to question the collection methods, but also and above all the methods of reporting the observations made in situ. This resulted in a fertile cross between arts and sciences, of which this artwork is only an extract.

It made it possible to observe many interactions between the coastal communities concerned by our field survey and their daily local environments, and in the first place, certain non-human living beings. Far from being a ‘slow’ season, with ‘suspended’ work, winter is, on the contrary, widely used by these communities to prepare for the activities of the milder seasons. The result is a multitude of interactions, very discreet, between the Humans and the non-Humans who surround them during these short and cold days. Another striking fact: the ritual character of many of the uses observed and questioned during this fieldwork. The repeated nature of the practices, year after year, and the inherent expectation of the winter season each fall constitute an important pillar of identity. The synchronic nature of the relationships is striking, but also their diachronic aspect, symbolized by a multi-secular repetition, translation of a certain historicity of the practices, and of a relatively old socio-genesis (long-term social-ecological system).

## 2 Synchronic Alliances Between Humans and Birds

Winter corresponds to the arrival, in these regions, of cranes (*Grus grus*), which take advantage of the bare fields of the season of non-vegetation to stop in these plowed spaces. They use the food present in the soil. The pairs of cranes are then observable, and their cries recognizable for leagues around, benefiting some ornithologists.

A second, more local alliance can be established: that of the bird baggage camps. These regions of northern European coasts, well placed in the main migration axes of the Western Palearctic bioregion, are indeed full of migrating birds during this season. These birds have left to reach more lenient regions for the heart of winter. It is then a third alliance, more unbalanced, can be observed: that of hunting migratory birds. Local hunters take full advantage of cultivated open fields to establish themselves, via raised huts, on the edge of these

agricultural areas, to target passing birds. Some of these birds are also the subject of particularly entrenched gastronomic practices, especially during the end-of-year celebrations, like waterfowl.



**Figure 1** Grues dans les champs  
© S.Allais-Danto

---

The use of Indian ink here constitutes a sharp reminder of the colorimetry of the plumage of the cranes, which sometimes stand out little from the landscape in which they evolve. The Indian ink is manipulated with a brush, on a system of layers on Canson paper. The tracings here evoke the furtive passage of the cranes, during their migratory cycle, and before their disappearance, as sudden as their arrival, when they set off again in the direction of Iberia or Mediterranean Sea.

Representing the flights of wild geese, which sail in a ‘V’ in the sky, from dawn to dusk, here required the use of a double system of ink on tracing paper, but also of watercolor. Geese indeed migrate, just like cranes, on a not relatively short time even if certain groups have contemporary tendencies to the sedentarization by mutations of agrarian practices. Geese have the ability to locate themselves from space, but also to use the winds to move around. They are also very sensitive to weather variations, which they perceive upstream. They thus navigate in a world where water can appear in all its forms, and are permanently exposed to the worlds of fluids during their flights.



**Figure 2** Le passage des oies  
© S.Allais-Danto

### **3 Nourishing Nature: The Eternal Restart of the Cut and the Regrowth**

The repetition of seasonality was also very striking in the more ‘bucolic’ works of the local communities. The Virgilian aspect of hibernation appears clearly in rural landscapes, when we have been able to observe the cutting of the reed, but also that of the young birches.

The reeds are cut in the reedbeds of the Wadden or the famous outlying Bodden of the Baltic Lake hilltops until Saaremaa wetlands. They are cut at the start of winter, when their post-summer growth stops, and before the first frosts (frost makes them brittle). They are then gathered in bundles, and left to dry for the winter near the farms. They serve as bedding, thatch roofing and even animal feed.

The reeds represent the vegetal element of the Land-Sea par excellence, since they develop in loose, sandy, muddy, sandy-muddy, even peat soils. They also support maritime bad weather and fluctuations in salinity. The artist chose to draw them in Indian ink, with the permanent reflection that can be seen in all reedbeds in the region. The image can be reversed to a full mirror. The precise limit between Land and Sea, impossible to determine with precision, is the subject of a voluntary ‘blank’, for lack of being able to freeze it with a brush and ink without flaring the line.

The young birches, a tree with multiplier power, but also regenerating with its sap, are cut by the fishermen of the Wadden Sea to mark out their tidal channels across the Watt. The Watt is this largest mudflat in Europe, an incredible nursery area for migrating birds and fish. They are cut during the winter, leafless and planted by boat in the mudflat, where they serve as ephemeral beacons for a few years.

Drawn with fine pencil, a system of tracing papers is employed to symbolize the wintry mists of the Wadden on windless days, when only fog horns and the cries of birds warn from the shore. Visually, the fishermen navigate or advance in dog sleds on the mudflat thanks to these birch helpers, real landmarks, which you have to know how to see piercing through the layers of fog, one after the other, tracing the berm of the tidal channels.

### **4 The Nomadism of Non-Human Societies: Birds and Fish Establish Their Camps**

Although human communities have become sedentary for a long time, they nevertheless benefit from the advantages of the societal nomadism of non-human species such as water and sea birds (see above), and migratory fish species in particular.

