

Reading borders and reading as crossing borders

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Abstract

Borders are traces, that is to say, they are a form of writing – and thus they are also texts to be read. We often think of that which is on the other side of the border as something unknown, and the border itself also in some sense unknowable, inviting interpretation. I will here be examining some literary and cinematic narratives in which national borders are crossed for elements of an epistemology of the border. Such narratives often transform crossings into readings, suggesting that these crossings are allegories of the reading of the narrative itself – the reader crossing over into the text. If border crossings are movements of bodies in space, what do these narratives tell us of the relationship between the reader's body and the space of the text? What can these narratives tell us about the figurality of community and identity? Can national affiliation be seen as an act of reading borders? I suggest that narratives of border crossing, like border crossings themselves, are structured around a double vector, sometimes transformed into a swirling confusion of directions, constituting the border zone and its associated identities.



Figure 1: Detail from Olaus Magnus' *Carta Marina* (1539). Source: Wikipedia commons.

Border monsters

The *Carta Marina* is the first printed map of the Nordic countries, drawn by ecclesiast and writer Olaus Magnus (1490-1557) and printed in Venice in 1539. The only true borderlines on it are those that divide land from water. Looking closer, however, we can see that it is possible to separate one fiefdom from another. For example, Norway (*Norvegia*) and Sweden (*Svecia*) are divided by a chain of mountains (Figure 1). The purely symbolic status of this representation

of the border is underlined by the fact that certain place names (Gudbrandsdalen, Hedmark) located west of these mountains would in a modern map appear *east* of the main massif of mountains in Southern Norway. On the right-hand side of the map we find the border between Finland and Russia (*Muscovie*), marked not with mountains but with two rows of trees, a symbolic linear forest (Figure 2). By the border on the Finnish side, we see the Swedish coat of arms (Finland being then part of Sweden), cannons, and soldiers. The soldiers on the Russian side are singled out by their wearing pointy red hats.



Figure 2: Detail from Olaus Magnus' *Carta Marina* (1539). Source: *Wikipedia commons*.

The marking of borders with mountains and trees was a convention in the maps of this period and is in keeping with an older, medieval conception of borders (Horn, Kaufmann & Bröckling 2002: 12-13; Power 1999: 110-12). They are not sharp lines dividing between nations, but wild forests and mountains -

extended borderlands. We see this also in the terminology. We know that borders in what is today Western Europe were often at the time called *marches*, *March*, or in Scandinavia, *mark*. The transition in German from the word *March* to the Slavic loan word *Grenze* (*granica*, *branice*, *Граница*) marks a transition to a more defined sense of borders as borderlines (Warnke 1994: 11).

Thus right at the top of Olaus Magnus's map we find the region of *Finmarchia*. What today is called Finnmark was then a borderland between different realms in which overlapping taxation areas co-existed with notional borders of jurisdiction (Hansen 2005). In addition, however, the map signals that we find ourselves at the borders of the known world, from a European perspective at least. Here be monsters, fabulous animals, fictitious beings – on this map, drawn into the landscape outside Vardø (*Vardahus*), the eastern end of Norway (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Detail from Olaus Magnus' *Carta Marina* (1539). Source: *Wikipedia commons*.

In reading this map – and in many languages, maps are something which you *read* – the logic of reading seems to change towards its edges. An element of the unknown inserts itself, and our bird's-eye perspective, perpendicular to the plane of the map, is supplemented by a perspective reaching out northwards from the map's centre or bottom, a perspective in line with the plane of the map. It is this spatiality of reading, formed by two perspectives, that I will be addressing here in relation to the border.

Borders are writing

In preparation, however, for what I have to say about reading and borders, I shall be making the argument that borders are writing. My departure point is the geographical border, especially the national border. Geographers (especially

cultural and political geographers) have begun to talk about borders as processes. Borders are not just static objects; they are dynamic *borderings* (Houtum & Naerssen 2002). Like nations and identities – two phenomena strongly connected to borders – borders are constantly under reaffirmation and negotiation; they are not final givens.

The political geographer David Newman has set an agenda for the geographical and historical study of national and other borders with this idea of bordering at its heart (2006). In this agenda he proposes a more active interest in two major ways of talking about borders: that focusing on border *institutions* and that focusing on border *narratives*.

Why make a connection between ‘bordering’ and these two terms, ‘institution’ and ‘narrative’? The link to narrative seems simple enough. Indeed, the very word process suggests the possibility of narrative, since narratives always describe processes, and processes cannot be described without the help of narratives. Institutions (such as states and departments of immigration control) seem more solid, however. Their function is partly to make borders secure and fixed. If, however, we look at borders as processes, as borderings, the institutions which are associated with them can be seen in a new light. The word *institution* itself comes from a verb, *to institute*, and an institution is thus something which has been instituted. It has undergone a process. Another way of defining the word *institution* is thus as an act of instituting, rather than as an established social body. This meaning would suggest also that an institution is not fixed forever once it has been instituted; rather it is something that is constantly under the process of institution. Observation bears this out. Institutions such as the national border are processes of interaction between different groups of people.

