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BORDER AESTHETICS

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It. *Estetica dei confini*; Fr. *Esthétique de la frontière*; Germ. *Ästhetik der Grenze*; Span. *Estética de lo fronterizo*. "Border aesthetics" was first proposed by academics and artists at the beginning of the 1990s (e.g. by Guillermo Gómez-Peña 1991) as a label for a specific aesthetic (or style) adequate to expressing the conditions of the Mexican-USA border and borderlands. In the 2010s it has developed into a wider concept and academic field (Rosello, Wolfe 2017; for a glossary, see Schimanski, Wolfe 2017) addressing not only cultural production related to geopolitical borders across the world, but also the aesthetic or sensual dimension of borders of all kinds and all scales, and the borders involved in all aesthetic processes.

BACKGROUND

Borders studies in political geography and the social sciences have undergone a processual turn, going beyond the idea of a single, fixed and divisionary line in concepts such as *bordering*, *borderscapes* and *borderscaping*. A cultural turn followed as it became clear that borders and borderlands were the themes of considerable cultural production worldwide, and that bordering had an aesthetic dimension (dell'Agnese, Amilhat Szary 2015). Geopolitical borders brought with them everyday aesthetics and (an)aestheticization (Welsch 1997a) through the beautification of border walls, border crossing points and deportation centres. A tradition of border theory in the humanities had already evolved out of poststructuralist philosophy, postcolonial theory, chicanX studies, liminality studies, and theories of genre and paratexts. "Border poetics", a method of reading literary narratives from the perspective of the border, was proposed in the 2000s (Schimanski, Wolfe 2007; Schimanski 2006; Viljoen 2013). This interest was followed by work on border films, border music and border (wall) art (e.g., Ganivet 2019).

BORDERS AS AESTHETIC

Within border studies, borders have been seen as ambivalent phenomena, places of both division and contact. They play out on different planes (political, cultural, linguistic, economic) and scales (national, local, regional, global). This multiplanar/multiscalar field has been expanded to include everyday, architectural, urban, bodily, and symbolic borders. Border theory has shown how external bordering relates dynamically to internal bordering (Derrida 1980, Bhabha 1994).

Border poetics builds on this proliferation of borders, limits, thresholds and boundaries, positing the interplay of topographical, symbolic, temporal, epistemological and medial borders in any narrative of border-crossing. Epistemological borders – the borders between the known and unknown – and medial borders – the outer frames and inner divisions of artworks and representations – are central to border aesthetics, the former involving *aisthesis* (“sensing” or “perception”), and the latter questions of form. Simmel (1997) was early in comparing social borders to frames of paintings. For Simmel, borders express social differences, while Larsen (2007) makes the argument that every border must have an aesthetic component: one must be able to sense the border in some way for it to have meaning.

The multilevel/multiscalar nature of bordering can complicate the border beyond a simple division, opening for folds, chiasmic structures, overlaps, multiplications, zones, no-man’s lands, enclaves, disputed territories, interstices, third spaces, margins, thresholds, parergons, paratexts, transitions, etc. The traumatic border-crossings of forced migration, border surveillance, and media spectacles connected to migration crises (De Genova 2012) and border walls (Brown 2010) – cultural and social figurations in which the visible is paradoxically mixed with the invisible – are of particular interest to border aesthetics.

The “borderscape” concept (Rajaram, Grundy-Warr 2007; Brambilla 2015; Brambilla et al. 2015; Schimanski 2015a) sees bordering as a network of both real and imaginary actants, ranging far from the border. It has become a way of integrating the imagination and aesthetics into analysis of bordering processes.

AISTHESIS, AESTHETIC CATEGORIES AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Border aesthetics addresses three common ways of defining aesthetics (Welsch 1997b). We can think border aesthetics through:

1. *Aesthesis*. How borders are sensed? Can all sensing can be figured as border-crossing?
2. *Categories of experience in our encounter with art, nature and the environment*. Can borders can be sublime, grotesque, beautiful, ugly, etc.? Can such axiological categories align with others in the ethics, ontologies, emotions, etc. of borders (e.g. good/bad, existing/non-existing, happy/melancholic)? Are they border figurations, e.g. the distancing involved in the sublime or the complicated bodily borderings of the grotesque (Schimanski 2013)?
3. *Art, literature and other forms of cultural production*. What borders do we find in narrative, rhetoric, imagery, genre, translation, transculturation, framing, etc.? Is the framing and grounding of the modern

work of art intimately connected with crossing the borders between private and public spheres? How do the ways in which narrative and images present borders differ (Schimanski, Nyman forthcoming)?

THE *PARTAGE DU SENSIBLE*

The contemporary geopolitical context to the border aesthetics field, and its focus on cultural encounters, has removed it from the Kantian division between aesthetics and politics in line with Rancière's concept of "political aesthetics" (2004). This form of *aisthesis* focuses on the central role the senses have in our political systems, as well as the specific forms of political *aisthesis* in art. Rancière defined politics as the *partage du sensible*, the "division/sharing of that which can be sensed" through which people can be made visible as political subjects and given an (audible) voice with which to share their concerns. The *partage* can also make people invisible and inaudible, or visible in non-empowering ways. Recent work in border aesthetics has developed on the notion of "in/visibility" (Brambilla, Pöttsch 2017), especially of migrants, inspired by Arendt's political thought.

Read in terms of border aesthetics, Rancière's definition in itself designates a bordering process, since the *partage du sensible* is activity of dividing – and in the ambivalent fashion of borders, also of sharing. Rancière makes clear that this *partage* is connected to "style" in the literary and artistic sense. Different aesthetic categories and ways of bordering aesthetic forms will produce different variants of political aesthetics.

PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES

Jørgensen (2019) has criticized border aesthetics for being more informed by cultural theory than by philosophical aesthetics. She suggests that its present focus on individual narratives of border-crossing could be countered by a stronger focus on transcendence in limit experiences and aesthetic transgressions (see also Lund 2012). Following Baumgarten, she emphasizes the need to include the imaginary, memory and phenomenological hermeneutics in border aesthetics – which is also about crossing inner boundaries, and cannot only focus on our outer senses.

Border aesthetics was pioneered by literary scholars and social scientists, who may have been seduced by the lure of cultural studies and research funding possibilities connected to migration. Engaging more with philosophical aesthetics may help border aesthetics realize its potential. The focus on the imaginary in border poetics readings (Schimanski 2015b), along with ongoing work on the border aesthetics of memory and trauma (Kurki forthcoming), might be fruitful entry points, as might cognitive approaches.

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