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Workshop 1: Border Poetics – A Project Proposal

"Border Poetics? – A Comparative Perspective", Tromsø 11-13.11.2004

The purpose of this workshop is to outline the main tenets of a project on border poetics and border-crossing narratives. We will then ask participants to discuss and evaluate the proposal in terms of the critical and theoretical usefulness of the project in their own research. We will be using this workshop for the constructive purpose of enhancing the project, but we will also be modeling an evaluative process that can be used to construct other long-term projects in the humanities. Our brief introductory remarks will focus on the theoretical and practical shape of the entire project, allowing as much time as possible for responses to and comments on the material we are presenting.

An abbreviated copy of the project proposal as sent in in connection with a grant application earlier this year (involving several speakers at the symposium) follows this workshop description and suggested questions, and we hope you have time to read it before the workshop. We will also provide copies of this material at the workshop. We would like to engage in an exchange of approaches and creative alternatives that could make "border poetics" a central critical strategy for the discussion of not only border-crossing narratives, but also framing devices in cultural texts, media depictions of border subjects, spatial presentations in artistic and other media, and the territorialization of the body and gender in contemporary culture, to name but a few examples.

Examples of questions for the workshop discussion

1. Should this project be more inclusive or exclusive in its focus on border-crossing narratives? In other words, should we be drawing clearer borders around this project or should we be opening up the frame?
2. What elements of the project need development and how?
3. Are there elements of the project proposal that need more theorizing, or perhaps less?
4. What do you think is the best context to develop a project on border poetics? What conditions would be helpful to making this proposal useful in your research? What elements of this proposal intersect with the research work you are currently doing and how? How do you use aspects of border poetics in your work and are there things that a project like this can do to help facilitate that work?
5. Should there be more emphasis on the relationship between Border Poetics and the cultural and political strategy of occupying the border? Or more emphasis on the border subject within the border-crossing narrative?
6. Travel/mobility becomes a theoretically enabling idea in this discourse of and about borders. Does it need for emphasis in this proposal?

Border Poetics – A Project Proposal

1. Abstract

Territorial borders have received renewed academic attention in this age of transnational mobility, though often in a fragmentary and isolated fashion in the humanities. As an ever present, if not always simply definable element in human life, they are commonly represented in narrative and symbolic forms. This project sets out to develop theoretical and practical strategies (a "border poetics") for examining the function of these forms of representation in the intersection between territorial borders and aesthetic works. Analysing primarily border-crossing narratives in literary texts, it aims to test two main theses: 1) that narrative and symbolic representation is a central element in border formation and experience; 2) that textual or medial borders within or around aesthetic works are related to the borders represented in these works.

2. Summary of field status and method of approach

Border poetics, border studies, border theory, border ethics

The term *border poetics* has been suggested by various scholars and writers during the last decade (Görner 1999; Karahasan & Jaroschka 2003; Schimanski 1996; Tygstrup 2000), though with little ensuing discussion which might establish it as a field of study. Here it is taken to mean specifically the study of how territorial borders are given form through narrative and symbolic (figural) presentations, and investigations of the accompanying formal disjunctions in relation to border-related problems already formulated within literary and cultural theory. An initial specificity is called for in face of the wide and sometimes superficial use of such a highly applicable term as border – along with boundary, threshold, limit, crossing and transgression – in many different contexts. Several studies may be seen as already suggesting the usefulness of such an approach in the practice of literary analysis (Cixous 1993; Ette 2001; Henderson 1995; Hicks 1991; Koschorke 1990; Lamping 2001; Moretti 1998; Schimanski 2000, 2001a, b, 2002, 2003). One aim of this project is to establish border poetics as a field of study, allowing at the same time for a continued critical debate about the definition, applicability and usefulness of the term.