Following this argument, there is no reason not to tell stories about these institutions, these interactions between people. Each act of instituting or reinstituting a border is a story, a narrative, a history on a large scale. But even everyday borders are dependent on everyday actions and negotiations: slower-moving to the point of seeming static, but in absolute terms just as dynamic. However, to say that the border is an institution in the verbal, processual sense is also to imply that it is not just an effect, but also a cause. It is not only the product of a continual act of institution, it is also itself a continual act of institution, instituting other things. If it is created by difference, it also creates difference (cf. Horn et al. 2002: 18). This in itself is a promise that it will be in a process of continual renegotiation.

Before the shift towards a processual view of borders, one of the main objects of classical border theory in geography was to examine the justification for borders, that is, to what degree they find their origin in balances of power, in distance from political or economic centres, in cultural and linguistic difference, in historical precedence, in natural features of the landscape, etc. Questions of whether a border is “antecedent”, “subsequent” or “superimposed” (Hartshorne 1936) are the basis of much contentious discussion both inside and outside geography; they touch upon the difference between nature and culture which comes to the fore in most discussions of origins.

These questions are of concern to those individuals who work with the renegotiation of borders on a practical, day-to-day basis. The process of the delimitation of national borders is a complex one, involving detailed examination

of historical precedence, conflicting cartographies, oral tradition, and existing border stones, posts and signs. I dwell on these technicalities concerning territorial borders because they go to show that bordering is a process of tracing traces, and tracing the traces of traces, and so on. In many historical cases, a boundary stone would hide in the ground beneath it another marked stone, so that the border could be found if the boundary stone was moved (Warnke 1994: 12). The work of border delimitation, whether it be technical or non-technical in its approach, involves looking into the archives, whether they be the physical archives of state governments, the archives of popular memory, or the metaphorical archive of the soil and water themselves.

To use a term taken from literary theory, bordering is an intertextual process, in which new texts and new topoi are created out of old. As Reinhold Görling has pointed out, borders are not signs; they are precisely traces (2007: 149-151). In other words, they do not refer by some sort of code to things in a real world. They are rather remnants of something which ultimately was never there, in the sense that this something was in itself a remnant, a remnant of a remnant, and so on. That is to say, if we are to follow Jacques Derrida's argument about signs and traces (1976), they are nothing more or less than writing.

Reading and borders

If borders are writing, that would of course imply that they can be subject to reading, even if that reading is an attempt to follow traces of something which was never really present. My first reading here is of a literary narrative describing both a border crossing and an act of reading. In 1953, Islwyn Ffowc Elis published what turned out to be one of the most popular novels written in Welsh in the 20th century, the politicized family romance *Cysgod y Cryman* (*Shadow of the Sickle*, 1998). Here we find an Englishman, Paul Rushmere, a young man on the brink of becoming a surgeon, and engaged to marry a Welsh woman, Greta Vaughan.

Elis chooses to introduce Rushmere in a scene in which he drives over the border in his car. As the border sign flashes by, Rushmere become embroiled in reflections on the sign, on the border, on Wales, and on the woman he is to marry.

Now we are coming into Wales, he said to himself. Who needed to know? He noticed as he drove past that the sign was leaning into the hedge, as if someone had given it a spiteful shove. Quite right too, he thought. Wasn't Wales different enough in every way without proclaiming the fact on its borders? (Elis 1998: 33)¹

In crossing the border he thus engages in a reading of the border and of what lies on the other side. These reflections are not all that happy; in spite of being in

¹ "Ac yr ydym yn dod i Gymru, meddai wrtho'i hun. Pwy oedd am wybod? Sylwodd wrth basio fod y bwrdd wedi gogwyddo tua'r gwrych, fel petai rhywun wedi rhoi hergwd sbeityld iddo. Eitha peth ag ef hefyd. Onid oedd Cymru'n ddigon gwahanol ym mhob ffordd heb ei hysbysebu ar ei ffiniau?" (Elis 1953: 40).

love with a Welsh woman, there is something about the cryptic and uncanny otherness of Wales which disturbs him. As he continues his diagnosis – he reads in the fashion of a doctor – it appears that the people of Wales are difficult to understand (“anodd eu deal”, Elis 1953: 40); its culture has hidden treasures, a language which closes off external access; a culture which takes the form of a folk cult (“cwl’t gwerin”, 40); which has been re-brewed and bottled (“wedi’i ail-fragu a’i gostrelu”, 40). Welshness has been bottled up, shifty and too drunken to be open to rational investigation. His attempts at interpretation seem to end unavoidably in an inability to decide on true meanings, in aporias. Ultimately, however, Rushmere uses his reading or diagnosis to retain control of the situation. The speed of his car, causing the border to rush by in the glimpse of a sign – there and half not there – wipes away the uncanniness with which he finds himself confronted.

