

BORDER AESTHETICS/BORDER WORKS

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The essays in this special issue of *Nordlit* were first presented as papers at the “Border Aesthetics” conference held at the University of Tromsø in September 2012. The conference built on continuing work at the University of Tromsø (the Border Poetics/Culture research group) and was the final conference of the Border Aesthetics research project funded by the *KULVER* (Assigning Cultural Values) research programme of the Research Council of Norway and the University of Tromsø (2010-2013).

The conference attracted 53 registered participants, including literary scholars, political geographers, historians, anthropologists, folklorists, linguists, media scholars, urban planners, architects, and students. Regional authors, performing artists, filmmakers, and artistic producers also took part in a special panel.

Several different groups of researchers participated from EU FP7 research projects *EUBORDERSCAPES* and *EUBORDERREGIONS*; as well as groups of researchers from the Finnish Academy research project *Writing Cultures and Borders* (WCTB) at the Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland; the *Barents Institute* University of Tromsø in Kirkenes, and the *Border Conditions* group at Delft University of Technology.

Four participants in the Barents Region aesthetic borderscape – Knut Erik Jensen (filmmaker), Liv Lundberg (poet and professor of Creative Writing, Tromsø), Liv-Hanne Haugen (dance artist) and Luba Kuzovnikova (artistic director, Pikene på broen, Kirkenes) – presented their work and discussed cultural production in Northern borderlands in a panel. Dmitry Vilensky of the art collective Chto delat? / What is to be done? from Petersburg presented their ongoing work in a “Songspiel” based on Russian-Norwegian borderlands.

Paper topics addressed the negotiation of borders: in photography, political satire, feature films, artistic happenings, literary fiction, poetry, theatre performances, local communities, urban spaces, architecture, magazines, and life stories. Papers also addressed questions about the aesthetic dimensions of: the visibility/invisibility of borders, culture borders and diaspora, waiting at borders, the borders of the subject, ecological borders, the economic crisis, and sovereignty.

Theoretical assumptions of the conference and this collection of essays

The aim of the conference was to *investigate how changing perceptions of borders relate to shifting aesthetic practices*. In so doing, the conference drew upon two guiding observations that inform any notion of a border aesthetics, these being a) that aesthetic theories and practices regularly invoke and engage with notions of the border; and b) that borders are in turn capable of producing aesthetic effects and can themselves be conceived of as aesthetic objects.

Indeed, one of the principal goals of the project, the conference, and of some of the essays that appear here are to establish a new ‘aesthetics of space/place and location’. It is of a kind likely to be required when studying divergent groups, objects, values and activities that inhabit and pass through border zones. Other objectives of

the project were the presentation of border zones using different techniques and medial representations which engage and invoke aesthetic and ethical values, and to establish models for bringing together the study of territorial, cultural, and medial borders in the investigative techniques of academic interdisciplinary practice. During the project's duration researchers have developed strategies to explicitly address the question of how aesthetic activity participates in the processes by which people relate to the real and conceptual geographies in which they live and through which they move. This focus is both socially engaged and inquisitive about the dynamic ways in which cultural phenomena are ascribed value in aesthetic practice.

The conference featured three keynote lectures. The speakers were Ulrike H. Meinhof of the University of Southampton; Fredrik Tygstrup of the University of Copenhagen; and Debra A. Castillo of Cornell University. Meinhof's and Castillo's papers are included in this collection. Both essays analyse how artists and communities engage in the negotiation of borders through the aesthetic practices of narrative, film, and photos while in the process creating and using old and new aesthetic genres and formulations. Castillo maps this *Rasquache* aesthetics in the language of her subject matter by showing how a website can be used to create forms of "mockumentary", code switching, and a mixing of conventions that earlier technologies by necessity had to keep separate. "It is, of course, a scholarly challenge to write about a form that is so subject to mutation and that continues to evolve; this too is one of the challenges our current scholarly mechanisms are not readily designed to capture and evaluate", Castillo argues. The problem of crossing and negotiating the border is both a physical or material matter of movements in space and time, in place and in history, and in the technologies of representation, but often such movements are projected into a memoryscape through the representation of that bordering experience. For her part, Meinhof captures this persuasively in her discussion of the changing narratives in story and photographs of German borders in recent history.