Border poetics is an investigation of a specific element (the border) in the relationship between spaces represented on the one hand and the spaces of representation (e.g. the literary text as a spatial object) on the other. As such it belongs properly to the study of a *poetics of space* in general, already well established in literary and cultural theory (Bachelard 1957; Bakhtin 1981; Frank 1963; Lotman 1977; Miller 1995; Moretti 1998; Tygstrup 2000). This poetics of space is in turn related to the wider field of *spatial studies* in the human sciences (underpinned by the work of social scientists and cultural theorists such as Elias, Lefevbre, Virilio, and Soja). Likewise, border poetics must be seen within the context of a wider field of *border studies* in an interdisciplinary frame including other aesthetic disciplines such

as art history, but also social anthropology, political science, international law, ethnology, history, psychology, sociology, economics and geography.

What binds these various approaches together and may provide a basis for comparison is the field of *border theory*. Along with those scholars already cited, there is a strong tradition of thinking on borders, limits and margins within continental philosophy, especially by Hegel, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Derrida. Many other intellectuals have also written on borders (e.g. Bennington 1992, 1994; Chilton 1998; Magris 1993; Miller 1995; Leerssen 1993; Naumann & Faber 1995; Ramírez 2001a, b; Stjernfelt and Troelsen 1992; Tabor 1985). In studies of national identity and in postcolonial theory, borders are also a privileged object of attention for theorists such as Benedict Anderson (the horizontal imagination), Edward Said (the border between East and West), Gayatri Spivak (the international division of labour), and Homi K. Bhabha (the in-between). The border and the in-between in postcolonial criticism have also been treated in a more specific fashion (Egerer 1997; Reif-Hülser 1999). Similarly, border theory also often overlaps with feminist and gender theory (e.g. Freedman 1992). In the case of Lichtenberg-Ettinger, a feminist psychoanalytical border theory verges onto a *border ethics* (Lichtenberg-Ettinger 1994, 1995).

A comparative imperative

In several non-aesthetic disciplines, border studies is already a well-established and sometimes institutionalised field of comparative studies. Within the aesthetic disciplines and in cultural studies, the term "border studies" or "border theory" has been used – mainly within the North-American academic context – often in connection with one of the most striking and most thoroughly discussed border regions in world culture, the Mexican-USAmerican border (Anzaldúa 1991; Calderón 1991; Castillo 1999; Görling 1998, 2002; Michaelsen & Johnson 1997; Saldívar José 1997). At the same time, much work is being done in the German-speaking context at the present time, especially in literary studies, on the literature of Central European border regions, on border figures in poetry, and on more general border theory (Benthien & Krüger-Fürhoff 1999; Görner 2001; Görner & Kirkbright 1999; Kirkbright 1997; Kuczynski and Schneider 1991; Lamping 2001; Naumann & Faber 1995; Borsò & Görling 2004). One purpose of this project is to make up for a lack of dialogue between such established traditions of border studies in the aesthetic disciplines, and to widen the approach to a more comparative perspective.

Borders in literary studies: thematic and formal approaches

Within the field of literary studies, there are several established areas of research which include or imply territorial or cultural borders as important *themes*, relating to exile, migration, diaspora, exploration, travel, war, espionage and crime literature; imperial, frontier, postcolonial, minority and border-region literature; and national representation in literature. The border seen as a more *formal* phenomenon or delimitator of other phenomena should be central to discussion of literary ontology,

genre, stylistics, composition, production/reception, canon formation and translation, and this project aims to move some of the attention often granted structural elements to the divides between these elements.

The method of border poetics

The purpose of border poetics is to bring two concerns, the thematic and the formal, together in an analysis of literary texts. By focusing on border-crossing narratives (including narratives of failed border-crossings), such a poetics can test the thesis that textual boundaries – the ones crossed by the reader – also may function as figures for spatial boundaries, sometimes in conjunction with imagery such as a door, a threshold, a cut, etc.