Looking at this scene for what it has to say about reading, some salient points appear. On the border, Rushmere engages in interpretation. His movement through space – into Wales in front of him and past the border sign to his side – is part of his act of reading. His method of reading is formed by his previous experience, for, as a doctor, his diagnoses involve facing the unknown. He is attempting to cross an epistemic border, the border between the known and the unknown (cf. Schimanski 2006: 56). His reading of Wales and the border is an act of border negotiation in which he both crosses and is unsuccessful in crossing the border on the epistemic plane. He thus both reaffirms and denies the border.

These points pretty much sum up what I am going to say here about reading and borders. Reading always involves an element of interpretation. In hermeneutics, the study of interpretation and thus attaining knowledge, reading has traditionally been a matter of circular movements, that is, movements between detail and whole, then and now, text and context, the text and a horizon of expectation. A phenomenological approach to reading can supplement the hermeneutic spiral by paying attention to the spatiality of lived experience. Reading becomes more a matter of situating the body in space. This spatiality applies both to the technologies of reading – our relationship to various media, such as the book, and their physical spatiality – and to the act of crossing the border, as in the Elis example. In such a phenomenological approach I suggest that the hermeneutic circle often becomes a *double vector*: reading as a combination of crossing into and of crossing past, of horizontal and perpendicular perspectives.

These two vectors may appear also in other media, for example in maps (as in the reading of Olaus Magnus’ map) and in cinema. In the film *Im Juli* (2000), by the Turkish-German director Fatih Akin, there are several scenes of border crossing. *Im Juli* is a combination of a road movie, a romantic comedy and a comedy of errors. Daniel (played by Moritz Bleibtrau) is a young mathematics teacher on his way to Istanbul to find a woman he has fallen in love with. What he does not know is that his true love will in fact be the woman he continually keeps meeting on his journey, Juli (played by Christiane Paul). He has lost both her and his passport in Hungary, and the scene I refer to here (00:59:54 – 01:04:09) shows how they meet again, and how he crosses the border into Romania (Figure 4).



Figure 4: *Im Juli* (dir. Fatih Akin, 2000): across – along – diagonal

The scene can be summed up in terms of project analyses of the three main characters involved, Daniel, Juli, and the border guard (played by the director, Fatih Akin). In order to cross the border, Daniel wants to fool the border guard into thinking Juli is his wife. In order to get Daniel to be her boyfriend, Juli takes advantage of the situation by fooling him into making a marriage vow; he goes along with this, but as a pretence. The border guard takes advantage of this unofficial marriage, as a pretext to ask Daniel to give him his van as a ‘wedding gift’; Daniel does not tell him that it is not in fact his van. The basic bordering is between Hungary and Romania and between Daniel and Juli (who has already crossed). The border guard is intimately connected to the border itself and personifies its unavoidable status as a necessary supplement to the division of opposing pairs – a third space – at the same time as safeguarding that division. As Reinhold Görling writes in a reading of the same scene, referring to the political philosophy of Giorgio Agamben: “Sovereignty functions as the border guard. It guarantees the limitation of the impact of non-binary logic” (Görling 2007: 158). Yet the fact that sovereignty is a guarantor for the law which is at the same time outside the law becomes very clear in the border guard’s corrupt misuse of his power. The border, here represented by the border guard, is a supplement necessary to the functioning of the state, but, as a non-binary third space, it also disrupts its own functioning as guarantor of the state.

This scene illustrates two principles. The first is the way in which a specific medium may handle the double vector figured by the border crossing. On the one hand, there is the zoom shot *along the road* across the border post into Romania, together with the various switching shots approximating Daniel’s and Juli’s perspectives in conversation (in film analysis called a shot/reverse shot sequence), also along a vector which crosses the border at right angles. These represent Daniel’s and Juli’s desires. On the other, there are the external perspective shots aligned *along the border* and the border point barrier (the scene opens with a shot neatly centering the open end of the barrier bar), *across* the road. These divide the screen into a Hungarian and a Romanian side and give approximately the perspective of the border guards (opening shot) or meet the border guard face on (after Juli turns up). Only occasionally do riskily diagonal vectors combining or confusing those of the road and the border come into play, representing the desire of the border guard for the van parked on the Hungarian side of the border post. These are reinforced when he points his gun at Daniel along this same diagonal vector.

