

# Border Aesthetics Project Description (short version)

## Summary

*This project investigates how changing perceptions of borders relate to shifting practices of aesthetic evaluation. In so doing, it draws upon two guiding observations that must 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. It will pursue its primary objective through both theoretical reflections and a sequence of interlocking case-studies that focus on the literature, film and video art produced by creative artists working in, or imagining, border regions and the Barents Region in particular. In the process, it will also 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 through aesthetic practice. At the same time, it situates the project at the vanguard of current thinking about aesthetics. For the concentration on border regions enables the project not only to explore and develop further the, relatively new, field of migratory aesthetics, but it also requires the formulation of what might provisionally be called a zonal aesthetics. Indeed, one of its principal goals will be precisely to establish how a new 'aesthetics of space' of a kind likely to be required by its study of the divergent groups, objects, values and activities that inhabit and pass through the border zones it surveys is to be instantiated, negotiated, evaluated and described.*

## 1. Relevance

This project responds to the main goals identified by the KULVER programme in the following ways (words in italics indicate passages taken directly from the programme call):

- its primary objective is to investigate how changing perceptions of borders relate to shifting practices of aesthetic evaluation. This objective has been set specifically in order to address the programme's request for research that demonstrates *how cultural phenomena are ascribed value and how cultural values are changed, displaced, transferred and appropriated*;
- through its focus on the cultural productions of border regions, this project is well placed to investigate how aesthetic practices participate in the processes by which people relate to the real and conceptual geographies in which they live and through which they move. This is especially apparent in its specific interest in the Barents Region, an area which has not only long been a zone of migration and transnational exchange but which is also currently being re-fashioned through a range of political and financial initiatives. In this way, the project represents *humanities-based research that has a clear relevance to society*;
- by setting out to question older conceptions of the relationship between aesthetics and space, and, in particular, by seeking to develop and evaluate the new theoretical arena of migratory aesthetics and to instantiate a new one that we have provisionally entitled zonal aesthetics, this project will produce *studies of foundational importance* for the future development of research in the field of aesthetics and aesthetic practice;
- central to this project is the KULVER programme's suggestion that attention be paid to the *borders* between, for instance, text and context, knowledge and criticism, understanding and ethics, and between one academic discipline and another. By explicitly considering such conceptual, territorial, cultural, medial and, indeed, disciplinary borders together, this project answers the request for research that demonstrates a considerable degree of *scholarly self-reflection* and that *crosses the traditional internal borders of current research*;
- because it involves these different kinds of borders, not least through their negotiation in art practice, it duly investigates *the interaction between cultural productions and other practices*;

- finally, the Border Aesthetics project draws upon and expands the *national and international networks* already established by the Border Poetics group in Tromsø and has clear and ambitious plans for the *dissemination of its research results*.

## 2. Aspects relating to the research project

### 2.1. Background and status of knowledge

In this section, we explain the background, current status of knowledge about and the research team's familiarity with 1) theories of the border and its relationship to aesthetic theory; 2) the Barents Region; and 3) the Mediterranean as the main site of comparison for the Barents.

*1) theories of the border and its relationship to aesthetic theory.* The project addresses both territorial and symbolic borders as aesthetic phenomena, asking both how these borders acquire value and what values they are assigned. Borders are a well-established field of study in the social sciences, in particular within what is known as 'border studies' in social geography and related fields. Recently, social geographers working with topographical borders have increasingly been calling for cultural and narrative perspectives on the way in which borders are perceived by state actors, borderland populations, and border crossers such as migrants (Newman 2006). Within literary and cultural studies, but also in sociology, the border concept is often used of more symbolic types of border, such as the borders between cultures, genders or classes. Such symbolic borders contain within them a spatial dimension; they are manifested as spatial borders either within the real, topographical world, or within a mental map, an imaginary geography (Said 1978) or a more intimate topology of, for instance, the body.