Within the retrolittoral lagoons of the former Prussia, called Bodden in Low German from Pomerania Citerior, the fishermen take

advantage of the winter to carve their chestnut stakes. These stakes will serve them, in the spring, to stretch out their worm-nets, with wings, within brackish waters, between two waters (in a double dimensional sense: horizontally, from upstream to downstream, from fresh to salty, but also altitudinally speaking, from the bottom of the water to its surface). Chestnut is a wood reputed to be rot-proof, and allows fishermen to use the particular plant properties of this ligneous wood to increase the durability of their fishing gear. The taut fyke nets notably target one of the most emblematic migratory fish of the Baltic: the European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*), critically endangered according to the IUCN.

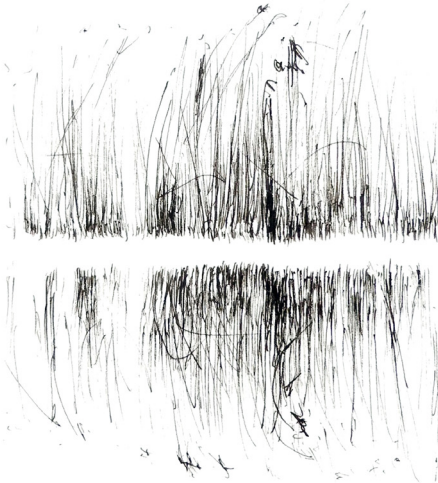


Figure 3 Roseaux en attente de faucardage  
© S.Allais-Danto



Figure 4 Bouleaux immergés dans le Watt  
© S.Allais-Danto

Winter previously allowed fishing under the ice, but now, for lack of winter pack ice (either it does not appear, or it is too thin), fishermen must adapt. It is this almost image of the past that the black and white of the drawing seeks to expose. The reflection, permanent in the lagoons, is represented by this play of mirrors. The eel, finally, shows through in the lines. The eel has the gift of contorting itself in many different shapes, and of drawing lines, with its body, from the Sargasso Sea to the upstream of the watersheds, passing through the



**Figure 5** Pieux de châtaigner pour pêcher  
© S.Allais-Danto

trajectories of leptocephali, the flow of glass eels, or the descents of silver eels downstream during the announcement of the meteorological winter. It is a very Ingoldian fish.

Taiga conifer will be used by fishermen of another migratory species: the lamprey, with their fishing dams in the estuaries of Latvia, around the Salacgriva region. The pines are cut during the winter by the fishermen's cooperatives, in forests far from the fishing grounds, which is symbolized by this composition of collages, with a fictitious border between the tree and the estuary of the Salaca river.

The stakes are driven by the fishermen to block the bed of the river, and traps are positioned on the structure. The horizon, in winter, merges, as shown in the second part of the composition: between the frozen river, the reedbeds of the snow-covered banks, and the sky laden with clouds heralding snow, one can barely distinguish the dam from the upstream or downstream in the distance. The composition demonstrates the functional, vital link between the fir tree and the lamprey, through this association of a plant and an animal, which Man unites in the bed of the river for subsistence purposes.