The second principle is that the unknown again makes its appearance, as in the scene in Elis’s novel. Here it takes the form of the cryptic and of deception (in the case of the marriage, further underlined by the pointing of the gun during the ceremony, ironically figuring it as a “shotgun marriage”). It is fitting that this should happen on a border crossing which is part of a larger, extended or

disseminated border crossing (cf. Aguirre 2006: 16; Schimanski 2006: 49) stretching between Hamburg and Istanbul, with every border along the way subject to potentially becoming *the* border between West and East, according to the logic of “nesting Orientalisms” (Bakić-Hayden 1995). On the first page of his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes: “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1991: 1). To some extent, this excess of fantastic constructions of the Orient must be based in a lack of knowledge, or even a presumed cryptic *unknowability* of the Orient. To this quote I would like to add Franco Moretti’s argument: “Near the border, figurality goes up” (1998: 45), i.e. that texts and discourse make more use of metaphors and other rhetorical figures when faced with the border. Moretti hints at theoretical explanations for this, to do with the cognitive and emotional function of metaphors. Border figurality is a way of dealing with “the emotional impact with an unknown reality” (45); metaphors “simultaneously *express* the unknown we must face, and yet also *contain* it” (47).

Both Said and Moretti are talking, at least at some level, about topographical borders. Said is talking about the border between East and West, Moretti about the border to the Scottish highlands in Walter Scott’s historical romance *Waverley*. Both are implying that the topographical border functions as an epistemic border, a border between the known and the unknown. I would argue, however, that not only the other side but also the border itself is often figured as unknown (cf. Aguirre 2006: 17) or as imagined (and thus unknown). Indeed, Said implies this when he later makes the central point that the border between East and West is itself a construction (1991: 39, 45-46) and an “imaginative geography” (54). It is part of the fantasy.

We meet here a variant of the double vector: when crossing the border we read both the other side of the border and the border itself. This unknown in the border has to do with the fact that we are always situated as bodies in relationship to the border and it is thus impossible for us to see the whole border from both sides at once. Its effect in border crossings is the introduction of elements of figurality, fiction, the fantastic, deception, illusion and the imaginary. Thus when we cross a topographical border, we are also attempting to cross epistemic borders. This fictionality also has to do with the argument presented earlier of borders being traces, readings of an archive with no absolute origin.

Border crossings are formed like narratives

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the French theologian, historian and social philosopher Michel de Certeau argues that stories are always travel stories (Certeau 1984: 115), and always involve border crossings (Certeau 1984: 122-23, 126-28). Some confirmation of this is to be found in narratological theories of what makes up a story or a narrative, that is, the minimal criteria for calling something a narrative. A character in a narrative has a project: to change her situation, and overcome certain obstacles. As in many other situations, this passage from one situation to another – this crossing of the narrative border – is figured as a journey.

To illustrate this I shall move to another literary example. Towards the end of the historical novel *Sulis* (1980) by Dag Skogheim, the reader follows the story of the young woman Janny Olsen as she escapes from Finland in 1918, at the end of the Finnish civil war. One of her most difficult tasks on this journey is to cross the border into Sweden. Topographical borders become obstacles she must overcome and these mostly are personified as concrete human antagonists. She persuades a sledge driver to carry her across the ice-covered Torne River, luckily avoiding the border control:

These means appeared to work, the man relented straightaway, leapt up onto the sleigh and lashed the horse on, standing boldly behind it. The control post was out in the middle of the still frozen river. But good fortune and luck followed, for a raging squall removed all vision, whipped at and blinded the Swedish controllers, and the sleighman most likely suspected something; he rushed faster, swerved a little in the driving snow and was over on the Swedish side before anybody could react.²

Here an opponent, the sledge driver, becomes a helper. So also does the weather, in the form of the raging squall on the wind-swept ice which hides Janny from the Swedish border control.

The squall thus cuts a pocket or a fold in the border into which she can insert herself. Folds are, according to Derrida, inevitable at borders (1992: 235); they are the product of the unavoidable overlappings between symbolic spaces. A fold can also create a third space in the sense implied by Homi K. Bhabha: an in-between place where the subaltern migrant can attain agency while still fulfilling the expectations of power, in the form of “sly civility” (1994: 99-101). Again, the border becomes a space of epistemic uncertainty; at the border we face the border of our knowledge. I would also claim that we here meet a stylistic border. Because the squall is so clearly the main *deus ex machina* in the story of Janny’s journey, for a short moment we cross over from novelistic reality – the suspension of disbelief – into a marked awareness of the novel’s fictionality. The reader may for a moment stop in her flow of movement through the text and become aware of the whole text as such, seen, so to speak, at right angles.³