Svend Erik Larsen (2007) has used this idea of manifestation as an argument that borders are essentially aesthetic as well as symbolic phenomena: they are constituted and expressed on the plane of the senses, as signs, or within a more deconstructive paradigm, as traces (cf. Görling 2007). Larsen argues that borders have a key role to play in the discussion of the arts as a central part of the production of culture. He is, however, aware that aesthetic objects within the field of culture are themselves structured by various kinds of borders. The aesthetic manifestations of borders are likewise bordered in their medial manifestations, either in their framing, in their compositional divisions or in the hermeneutic relationship between perceiver and object (Schimanski & Wolfe 2007). It is significant that one important contribution to the theory of borders takes place in an essay on textual genre (Derrida 1980).

Taking these various kinds of border – topographic, symbolic, and medial – together, one may trace a complex circulation of the border concept from one discourse or register to another. Any one of the registers - national territory, cultural difference, gender, medial form, and so on - can be mapped onto one of the other registers, in allegorical transfers of meaning. It is this kind of circulation which constitutes the historicity of the border concept, i.e. which allows the border concept to change and develop in different cultural and historical contexts. Taking territorial borders as a departure point, feudal territorial borders are quite different from those of modern nation states as wildernesses rather than dividing lines (Warnke 1992); global borders towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century are formed around colonial zones based on a racial differentiation between the European self and non-European others which has become increasingly temporalized with the introduction of theories of evolution (Frank 2006); after the First World War, the dissolution of empires and the Wilson doctrine caused territories and borders in Central and Eastern Europe to become increasingly multi-layered and fragmented (Robinson 2007); today we are living with discourses of globalization and hybridity which have paradoxically created both an illusion of a "borderless world" and a world in which borders have multiplied as they are folded into refugee camps, detention centres, urban enclaves, walled communities, tourist spaces and the individual subject. In each case, the changing border concept is connected to changes in medial form and thus changes in medial borders: nation-state borders are connected to realism, cultural selves and others in the period of classic colonialism to naturalism and symbolism, a fragmented Central and Eastern Europe to modernism, and so on. Borders can also be associated with specific rhetorical tropes; it has been claimed, for instance, that borders are a site of raised figurality (Moretti 1998).

Historical series of border concepts in different registers cannot, however, be taken only at face value. New borders overwrite older borders. The landscape is based either on the repetition or negation of a previous landscape. The border or the border zone is a place of memory, of remembering or forgetting, to the extent that it is perceived as a place. As a place, it is made up of traces of previous borders and bordering activities. Border crossing can also involve acts of remembering or forgetting. A typical case is that of a border-crosser who brings with her a souvenir to/from the other side (Castillo 2007). Borderings involving state and legal power are ultimately built on the idea of the trace, as borders are made legitimate by an appeal to a precedent that is to be found in the form of evidence, be it in archives, maps, folklore, old markers or even the physical landscape itself.

Representations of borders in novels, short stories, poems, films, plays, videos, artworks, museums and the like are very often traces in the sense that they are historical. They can be narrated/enunciated in the past, and they can be narrated as being the past. Various kinds of aesthetic narratives and figurations can function as remembering practices that bring past historical layers of border spaces and border concepts to light. Each border carries within it an archaeology of previous borders, and this archaeology can play an active part in the renegotiation of borders if it is opened to new border concepts or used to construct a deconventionalizing perspective.

Borders have different values assigned to them (good, bad, neutral, threatening, hindering, useful, protecting, traumatic, challenging, existential, quotidian, absurd, and so on) depending on which border concepts they represent, how these border concepts are themselves assigned values, and how these border concepts are figured through metaphor or where they are presented in underlying narrative sequences. Border ethics has been addressed in different contexts: in psychoanalysis (Lichtenberg-Ettinger 1994), existentialist philosophy (Jaspers 1956), international relations (Williams 2006), and political philosophy (Agamben 1998, 2005).