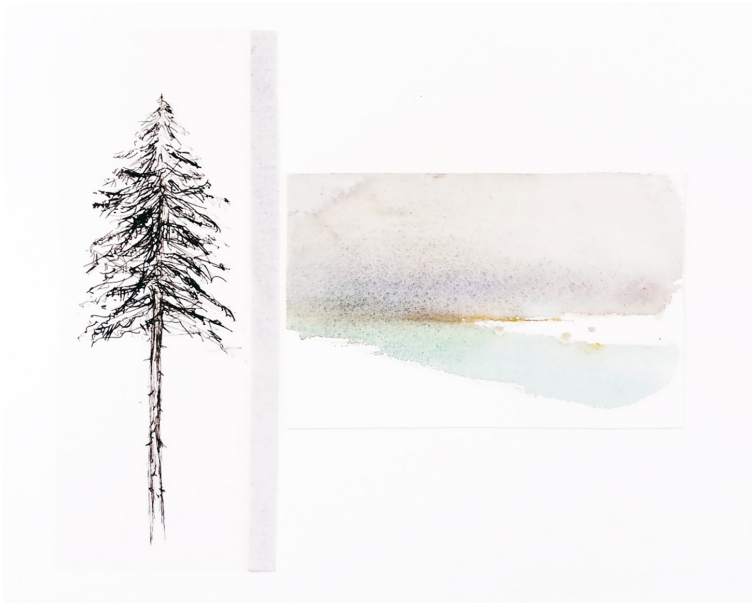


Figure 6 Résineux donneront lamproies © S.Allais-Danto

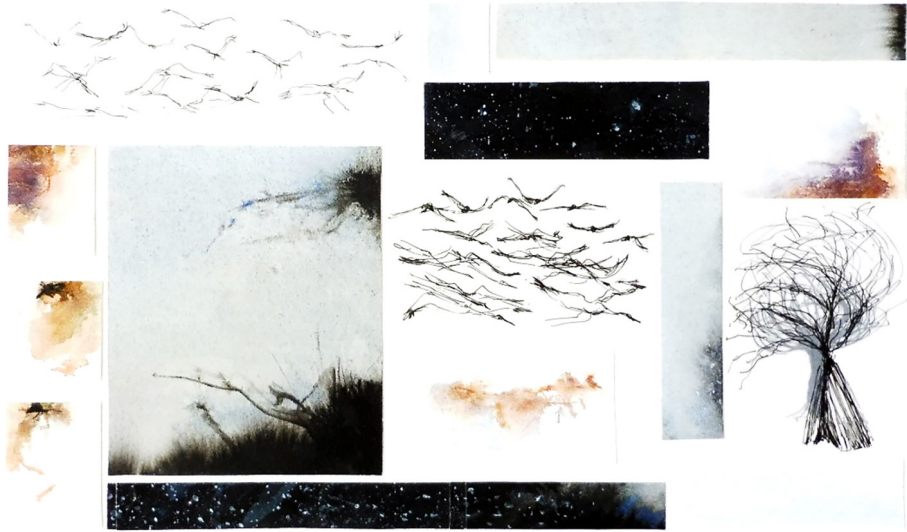


## 5 Translation of a Changing Coastal Boreal Social-Ecological System

The work of synthesis of this project is represented below. It demonstrates the difficulty of synthesizing the social-ecological systems encountered in winter weather. The voluntary segmentation of the collages exposes the ambivalence of the observations. On the one hand, the micro-socio-systems investigated have been the subject of long sedimentations. But like the Anthropocene, they are disrupted by major changes, mostly induced by the hand of humans. The double meaning of the word *temps* in French (*temps* as ‘time’ and *temps* as ‘weather’) symbolizes this fragmentation into a mosaic of uses that are perpetuated, but adapting, even transforming, by losing historical connectivity (also represented in the work by these micro-compartments in pictorial interactions, dispatched in the painting, which respond to each other, echoing) of these social-ecological systems, and their continuums (spatial: Land-Air-Sea, or temporal: Past-Present-Future).

This segmentation also reflects the contemporary divergences of scientific, political and ontological categories, which are no longer shared. Politics, or at least modes of government, lead to the enactment of a calendar of practices, freezing the seasonalities of traditional exploitation of the environment on opening and closing dates, in a fixist approach to environmental uses, running counter to the overcoming of the Nature-Culture dichotomy exposed by French famous anthropologist Descola.

This fixation by politics is found even more out of step by the misdeeds of climate change at work throughout the world, and particularly in the region, especially in winter, the season when sea ice no longer appears in coastal re-entrants.



**Figure 7** Social-Ecological system during winter time on northern coast  
© S.Allais-Danto

## Exploratory bibliography

- Bremer, S. et al. (2023). “Co-Producing Representations of Summer Rainfall in Bangladesh”. *Regional Environmental Change*, 23(60), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-023-02057-8>.
- Danto, A. (2019). “Estuaires et rivages, parmi les derniers lieux du « sauvage » ? Étude de techniques de mise en scène de la nature pour la perpétuation d'activités halieutiques et cynégétiques”. *Trajectoires*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.4000/trajectoires.3406>.
- Danto, A. (2022). “Weather Perception in Coastal Communities”. Danto, A. (ed.), *Weather and Language-Conference = Conference Proceedings* (Dijon, October 2022). Dijon: Bourgogne University.
- Danto, A. et al. (2023). *Les relations Hommes-Mers au sein des communautés côtières boréales: Ethno/graphies sensibles des immatérialités des connaissances et pratiques concernant l'environnement marin*. Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon: Institut Français; OCTA; APCA; UE; PIIRESS.
- Descola, P. (2014). “Beyond Nature and Culture”. Harvey, G. (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*. London: Routledge, 77-91.
- Ingold, T. (2016). *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge.
- Kalle, R. et al. (2024). “Commons Are Cared For: Coexistence Between Humans and Wild Birds on the Island of Kihnu, Estonia”. *People and Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10669>.
- Krause, F. (2013). “Seasons as Rhythms on the Kemi River in Finnish Lapland”. *Ethnos*, 78(1), 23-46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2011.623303>.
- Krause, F. (2022). “Rhythms of Wet and Dry: Temporalising the Land-Water Nexus”. *Geoforum*, 131, 252-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.12.001>.
- Mauss, M. (2013). *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo: A Study in Social Morphology*. London: Routledge.
- Roncoli, C. et al. (2016). “Fielding Climate Change in Cultural Anthropology”. Crate, S.A.; Nuttall, M. (eds), *Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Action*. London: Routledge, 87-115.
- Strauss, S.; Orlove, B.S. (2003). “Up in the Air: The Anthropology of Weather and Climate”. Strauss, S.; Orlove, B.S. (eds), *Weather, Climate, Culture*. London: Routledge, 3-14.
- Von Hardenberg, W.G. (2020). “Measuring Zero at Sea: On the Delocalization and Abstraction of the Geodetic Framework”. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 68, 11-20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2019.12.004>.

