



Border Aesthetics

Introduction

What has literature to do with borders? Isn't literature just imaginary, whereas ›real‹ borders have impacts on people's lives? Seen from the theoretical perspective of *Border Theory*, there is no such opposition as ›real‹ and ›imaginary‹ concerning borders. What are borders? And which role do arts, e.g. literature, play in this context?

Theoretical background

What is a Border?

Border scholars have answered this question in various ways...

»The simplest way of thinking about the border is to think of it as a line dividing two different territories. But does the border have to divide between two nation-states? Of course not.«¹ (Johan Schimanski)

»What all borders share in common, [...], is that they introduce a division or bifurcation of some sort into the world.«² (Thomas Nail)

»The transition from the concept of border to that of bordering, at the center of the *processual shift* in border studies, allowed borders to be viewed as dynamic social processes and practices of spatial differentiation.«³ (Chiara Brambilla)

Border and Borderscape

Recently, borders are very often re-thought and described as *borderscapes*. The term was created by joining the concept of ›border‹ and ›landscape‹ together into the portmanteau ›border-scape‹. It alters the traditional understanding of borders in two ways: Firstly, the image of borders as dividing lines is replaced by a spatial understanding of border as »a zone rather than a simple line«.⁴ Secondly, it introduces a perceiver, in whose perception the border first of all starts existing. Accordingly, borders »primarily [exist] in a mental landscape, and only secondarily [...] in a physical landscape.«⁵ From this perspective, *borderscaping* can be understood as »practices through which the imagined border is established and experienced as real.«⁶

Border and Arts

If borders are first of all aesthetic figurations, they can be described and interpreted in terms that are normally used in the field of arts. As object of works, borders furthermore play an important role in helping people to imagine what they are and how they function. Researching border presentations in works of art therefore leads to two general research questions: How are borders presented in different fields of art? And how do these presentations »change or confirm our ideas about what borders are?«⁷

Research question(s)

By analysing literary texts, I try to learn more about how borders are modelled on the »levels of *histoire*, the world the text presents to the reader, and of *récit*, the text itself, a weave of rhetorical figures and narrative structures.«⁸ Researching the level of *histoire* means answering the question, **how borders and their crossings are portrayed in the texts**: Who is approaching and possibly trying to cross the border and why? How is the border-crossing described? Is the border described as simply existing? Or do texts orchestrate the process of how borders are put into the character's heads? Researching the level of *récit* means asking **how texts use their artistic potential to display borders**: Do Borders reflect in the author's choice of distinct narrative situations? Are the texts formed by certain forms of language use? Understanding **how literary texts handle borders can lead to a better understanding of what borders are, how they function and what they mean to people**. Furthermore, literature can be critically examined as supporting existing or even inventing new borders: »all of the cultural objects *make* the border [...] even when their explicit purpose is to resist the dominating border regime.«⁹

Corpus – Primary Literature

For my analysis I chose three novels, which deal with borders and border-crossings in a Bulgarian context:

- Ilija Trojanow: *DIE WELT IST GROSS UND RETTUNG LAUERT ÜBERALL* (1996)
- Dimitré Dinev: *ENGELZUNGEN* (2003)
- Evelina Jecker Lambreva: *VATERS LAND* (2014)

My choice is motivated by a number of commonalities in regard to form and content of the novels. All of them are autobiographically inspired. The Iron Curtain serves as a reference point: The main characters cross or try to cross the Iron Curtain, setting off in Communist Bulgaria, aiming for the ›Golden West‹.

Results and discussion

Analysing the corpus, I came to the following results:

1. Borders on the level of *histoire*

- in all three novels, borders are not just existing, on the contrary the texts describe how they are actively constructed in people's minds
- this construction is based on two counter-narratives: the first one describing communist Bulgaria as superior to other states and therefore not worth leaving, the second one claiming that crossing the military secured border is impossible and every attempt would be punished