The challenges posed in the field of border aesthetics and value are connected to both an international and a national perspective, as the border concept circulates between the two. Seen in context, this concept can have wide-ranging implications for pressing ethical questions about the human subject's ethical and affective relationship to the world, the position of minorities and migrants, conflict resolution, and so on. Indeed, new conceptions of space as a network and not a container, with accompanying concepts of the border as a place of relation, contact and creativity rather than a place of division and negation are part of the potential renegotiation of the borders taking place in border studies, border theory, and in cultural practices such as literature, cinema and art. One can see this in particular in the case of the Barents Region, as we shall now explain.

2) *the Barents Region*. The Barents Region - the area that runs along the coast of the Barents Sea, from Novaya Zemlya to Nordland on its east-west axis and to the Gulf of Bothnia in the Baltic and lakes Ladoga and Onega in the south - is a transnational space in which the questions posed above are both active and of considerable importance for an understanding of space that has the capacity to shape future Norwegian policy on international cooperation on a political and a cultural level. The potential the Barents Region offers for a study of this kind lies not least in:

a) *its current status as a highly constructed, trans-bordered zone*, which has received a considerable amount of both political and economic capital in order to enhance both its economic and cultural output. It is at any rate a site of remarkable economic and cultural creativity that involves the aspirations and self-narratives of local, national and global elites in an atmosphere of hybridity and that reflects its central position in the ongoing construction and contestation of territorial and symbolic borders in the Arctic sea which is currently taking place against a background of the rapid economic development of oil and gas resources. It therefore provides an ideal case-study for the question of how aesthetic practices participate in the processes by which people relate to the real and conceptual geographies in which they live and through which they move.

b) *its historical and geographical significance*. Within this zone are found national and other borders that have been taken to divide not only North and South, but also East and West. Likewise, it has a long history of being a site of migration. Indeed, within this border zone the movements of people, cultural and social processes and productions, and the establishment of political identities within a North-South vertical set of borders or axes, have been in consistent negotiation with the rhetoric/aesthetic and material cultures of the region in an East-West formulation that has produced a divide between Europe and the "East" or, historically, between European and Eastern models of

aesthetic and material development. An already established NFR grant “The Construction and Negotiation of Borders: Discourses Related to the Border between Norway and Russia” is currently looking at the Barents as a border region, but they are not considering aesthetics and values. We will take their findings into account.

3) *The Mediterranean as the main site of comparison for the Barents Region.* It is possible to identify a number of potential analogies between the border zones of the Mediterranean and the Barents Region. In both, for instance, two sets of borders - North-South and East-West - have been invoked in the writing of their histories. By the same token, both these regions have come to accommodate groups of peoples whose migratory movements have helped to establish a space in which they and their cultural productions have been judged by both aesthetic criteria and ethical values as these have been produced by, and as they incorporate, traces or memories of a North-South border within the contested arena of an East-West divide. Cultural encounters, networks and conflicts have been written onto both regions’ landmasses and watery surfaces so that each movement of economic, historical, or political migration in the region has had to negotiate a space with traces written on its surface. An important part of this project will therefore involve the study of the cultural productions of the two regions, including the interactions between them. The value of the Mediterranean as a point of comparison for the Barents Region also lies in the fact that far more research has been carried out on that area (Horden & Purcell 2000; Braudel 2002; Harris 2006) and so this research will be able to provide an outside perspective on the Barents Region. In addition to considering the cultural articulations of these two regions and the relationship between them, we shall therefore also explore the value of some of the intellectual models that have been brought to bear upon studies of the Mediterranean for the analogous study of the Barents Region. We shall, of course, be as interested in the limits of these models as we are in their transferability. Indeed, throughout our exploration of the potential analogies that persist between these two border zones, we shall seek to articulate the contribution the Barents Region case study can in turn make to future academic, artistic and societal activities centred around the Mediterranean and other international border spaces.