When Certeau, writing about social practices, uses the term ‘stories’, he is primarily concerned with the everyday stories which we are constantly telling ourselves and others, even at the very moment that we enact them by moving through space. He is, however, clearly aware that a central element in his world of everyday practices is the tricks and subterfuges – the sly civilities – played by normal people in the face of a dominant power: “a tactic [as opposed to a strategy] is an art of the weak” (Certeau 1984: 37), it is “determined by the *absence of power*” (38). Though Certeau does not refer to it, one definition of ‘stories’ is that which focuses on the status of stories as lies, or more specifically,

² “Midlet viste seg å virke, mannen gav seg med en gang, hoppet opp på sleden og jaget hesten av gårde mens han stod freidig bakpå. Midt ute på den ennå tilfrosne elva var kontrollposten. Men hellet og lykken fulgte, for en rasende byge tok all sikt, pisket og blindet den svenske kontrollen, og skysskaren ante nok noe; han peiste på, dreiet litt av i snødrevet og var over på svensk side før noen reagerte.” (Skogheim 1998: 287). My translation.

³ For a more complete reading of borders in *Sulis*, in Norwegian, see Schimanski 2008.

fictions. ‘You’re not telling the truth, you’re just telling a story’, we told each other as children. Again, borders as they are formed, lived and negotiated in the real world become dependent on categories such as fiction, figuration, and the imaginary. Like Certeau’s tactics and trickeries, these must be read along a second vector into the text.

Allegorical connections between different kinds of borders

I shall now address the way in which allegorical connections can be set up between the act of border crossing as described in a literary narrative and the act of reading that narrative envisaged as a movement through textual space. I shall be using some more examples in which the second vector of this movement – at an angle to the text – is figured in different ways: as maps, as heraldic images, as faces.

The first is taken from Knut Hamsun’s novella *Dronningen af Saba* (1892, “The Queen of Saba”). This tells the story of two trips across the Swedish border. As in the novel *Sult* (*Hunger*), published two years previously, the nameless protagonist finds himself involved in the fruitless pursuit of a woman he does not know. The text is divided into two parts, each framed by crossings into and out of Sweden. His second trip ends in a reckless train journey across Sweden to Kalmar. Kalmar is a border town in the sense that it lies on the Swedish coast and is pictured strongly by the text as the terminus of the protagonist’s journey and a labyrinth in which he loses all sense of direction. Kalmar is a place in which his erotic desire and the reader’s narrative desire are frustrated. It is also, as the novella makes clear in an ironic fashion, a town with a highly symbolic role in the historical development of Scandinavian borders, though the protagonist’s historical researches there only end in confusion.

It is, however, on the first trip that the reader is given a premonition of this terminal movement across Sweden, blocked in the end by the sea: “The only reading I had with me was a map of Sweden; I sit there, smoking and feeling vexed; in the end then I pull my map out of my pocket and start reading it”.⁴ While on a trip across the Swedish border, and just after he has met the woman he later follows on the train, it is as if the protagonist reads his whole later journey through the map of Sweden. While himself sitting in Sweden, he can interpret the whole of the nation as it is delimited by its land and sea borders. He is inside Sweden, but places himself outside in the act of reading. He is on the map, but also above it. At the same time, the reader is allowed a premonition of the framing of the text itself by the protagonist’s border crossing.⁵

⁴ “Den eneste Lektüre, jeg havde med, var et Kort over Sverige; jeg sidder der og røger og ærgrer mig, tilsidst tager jeg da mit Kort op af Lommen og giver mig til at læse i det.” (Hamsun 1892: 365). My translation.

⁵ For a more complete reading of this story in Norwegian, see Schimanski 2001. See also Rees 2008: 189-190 for a further reading of the map scene.

Something similar happens in one of the more famous border crossings which take place in Jean Genet's highly autobiographical *Journal du voleur* (1949, *The Thiefs Journal* 1967). This is the crossing from Czechoslovakia into Poland which Jean associates with the image of the Lady with the Unicorn (of the famous medieval tapestry in the Musée de Cluny in Paris). In this crossing he focuses on, among other things, erotic and heraldic images of Poland: the blonde men of Poland, the heraldic eagle of Poland, and the birches on the other side of the border. Genet then states that in crossing he would rather become part of the image than of the actual country on the other side of the border: "The crossing of borders and the excitement it arouses in me were to enable me to apprehend directly the essence of the nation I was entering. I would penetrate less into a country than to the interior of an image" (Genet 1967: 39).⁶ We here see an attempt at what Derrida calls in his discussion of borders "participation without belonging" (Derrida 1992: 227), this time with the unknown of the border depicted as fantastic heraldic beasts. As in Hamsun's *Dronningen af Saba*, we are faced with the reading of an image at an angle to the crossing into the actual country, inside and outside at the same time.