In their essay, "Reading and Reacting" Marc Schoonderbeek and Klaske Havik employ an experimental and interdisciplinary approach to spatial analysis and architectural design. They argue that an intrinsic relationship might exist between methods of spatial analysis and methods of architectural design. First, they present four specific understandings of the border, namely as space of differentiation, as zone of performance, as space of encounter and as space of simultaneity. Focusing on the marginal urban regions where the "other" resides, they suggest bringing into play methods of spatial analysis of urban fringes into the speculative design of alternative urban realities. Through such mapping and reading practices a space of simultaneity can be explored. The essay also brings forward how a meeting of and a separation between architecture and literature can be employed to read texts and spaces in contemporary artistic expression and design.

Central to a number of the essays is an emergent and not fully-defined term in border studies, the *borderscape*—a wide material and virtual field constituted by "re/de/bordering" processes and aesthetic representations of the border—used to map the relations of borders to power, resistance, connection, and reformulation. The borderscape with its suggestion of a topography defined through perspective

connects power directly to visibility in a way discussed in recent theories of aesthetics (see Rancière, 2004).

Cultural production in Northern borderlands is the subject of a group of essays in the collection. These take up the changing representations of borderzones and borderpeoples within the borderscapes of that region. The essays of Ristolainen and Saarinen focus on the Karelian borderlands from a historical perspective, while Wräkberg's essay reads a more recent geopolitical change in the Norwegian Russian Borderlands.

In Wräkberg's essay, the border-crossing tourist passes through the landscape interpreting the geo-political history of the recent past in the monuments and buildings in the area but also within the aesthetically formulated framework of a road movie. The essay argues that such a car or bus journey expresses and performs symbolic differences, mapping complex recent political and national histories on "the difference" between Russia and Norway.

Mari Ristolainen's essay explores the differences between Finnish and Russian history and their shared history by analyzing aesthetic strategies in the photographic process of border-building and border-reformulation in Soviet and Finnish photographs of the 1930s. She draws attention to the photographs in their historic context, while also problematizing them through a focus on the contemporary viewer as "border crosser". Through the processes of re-contextualizing these pictures new spaces are created which are contingent upon "looking across" while also at both "sides" of the border. The viewer is moving across a threshold, while realizing the people of 1930s didn't have such opportunities. Saarinen's essay focuses on a Finnish popular magazine that had a huge readership from 1970-1990 during the height of the Cold War. She has analyzed over 200 hundred narratives from the pages of *Hymy*, to show the discursive construction of a border between Finland and "the Soviet Union". The essay argues that the border between these two sovereign nations was ideological, but it was also performed in the narratives of social and cultural relations in what appeared to be the lived experiences of border subjects. However, the magazine was invested in and encouraged exaggeration and sensationalism thus recapitulating to popular beliefs and values at the time.

The borders investigated in these essays both mark a difference and a connection in space, while suggesting that space is a social construction and constantly in the processes of production, location, and negotiation. These processes are formed through images and symbols and often displayed in symbolic representations. Johannes Riquet's essay illustrates how the border of a Western South Sea island plays a seminal role in both historical texts but also in more recent films. He carefully interrogates the discursive practices and processes that travellers used to look into, across and over the spaces of such an "island". The island emerges as an aesthetic object framed by its own representations whether in early Europeans' narratives or Hollywood's island fantasies in the early 20th century. Anne Heith's essay demonstrates how the processes of migration have had a deep impact on national identities, notions of home, belonging and their aesthetic representation. As an effect of migration, national identities have been de-naturalized and new forms of artistic representation shaped by patterns and the appropriation of elements from

diverse cultural and literary traditions. This is an essay that takes up the formation of the borders of ethnic, racial and national identity. Narratives by migrants and their descendants deploy discord and displacement as strategies that evoke their own cartographies and ethnicity, thus introducing new modes of imagined community. This is explored in the writing of Swedish author Johannes Anyuru.