### **2.3. Approaches, hypotheses and choice of method**

This project will place as much weight on the evaluation, development and production of purely theoretical positions as it will on the investigation of individual, concrete case studies. In so doing, it will employ a variety of theoretical perspectives and methodologies from the social sciences and the humanities that have been developed within the general field of cultural studies, especially those associated with literary theory, border studies, film theory and philosophies of aesthetics and space. By examining cultural productions in literature, film and video art in particular, moreover, we shall address not only the pedagogic and analytical aspects of aesthetic practice and evaluation, but the performative as well. These diverse inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches will enable us to engage with and evaluate the multifarious nature of the ideas and practices we shall be examining, as well as the equally complex responses that have been, or might be, directed towards them. The clearly structured programme of guest lectures, workshops and plans for close collaboration (section 2.4 below) will ensure that the wide-ranging interests and expertise the project members bring to this study will produce results that are both coherent and valuable, not only for academic research in a variety of disciplines, but for society more broadly.

In the following, we present some of the key theoretical and methodological approaches we shall deploy to achieve each of our primary and secondary objectives:

*Objective 1: to investigate how changing perceptions of borders relate to shifting practices of aesthetic evaluation.* Using a cultural studies approach, this project aims to develop the spatial turn in the humanities by engaging more explicitly than is common with the historic, cultural and medial dimensions of the topographical spaces we examine. It will bring new spatial models from geography and sociology into cultural studies, but most urgently, it will address the rapid transformation of the ways in which border spaces are conceived. The medial spaces of history and culture are changing in rhythm with changes in topographical spaces, and are also participating in those changes, so we propose to trace creative potentials for new and as yet unknown ways of remembering, imagining and

forming the places we live in together with others. In terms of our concrete examples, we shall be looking at the relationship between changing perceptions of borders and shifting practices of aesthetic evaluation by examining not only different border places (such as the Mediterranean as well as the Barents) and different border and aesthetic concepts (such as those from the Hellenistic world, the nineteenth century British empire and modernism, as well as more recent formulations), but also by looking at what might ostensibly seem to be the same border places and the same concepts from different periods of time and from different societal and intellectual traditions. The project will, of course, also evaluate several of the different lived experiences of groups who have moved across and within border zones. In so doing, it will invoke and explore a variety of forms of reception theory and, in particular, it will assess the reception of artistic productions that have been produced both on and about the border.

All contributions to the project will be oriented towards addressing this question of how changing perceptions of borders relate to shifting processes of aesthetic practice and evaluation. It will receive its most sustained, wide-ranging and coherent discussion in the book (see Section 2.4 Research Activity 4).

*Objective 2: to address the question of how aesthetic activity participates in the processes by which people relate to the real and conceptual border regions in which they live, work and through which they move.* The project seeks to address this question by considering not only a range of border regions, but also the different aesthetic practices and movements that have served to articulate the relationship between peoples and the places they inhabit. Thus, in addition to assessing the differences between the representational techniques of literature, film and video art, the project will also include the ways in which these relationships are enacted in and enabled by, for instance, Hellenistic aesthetics, modernism, and the regional aesthetics of minority groups in a globalised world. The primary focus on the Barents region, moreover, and the deployment of the Mediterranean as the main point of comparison means that the project will be able to assess how historic changes in topographical perceptions of both North and South intersect with an equally resonant East-West axis and in so doing to evaluate how the cultural inscription of space in these two regions relates to issues of identity and belonging in these areas. Each of these case studies will make important contributions to the understanding of the role history plays for the cultures and cultural practices of the relevant border zones and, as such, will provide useful information that could helpfully influence political decisions about the future development of these areas.

Methodologically, we shall be employing a comparative approach in many of our studies. In particular, we shall be drawing upon work already conducted in relation to the Mediterranean for structural and conceptual analogies between it and the Barents, as well as for other points of comparison in order to identify both what is generic and what is distinctive about these border zones.