In the story "Geduld bringt Rosen", (1932, "Patience Brings Roses" 2006), first published in the Viennese *Arbeiter-Zeitung* by the Sephardic Jewish author Veza Taubner-Calderon, and later published under the name Veza Canetti, we the readers cross into the text together with a rich family, the Prokops, as they leave Russia as refugees. These Prokops later prove to be the nemesis of a much poorer family, the Mäusles, in an ironic, or even sarcastic, fable of the violence of class relations.

The border crossing serves to characterize the Prokops as immoral and heartless people, animals under their fine veneer. With them they have their wealth, smuggled in the form of jewels hidden about their persons, even in a bag of bread rolls carried by their niece. Their deceptiveness is depicted in the form of hidden folds and pockets of various kinds within their baggage. Almost immediately after crossing the border, and to the surprise of the other passengers – representatives of the readers in this text – Frau Prokop begins to dig out the jewels. In an invocation of the fantastic and supernatural, or to be more precise, the divine, she begins to open up the bread rolls, revealing more jewels, in a parody of Christian transubstantiation. When her niece Ljubka, who had not realized what she was carrying, protests that her unknowing act of smuggling would have been punishable by capital sacrifice, Frau Prokop replies: "'God looks after the innocent,' Mrs Prokop said, pointed towards God, who was apparently enthroned on the luggage rack, and, broke off a piece of the roll, which she passed to Ljubka". (Canetti 2006: 23)⁷

The meaning and absolute signifier of this scene is thus set at an angle to the trajectory of the journey, above, in the pocket of the bread, or the pocket of the luggage rack. But the ultimate hiding place is the bodies of the Prokops

⁶ "Le passage des frontières et cette émotion qu'il me cause devaient me permettre d'appréhender directement l'essence de la nation où j'entrerais. Je pénétrais moins dans un pays qu'à l'intérieur d'une image." (Genet 1995: 54).

⁷ "'Die Unschuldigen schützt Gott', sagte Frau Prokop, zeigte auf Gott, der offenbar ober dem Gepäcknetz thronte, und gab ihr ein abgebrochenes Stück von der Semmel." (Canetti 1994: 8).

themselves. Here they do not hide jewels, but their true characters. As the Prokops cross the border, the hand breaks the bread rolls, and the gaze pierces the flesh. As Frau Prokop hands over one of the smuggled pieces of jewellery, her daughter Tamara laughs:

How that fine face was now contorted! Rough lines, bare gums, wrinkles which reached as far as her temples, and then her ears – it was her ears which drew one’s attention more than anything else. They were like a dog’s when you pull back his flaps, twisted, brown sockets, and her whole laugh betrayed no sign of joy, but just a meanness which could not be hidden. (Canetti 2006: 24)⁸

The operative figure of the spatiality of reading is here the face, with its folded boundaries.⁹

Historicizing allegories of crossing into texts and nations

I use the word “allegory” here in its flexible sense, as the possibility of constantly switching the hierarchy between allegory and allegorized and extending metaphors on both sides of the divide. After Paul de Man’s deconstructive writings, reading allegorically is no longer necessarily based around a consistent code mapping the surface narrative to an underlying meaning (cf. Jameson 1986: 73). The act of reading becomes a figural resource which feeds into the act of border crossing, and the act of border crossing, becomes a figural resource which feeds into the act of reading.

These allegories between different kinds of border crossing must be historicizable. They all bear some relationship to changes in the conception of reading and of text, or of borders and of nations. When I say that reading and border crossing “feed into” each other, this means not only that we can understand the one better by looking at the other, but also that the one may reconstruct the other. Like borders themselves, they can both be effects and have effects. In Homi K. Bhabha’s terminology, they *write*: that is, they describe and prescribe, they are both performative and pedagogic, i.e. caught between the everyday practices of the people and official national narratives (Bhabha 1994: 145-46).

This double status of being and having effects is regulated by various figures or configurations: spatial figures of folds and pockets, participation without belonging, the internalization of the outside, suspension and immersion,

⁸ Welche Verzerrung in dem feinen Gesicht! Grobe Linien, nacktes Zahnfleisch, Falten bis zu den Schläfen und vor allem die Ohren, die Ohren wurden plötzlich sichtbar wie bei einem Hund, dem man die Lappen zurückstreift, gekrümmte [sic], braune Höhlen waren die Ohren, und dieses ganze Lachen zeigte nichts von Freude, sondern eben eine Kargheit, die es nicht verbergen konnte. (Canetti 1994: 9). My translation.