This procedure involves close readings of the narrative text on its component levels, in the search for juxtapositions of *topographical, symbolic, temporal, epistemological* and *textual* borders. One might find the crossing of a national border in a literary text which coincides with an opposition in ethnic identity, the coming of age of a character accompanied by a widened world-view, and the crossing of generic boundaries in the text from the realistic to the gothic. This method uses the tools of text-immanent literary analysis, combined with perspectivization from the various established schools of literary and cultural theory. To a certain extent it will be able to build on models from chronotopic analysis. The analysis of textual borders may also be able to use techniques from discourse analysis, reception aesthetics, and media studies.

In practice, some of the studies cited above have already shown the potential of such an approach in addressing questions of whether borders can be categorized as natural or artificial, as a defined line or a zone (with its own outer borders), as a place of insight or of fear, as stabile or instabile, as affirming or questioning identity, as an absolute limit or a gradual transition to the other, etc. It can also provide new perspectives to the concept of the "border subject" as conceptualised in North American border studies, highlighting the cumulative effect of actual and potential border-crossings as they are exposed in border region culture.

It is by this highly specific and concrete approach that this project aims to avoid a tendency towards generalization and semantic entropy in the use of the border as a figure in so many different fields, contexts and intellectual traditions. Especially, our approach helps nuance the common use of the term "border" about any form of symbolic difference and transgression (in terms of gender, ethnicity etc), by relating it explicitly to the relevant spatial level. The spatial level need not of course be a national border; differences in ethnicity and gender may be territorialized as the boundaries of cities, bodies, etc. Differences in literary or discursive genre may be territorialized as textual boundaries.

Applicability and relevance

Specificity in terms does not hinder the application of analytic practice developed in border poetics in these other contexts, or the use of theory developed in other contexts within border

poetics. It can be argued that a focus on borders in literary texts has an exemplary force for the concentrated complexity of narrative and figurality found in such texts, at the same time as the borders between such texts and other forms of discourse being permeable enough to allow for dialogue with other textual and aesthetic genres within a wider discursive or cultural field (for a succinct and practical approach to the interdisciplinary study of culture, see the presentation of *cultural analysis* in Bal 1999).

The need for the specific approach to border aesthetics is finally raised by the wide dissemination of *border-crossing narratives* in modern literature. A long list of authors may be mentioned: among others Dannie Abse, Ivo Andric, Veza Canetti, Seamus Deane, Islwyn Ffowc Elis, Sherko Fatah, Carlos Fuentes, Jean Genet, Nadine Gordimer, Knut Hamsun, Bessie Head, Seamus Heaney, Janette Turner Hospital, Roy Jacobsen, Uwe Johnson, Jaan Kross, Cormac McCarthy, Terézia Mora, Joyce Carol Oates, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph Roth, Antonio Tabucchi, Yoko Tawada, and Stefan Zweig. The border-crossing motif is also common in many contemporary films thematizing national difference and globalization in the modern world.

The modern genre of the border-crossing narrative may thus be provisionally delimited as belonging to a period in which the borders of the modern nation-state are put into question, but also to a period with a specific literary interest in divisions and fragmentation in the aesthetic work. However, a comparative study of border-crossing narratives may also involve analysis of such narratives produced in older social and cultural contexts, now reactualized. It must also attend to situations in which characters cross borders *within* nation-states (e.g. the boundaries put in place by zoning laws in pre-liberation South Africa for example), and indeed ultimately to any narrative spatial relationships to the divides between one territory and another and passages between one text and another.

3. Main objectives of the project

The project aims to test two main theses:

- that specifically narrative and symbolic representation is a central element in border formation and experience.
- that the textual or medial borders which frame and divide aesthetic works are related to the borders represented in those works

4. Expected outcomes

- Qualified confirmation of the main theses.
- A thorough description of the border-crossing narrative as a genre.
- A formulated practice for working with textual boundaries using the tools of narratology and discourse analysis.
- An interdisciplinary and comparative framework, developed within a research network, which will facilitate scientific

exchange and counteract tendencies towards regionalism in border studies and border theory.

- New perspectives and tools for both the social sciences and the humanities.