*Objective 3: to develop and interrogate further the notion of a migratory aesthetics and to formulate a zonal aesthetics.* We shall be adopting the notion of a migratory aesthetics, comparing it with earlier and alternative models (such as those constructed around notions of exile and displacement) and will assess its ability to respond to the lived experiences and cultural productions of border regions today. Likewise, the objective of formulating a new aesthetics of space (Casey 1997 and Friedman 1998, 2002) that can accommodate the divergent groups, objects, values and activities that inhabit and pass through border zones will proceed from an assessment of the uses and inadequacies of current formulations (this will be key theme of the book). If successful, the new aesthetic theory we produce here should lead to further studies of this kind in the future, beyond the boundaries of the current project.

*Objective 4: to investigate the presentation of border zones using different techniques and medial presentations that engage and invoke aesthetic and ethical values.* This objective will be achieved through our concentration on, and comparison of, the three medial forms of literature, film and video art. Cultural production group Pikene på Broen have agreed to act as one of our partners and, in addition to inviting them to attend both of our workshops, we shall hold the first of these workshops alongside the Barents Spektakel, which Pikene organise (for more details <http://www.pikene.no/projects/barents-spektakel>). In both workshops, we shall actively discuss the

question of how the various generic, technical and formalistic borders that characterise these different forms enable or require them to negotiate and represent the aesthetic and ethical topography of border zones.

*Objective 5: to establish models for bringing together the study of territorial, cultural, and medial borders and to investigate how they are reflected in and sustained by academic interdisciplinary practice.* Despite the growing interest in the cultural impact of borders, most of the work in this field to date has focused almost exclusively upon the geopolitical manifestations of this impact and has duly raised questions about the role borders play in the dispensations of power and cultural identity. Throughout the period of the research grant, we shall reflect upon how these borders relate both to academic and to artistic practice through the inclusion in the project of academics and artists alike. The culmination of these reflections will be most fully represented in the book, which will seek to connect academic conceptions of borders with cultural and territorial conceptions. In so doing, it will present an historical archaeology of the border, but in such a way that history itself will be represented through a variety of temporal configurations (Foucauldian, Benjaminian, and so on), each of which will be interrogated for the different border concepts and aesthetic evaluations it helps to generate.

#### 2.4. The project plan

| years  | 2009 |   |   |   | 2010 |   |   |   | 2011 |   |   |   | 2012 |   |  |  |
|--|------|---|---|---|------|---|---|---|------|---|---|---|------|---|--|--|
| quarters   |      | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3    | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3    | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3    | 4 |  |  |
| preparation  |      | • | • |   |      |   |   |   |      |   |   |   |      |   |  |  |
| Barents region case studies                            |      |   | • | • | •    | • | • | • | •    | • |   |   |      |   |  |  |
| Mediterranean region case studies                      |      |   | • | • | •    | • | • | • | •    | • |   |   |      |   |  |  |
| case study articles ready for submittal to periodicals |      |   |   |   |      | • |   |   |      | • |   |   |      |   |  |  |
| <i>Border Aesthetics</i> book                          |      |   |   |   |      |   | • | • | •    | • | • | • | •    | • |  |  |
| book planned (2011) and ready for publication (2012)   |      |   |   |   |      |   |   |   | •    |   |   |   |      | • |  |  |
| meetings (workshops and in 2012 a conference)          |      |   | • |   |      |   |   | • |      |   |   |   |      | • |  |  |
| 6 guest researcher stays                               |      |   |   | • | •    |   |   | • | •    |   |   | • | •    |   |  |  |
| postdoc announced (2010), stay at Barents Inst. (2011) |      |   |   | • |      |   |   |   | •    | • |   |   |      |   |  |  |
| 2-year postdoc   |      |   |   |   |      |   | • | • | •    | • | • | • | •    | • |  |  |

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