⁹ For readings emphasizing gender aspects of the episodes from *Elis*, Skogheim, Hamsun, Genet and Canetti, see Schimanski (2010).

borderlines and borderspaces, walls and bridges, negotiations and sometimes splittings of the self, third spaces, dislocation and disorientation.

“The Pencil Box” (in *There was a Young Man from Cardiff*, 1992) is an “autobiographical fiction” by Dannie Abse, a Jewish Welsh poet writing in English. It describes how the young Dannie has stolen a pencil-box from a school friend. Having just learnt about the Ten Commandments, among them the prohibition on stealing, he feels guilty and throws the box into a stream near his home in Cardiff. Later, he tries to retrieve it, following the stream out towards the Bristol Channel and the border to England. The story ends with the following passage:

I walked on and on, out of bounds, to where the path disappeared and where I had never been before. I stopped. The sun had sunk down in the sky behind a line of menacing trees and no one at all was about. Surely I was not in Wales any more, not even in England? I had reached a strange country, one not on the map, and suddenly I was afraid. I felt impelled to look up at the sky. There was a slow cloud passing over, the front of it shaped like a man’s huge face – the forehead and the nose and the jaw forming. (Abse 1992: 13)

Here, divinity from above and the figure of the face which we saw in the story by Veza Canetti combine in an uncanny borderscape. Dannie imagines that he has entered another country – not the “other” of Wales (that is, England), but perhaps the “other” of all nations, a third space, where directions are confused. Right on the outer edge of the text, he is now outside its realistic framework. The face of the man in the clouds is the god of the Ten Commandments perhaps, aware of Dannie’s deceptions. The reader is forced out of her onward movement through the text also into a space of confusion, confusion about genre. Is this a realistic text? Is it a fantastic text? Is it a religious text? Is it a lyrical text? Is it a child’s text? The confusion is regulated by Dannie’s gaze onwards, along the line of his journey, and the face’s gaze downwards, at an angle.

In Fatih Akin’s *Im Juli* the perspective at an angle in the end explodes into a circling disorientation, a confusion of directions, just as the viewer is about to cross out of the film, expecting some form of narrative closure (Figure 5).

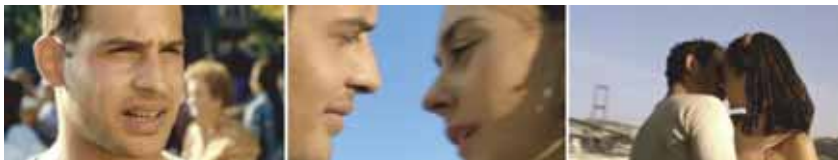


Figure 5: *Im Juli* (dir. Fatih Akin, 2000): faces – profiles – swirling

The film’s protagonist Daniel at last declares his love for Juli, using Juli’s made-up wedding ritual from the earlier Hungarian-Romanian border-crossing scene. This is shot face on in a shot/reverse shot sequence, the perspective in line with the axis connecting them. They then move to cross the emotional and bodily border between by entering into a kiss. This movement is shown in an external shot at right angles to the axis connecting them, with the screen divided between the side profiles of their heads (01:29:05). This static shot is, however, immediately replaced by a sequence in which the camera starts spinning around the couple on the quay by the Ortaköy Mosque in Istanbul, with the Bosphorus

Bridge in the background, this spinning signifying the dizziness of love and a movement out of the everyday world.

Daniel and Juli have reached the end of their journey. Only one border crossing remains as the couple rejoins their friends and previous rivals in love, Melek (played by İdil Üner) and İsa (played by Mehmet Kurtuluş). Like Dannie in “The Pencil Box”, Daniel in *Im Juli* also has to negotiate the borders of imagined communities, crossing over into a Mediterranean culture and leaving his initial status as a stiff German mathematics teacher behind him.



Figure 6: *Im Juli* (dir. Fatih Akin, 2000): towards – side-on – swirling

The watcher leaves the film as the four cross the Bosphorus Bridge in İsa’s black Mercedes, going for their holidays “in den scheiß Süden” (“in the fucking South”, 01:30:01). An external, aerial camera perspective – the actual camera no doubt attached to a helicopter – follows the bridge with the car centred in a tracking shot pointing across the lanes of the bridge, Europe to the left and Asia to the right (Figure 6). Again, however, the camera begins to ascend in a circling shot, swirling around the car and the bridge – the latter a ubiquitous motif in German-Turkish narrative (McGowan 2000) – announcing the confusion of the car’s trajectory and the border formed by the course of the Bosphorus. This is the final shot of the film.