Anka Ryall's essay begins by focusing on Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* with its repeated border-crossings during a single day. Characters routes are traced within the density of the city of London and through an intertwining of spatial and temporal consciousness. The narrative structures of this novel are shown to be trajectories of an evolving "boundary state in which the present moment is continually intersected and expanded by mental images of the past". The geography of the city is an active force here. Ryall's argument is then carried on to three contemporary novels: Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Gail Jones' *Five Bells* (2011). While the intertextual relationships with Woolf are important, the reading of these texts demonstrate the importance of space generally, but especially liminal spaces within each novel. Ruben Moi's essay on Seamus Heaney also places an emphasis on a space/place and location: Northern Ireland during the Troubles. In this memorial essay Heaney's poetics is explored in a number of his collections of poetry as a conciliatory middle ground between aesthetic autonomy, often desired but impossible to obtain, and the need for social commitment. Moi treads carefully and insightfully over the ground upon which the binary structures of Heaney's poetry originate. Moi argues that Heaney's poetry is a rich field for a study of the aesthetics of borders and of their changing history within Ireland. The structures of daily-lived experience within a history of colonial domination and post-colonial angst are the subject of Heaney's tightly controlled stanzas revealing finely tuned memoryscapes and borderscapes.

Each of these essays engages with a spatial poetics, a way of examining narratives and images of borders and border-crossings in order to uncover their underlying configurations and thus isolate the changing concepts of borders in the narratives and images which make up the social imagination. In keeping with a common distinction within narratology, it looks at both the borders in the world presented in texts, and the borders of the text itself (its framings, divisions and stylistic shifts). This is also the subject of Liv Lunberg's short personal essay on the role of a poet born into a Northern Norwegian landscape and active in creating a poetics of place.

These essays confirm the premise that borders have a dense aesthetic dimension, involving works of art, cinema, urban building, literature, performance, and video presentations on the Internet. These cultural productions have played an important role in the formation of what might be called "soft" geopolitical and cultural-political mobilization in the borderlands of Europe and the Americas or among immigrant groups throughout the Mediterranean.

The conference call for papers elicited a large response and these selected papers are an indication of some of the rich ways a Border Aesthetics approach to borders as aesthetic and aestheticized objects can be discussed. Some of the writers have also sought to connect borders and representations of borders to established aesthetic values, often related in these essays to other kinds of value: emotional, ethical,

instrumental, political, national, or in contradiction to those values so often assumed to be “true”.

Finally, the Border Aesthetics Project was centred around a core of 8 researchers at the University of Tromsø over the 3 year period of the grant (Heith, Moi, Ristolainen, and Wräkberg are represented in these essays), and a network of 8 external partners (in Kirkenes, Bergen, Amsterdam, Düsseldorf, Nijmegen, Joensuu and Bergamo), including literary scholars, media scholars, a political geographer, a folklorist, an urban planner and a social anthropologist. We would like to thank Janet Handley for her editorial assistance in the publication of these essays.

References

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Biographical Note

Stephen Wolfe is associate professor at University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway. His research interests include transatlantic literature 1700-1900, border crossing narratives of the 19 and 20th centuries, and border aesthetics. He is co-editor, with Johan Schimanski, of *Border Poetics De- Limited* (Wehrhahn, 2007) and other articles and reports with Schimanski on border aesthetics. He has been co-coordinator with Schimanski of the Border Aesthetics project, the Border Poetics/Border Culture research group at UIT, and the co-coordinates the large-scale EU FP7 research project EUBORDERSCAPES (2012-2016), where UIT runs a work package on border-crossing and cultural production.