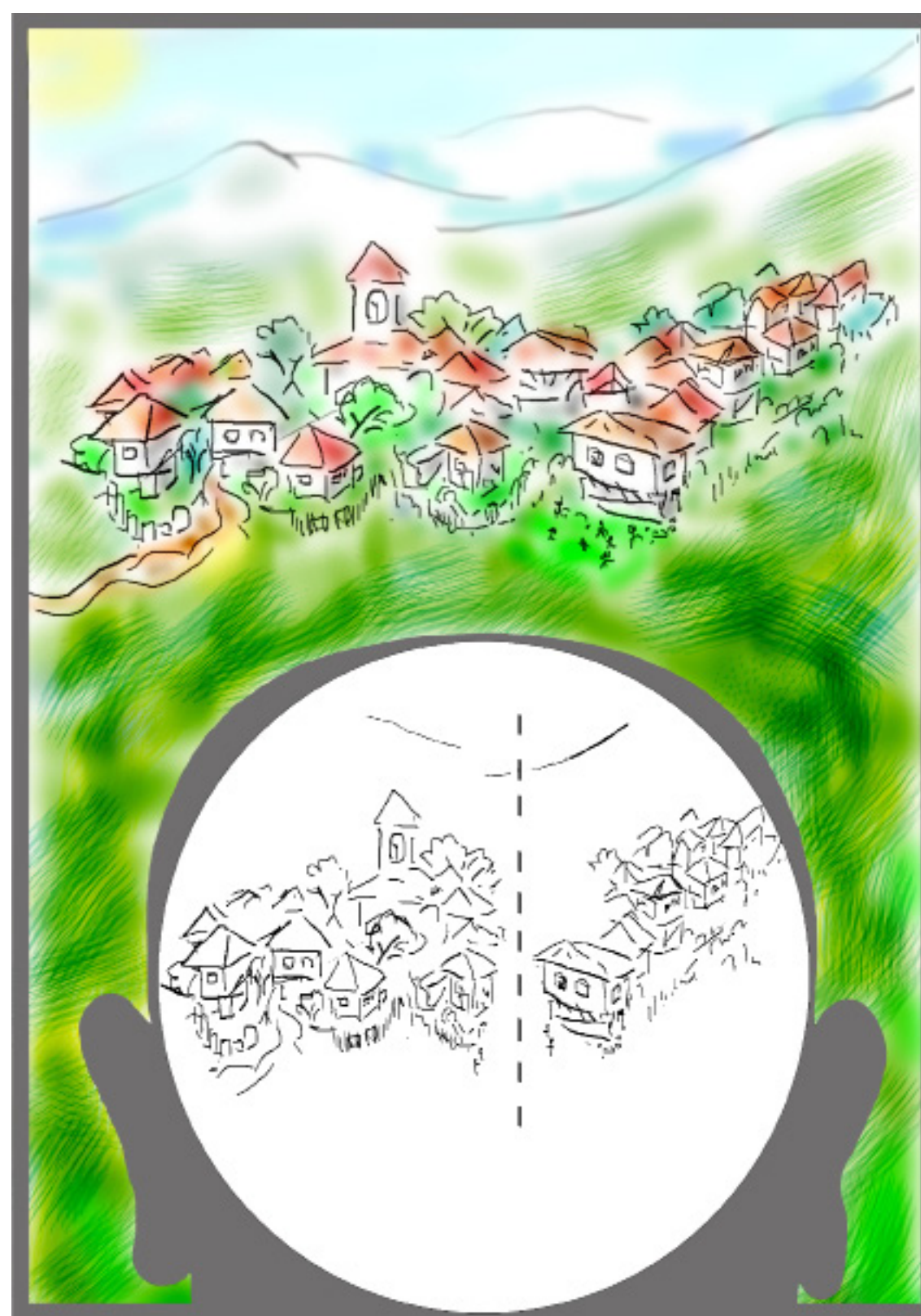
- the construction of borders is supported by techniques of *emotional bordering*, such as military parades and monuments

- borders very often display characteristics of *borderscapes*, e.g. are described as zones of disorientation and disorder

2. Borders on the level of *récit*

- to a various extent, all three novels use their formal potential to reflect on borders
- special contributions could be made regarding humour, multilingualism and orality of the texts

3. Escapes during Bulgaria's communist period have been abandoned until today. Neither the body count nor the exact circumstances of border protection have been publicly discussed.¹⁰ The novels therefore play an important role in the public discourse and as testimonies that requires further research.



References

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- 2 Thomas Nail: Theory of the Border. New York: Oxford University Press 2016, p. 2.
- 3 Chiara Brambilla: Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept. In: Geopolitics 20 (2015), pp. 14–34, here p. 15.
- 4 Johan Schimanski: Crossing and Reading: Notes Towards a Theory and a Method, p. 49. Online: <<http://septentrio.uit.no/index.php/nordlit/article/view/1835/1707>>
- 5 Elena Dell'Agnese/ Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary: Borderscapes: From Border Landscapes to Border Aesthetics. In: Geopolitics, 20 (2015), pp. 4–13, here p.
- 6 Antje Strüver: Stories of the 'Boring Border': The Dutch-German Borderscape in People's Minds. Münster: LIT 2005, p. 170.
- 7 Schimanski: Border Culture.
- 8 Schimanski: Crossing and Reading, p. 51.
- 9 Dell'Agnese/ Szary: Borderscapes, p. 8.
- 10 Art. Tod in Bulgarien. Online: <<http://www.mdr.de/damals/archiv/artikel86916.html>> Abb. © Boyan Vasilev