What my examples all point to is something strange happening on the border and often on the edge of the nation-state, something which in genre terms threatens the horizontality and homogeneity of realistic representations. I refer here to the kind of representation found in realistic novels which Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities*, takes as an adequate form for representing the standard established nation-state (1991: 25-36). Representations figuring the border as a fold, an unknown or a third in-between space, allow the status of the border as process and as a constantly renegotiated institution – as bordering – to come to the fore. The contrast between the two forms of representation implies that these strange phenomena at the edge of the nation-state are connected to specific moments in its history, moments when its homogeneous fullness and independence are brought into question.

Reading reading as border-crossing

To sum up, I shall return to those points mentioned earlier in connection with my reading of *Cysgod y Cryman* by Islwyn Ffowc Elis. Border crossing involves interpretation or reading. Reading can be envisaged as movement through space, involving border crossings both along and into the text. This makes it possible for reading and crossing (of national borders) to feed off one another, through allegorical figurations. Our ways of reading and crossing are formed by experience; they are based on concepts which undergo historical transformations.

Crossing and reading involve an element of the unknown – the attempted crossing of an epistemic border – which often takes the form of the figural fiction, or the fantastic.

Furthermore, I have described the phenomenological activity of reading and approaching the unknown meaning behind or beyond a text as regulated by a double vector, across and along. The mathematical concept of the vector, a central element in linear algebra often used in physics and engineering to model movement-related phenomena such as velocity and force, is a means of expressing magnitude and direction together. As a form of mathematical modelling or metaphor for readerly space, I do not claim that it is a true explanation of the act of reading, interpretation or understanding. At most, I can only claim that it is an allegory of a doubtless historically contingent tendency to imagine understanding as a double spatial movement. But the mathematical metaphor is certainly extendable. The *sum* of two vectors which are perpendicular to each other is defined as a third, diagonal vector (thus two forces working on a free body can be seen as a third force pointing in a direction in between the other two), and a single diagonal vector can, conversely, be “decomposed” into two perpendicular vectors. The examples I have been reading show how both reading and border crossing can be seen as a constant switching between two perpendicular perspectives or motions, at any time to be supplemented by a diagonal. This diagonal furthermore can point to a sense of confusion, often expressed in a circular movement or sometimes in a labyrinthine space, and on the level of understanding and meaning, in irresolvable aporias.

Here I have only made readings of scenes of border crossings, but by saying that these border crossings are allegories of reading, I am making the claim that all reading can be imagined as a form of continuous border crossing, as the reader negotiates the spaced or punctuated linearity of the text, making passages from one part of the text to the next. Literary theory often deals in pairs such as paradigm and syntagm (the two main axes in language), or mimesis and diegesis (showing and telling), which can be imagined in spatial arrangements. The pairs are often supplemented by a third, uncannily diagonal term such as the poetic (in formalist theory, defined as a combination of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of language) or mimicry (a diegetic travesty of mimesis central to both surrealism and postcolonialist theory). I am led to suspect a productive master code or discursive formation leading to the creation of pairs and trios.

In hermeneutics, meaning is imagined as placed behind the text, to be reached by crossing through the veil of the text, in a hermeneutic circle which at its most banal or pragmatic is expressed as that between the reader and the author. However, another hermeneutic circle, that of part and whole, also allows for a perspective along the text, pointing to the text’s edges as guarantors of meaning and closure. In practical terms, the truth of the text as stated or implied in any specific interpretation is sometimes imagined to be not behind the text, but at its beginning, in its title or foreword, or at its ending, in a moral, climax or dénouement, the target of the reader’s narrative desire. The text is *articulated* both in the sense that it is an enunciation, that it *crosses* the divide between meaning and reading, and in the sense that it is segmented *along* its length, like an articulated bus or the articulated body of an insect.

The relationship between meaning and spatiality can be presented as one divorced from the concrete spatiality of the text. In his book *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines* (1992) J. Hillis Miller – who like many other deconstructionists is sceptical about narrative or interpretative closure (cf. p. 18) – envisages reading as a following of a textual line constantly disturbed and crossed by repetitions in the text, places where the text curves back on itself, “breaking linearity” (6). While “a book is made of ‘gatherings’ or ‘folds’ bringing the divided back together” (6), ultimately these structures of repetition obstruct the linearity of the text and the search for textual meaning: “The intelligibility of writing depends on this twisting and breaking of the line that interrupts or confounds its linearity and opens up the possibility of repeating that segment, while at the same time preventing any closure of its meaning” (8). All lines, promising absolute meanings, tend in fact to end in aporias (8). Miller believes that the spacing or segmentation of the text’s line does not constitute truly disruptive repetition (6), but I would claim, that in practice, even textual boundaries usually exhibit some sense of repetition: the presence of a double vector and its disruptive/supplementary diagonal, as indicated by my readings here of topographical and epistemic border crossings.¹⁰

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