

INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND NEGOTIATION OF BORDERS

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The papers we are presenting in this issue of *Nordlit* were all first given at the 2008 European Conference of the Association of Borderlands Studies, held in Kirkenes in northern Norway, September 11-13, on the borders of the Arctic and in the Finnish-Kven-Norwegian-Russian-Sámi borderland. Mieke Bal's paper on her film *Becoming Vera* is her plenary lecture. The conference was arranged by the Border Poetics research group at the University of Tromsø in close cooperation with the History Department and the CEPIN (Citizenship, Encounters and Place Enactment in the North) research school there, the Petrozavodsk State University and, vitally, the Barents Institute in Kirkenes itself. Various policy and cultural groups were also involved, such as the Kirkenes cultural production outfit *Pikene på broen*, the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, the Borderlands Museum, the Akademisk Kvarter bookshop, the Pasvikturist tourist agency and the Samovarteatret.¹

The theme of the conference was a wide one: the "Cultural Production and Negotiation of Borders". This theme was intended as an acknowledgement of the increasing focus which has been given recently by geographers and historians to the role of cultural production and negotiation in social and territorial bordering processes. The ongoing spate of movies, documentaries, art projects, novels, websites, festivals and tourist attractions concerning borders has given this aspect of bordering renewed topicality and economic importance, and has attracted research both in the humanities and in the social sciences. The stories such cultural practices and artefacts tell, and the images they project, give extra weight to questions about the location of borders and of border populations. In some cases, the border itself – a wall or a fence – becomes a cultural icon of great significance in the

¹ See report in *La Frontera* (29:2, 2009) newsletter of the Association for Borderlands Studies, <http://www.absborderlands.org/2laFrontera.html>.

media and in everyday discourse. In a world of mobilities and securities, the outer peripheries of states are clearly linked to their hybridized urban landscapes and even to the bodies of immigrants and other border-crossers themselves. The cultural negotiation of contested borders is a crucial element of ongoing problems of security, freedom of movement, economic differentials, trafficking, fear of the other, etc.; it also promises the possibility of a creative refiguring of borders and cultural border zones into economically and symbolically productive sites of dialogue, crossing, hybridity and creativity. All these phenomena are the product of historical processes and take place in a shifting historical landscape which both creates a framework for and is formed by cultural practices. Borders are also a central metaphor in cultural theory, and there is need to reflect over the reasons for this.

The conference was thus envisaged as an interdisciplinary conference which would cross the academic divide between “border studies” in the social sciences and “border theory” / “border poetics” in the humanities. It aimed to examine the ways cultural practices use discursive and semiotic strategies in order to imagine and negotiate the border in its social and historical context and to further our understanding of the role of culture in subjective interactions with the border by border crossers and by border zone dwellers. While focusing on bottom-up perspectives, papers raised questions about the need for localized solutions in top-down policy-making, actualised with the increasing economic significance of cultural production and consumption. They asked who initiates and who benefits from such cultural practices, and what their symbolic effects are for social conditions. They aimed to place cultural processes of bordering in historical contexts and show the role of cultural memory in the formation of borderscapes. They traced the transferability of the border concept to questions of identity, subjectivity and medial exposition as facilitated by cultural practices.

A special focus of the conference was the region in which it is set: the Norwegian-Russian-Finnish-Sámi borderland and the wider contexts of the North Calotte, Barents and Arctic regions. The Arctic is an area in which the borders of the environment and energy production are being changed and are changing the geographical, historical, imaginative sense of place and space. This is a transborder region of a layered, complex border history, of pressing social and environmental

problems and possibilities involving many different cultural identities and ways of life, and of high importance today as a political and cultural hotspot of “Western”-Russian relations within the Arctic and Sub-Arctic context. Kirkenes, an old mining town, lies at a point where the interests of many nations and indigenous/minority groups meet, and has been a place of social, economic, environmental, military and cultural confrontation; now it is a site of economic and cultural creativity involving the aspirations and self-narratives of local, national and global elites in an atmosphere of hybridity. It is centrally placed in relationship to the ongoing construction and contestation of territorial and symbolic borders in the Arctic sea against a background of rapid economic development of oil and gas resources. The conference also included a final summing-up panel made up of scholars working from different perspectives on the Norwegian-Russian-Sámi-Kven-Finnish borderscape.

The conference attracted sixty-nine registered participants including social geographers, literary scholars, historians, philosophers, ecologists, library scientists, tourism researchers, political scientists, media scientists, anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, economists, artists, and artistic producers. The programme included in all forty-eight papers, twenty-two of which dealt specifically with borderlands between Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Some of these “northern” papers will be appearing in a separate special issue, of the *Journal of Northern Studies*. Another group of papers will appear in a special issue of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*.

The essays in this issue of *Nordlit* focus on how historical and contemporary border discourses, expressive and aesthetic representations, are generated, circulated, and interpreted in both local and global contexts. We have also sought to include material that raises questions about the nature of aesthetic discourses and how their specific form of intervention, production and negotiation, works through various forms of representational displacement, with the border not always being described in a directly recognizable or transparent way. These displacements include narrative, fictional, and figural reinscriptions of the border. Aesthetic discourses thus make discussion of imaginary and symbolic borderlands necessary, often emphasizing the layers of memory in the borderscape. Within a discursive approach to borders it is important to acknowledge the role displacement has to

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play in the cultural production and formation of borders, even territorial borderlands such as the one in which the conference was set.