5. Activities

Activity 1. Border Poetics – A Comparative Perspective

CONCEPTUALIZATION & NETWORK-BUILDING – 2005-2006

A theoretical conceptualization and field definition of border poetics, bringing perspectives from different regional research traditions into dialogue. Addresses different kinds of border and different genres of literature.

Activity 2. Border Signs – Borders and Representation

THEORETICAL PROBLEMATIZATION – PROVISIONAL 2006, REVISION LATE 2008-2009

A theoretical problematization of borders and representation coupled with a preliminary mapping of typical kinds of border representations, figural and otherwise.

Activity 3. Border-Crossing Narratives

STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION 1 – 2007

A structural description of narrative episodes in which characters or things cross territorial borders, coupled with a theoretical conceptualizing of the act of border-crossing.

Activity 4. Textual and Medial Borders

STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION 2 – 2008

A structural description of borders and frames in literary narratives and other texts, theoretically situated in a larger discussion of borders and frames in other aesthetic genres and in other media.

Activity 5. Border Poetics – Formulation of Practical Procedures for Textual Analysis

FORMULATION OF METHOD – PROVISIONAL 2005, REVISION LATE 2008-2009

A synthesis of approaches covered in activities 3 & 4, coordinating the main objectives of the project.

6. communication strategies

Open access web site

A BORDER POETICS web site will be formed, including an electronic journal, a web portal, an electronic discussion list, a bibliographical database and a database of border-crossing narratives in literature, non-literary texts, film and art. The electronic journal, named *Border Poetics*, will contain refereed articles and pre-publication material from the yearly seminars and other sources. There will be one themed issue each year from 2005 onwards, but each will be open to submissions after initial publication date (thus using the possibilities of the electronic format). There will also be a section for reviews of new material in book, article, or website form. The *discussion list* will be open to network participants and the contributions will be accessible both on the website and through e-mail distribution. The *bibliographical database* will contain references to scholarly texts relevant to the project. The *narrative database* will provide lists of empirical material. The *web portal* will provide internet links to

border-relevant websites. The web site will be running in its entirety by the end of 2006 and continue its activities after the end of the project period, providing the basis for the continued existence of a border poetics research network.

Seminars resulting in anthologies or special journal issues

There will be a series of workshop seminars with keynote speakers, international research partners and other scholars, and during the last year a summing-up conference. A preliminary seminar, "Border Poetics? – A Comparative Perspective", will be held from November 8-12 2004 at the University of Tromsø; it and an accompanying Ph.d. course, "Borders and Frames", has been financed by the University of Tromsø and NFU-H.

Subsequent project seminars and conferences will be titled "Border Signs - On Borders and Representation" (2006), "Border-Crossing Narratives" (2007), "Textual and Medial Borders" (2008). The first seminar in the project and the final conference will be held in Tromsø; other seminars could be held in other locations, in co-operation with international network members. Conferences and seminars will be run by the project coordinator and the project leader.

Publications from the project

These will include at least one monograph, three edited books or special editions of journals, articles in periodicals and/or book chapters, and the products of doctoral and postdoctoral research.

7. Human Resources

Research partners

These will be selected scholars who will be invited to participate in the network, and also be invited to the projected seminars. Some of these will be invited on the basis of significant contributions to the study of literary borders, others in order to provide perspectives on the subject of the project from other viewpoints (other aesthetic disciplines, discourse theory, social sciences). The research partners will be invited to join the editorial board of the website/journal.

Research network

This will be a network open to all researchers working on themes related to the project. The network will also establish contact with border research networks in other disciplines, such as those centred around the Centre for Border Studies in Glamorgan, the International Boundary Research Unit (IBRU) in Durham, the Danish Institute of Border Region Studies in Aabenraa, the Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS) in Arizona, the Geopolitics and International Boundaries Research Centre (GRC) in London, the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research, the Centre for International Borders Research (CIBR) in Belfast, and the Border and Transcultural Studies Research Circle at University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Grants

Funding allowing, the project aims to provide mobility grants for researchers resulting in articles, and full grants for a doctoral student and post-doctoral researcher.

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