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The geopolitics of Northern Travels: enactments of adventure and exploration in the Norwegian–Russian borderland

Urban Wråkberg



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Introduction

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the national borders of the former states of the Eastern Bloc have changed character and taken on new functions and meanings. The introduction of democracy and the transition to market economy have followed no given courses. Statements on the borders in the new Europe, and narratives from people who have travelled across them, rather than providing a balanced account of an individual journey often mirror what the narrator would like us to conclude about the present and to envision for the future. Changes in outlooks are taking place in many regions but runs in parallel with only slowly altering, deep seated practices and attitudes about the east and west of Europe stabilized by *la longue durée*, the momentum of human mentalities, identified by Marc Bloch in the Interwar period and studied by the French Annales school in spatially oriented economic and social history. Informal dissemination of ideas on cultural and national differences often takes place during cross-border travels.

The up-take in policy-making of the findings of critical geopolitics has promoted liberal institutionalism and created new symbols of shared interests and for dialogue in the new Europe.¹ In the north this includes the Arctic Council (1996) and the EU's Northern Dimension policy (1997). The Barents Euroarctic Region and its council is another example of innovative multilateral partnership launched in 1993. The northern counties of Scandinavia and the five oblasts and republics of NW Russia run it. In a regional context, based on approval and funding from the Foreign Offices and State Departments of the nations involved, the Barents Euroarctic Council has promoted local initiatives for cross-border regionalism. There has been criticism on its lack of success in the business and industrial sectors but experiments are continuing with e.g. twin town cross-border collaboration and bilateral local citizens' borderland visas.²

1 V. Morozov, "New borderlands in a United Europe. Democracy, imperialism and the Copenhagen criteria," in A. Makarychev, ed., *Russia's North West and the European Union: a playground for innovations*, Nizhny Novgorod: R-US Expert Transit, 2005, pp. 74–84; M. Sparke, "From geopolitics to geo-economics. Transnational state effects in the borderlands," *Geopolitics* Vol. 3, No. 2, 1998, pp. 62–98; G. O'Tuathail, *Critical geopolitics. The politics of writing global space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

2 C.S. Browning, P. Joenniemi, "Geostrategies of the European Neighbourhood Policy," *European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 14, No. 3, 2008, pp. 519–51; C. Archer, T. Etzold, "The EU's Northern dimension: blurring frontiers between Russia and the EU North?" *NORDEUROPAforum: Zeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur* Vol. 18 [11 new series], No. 1, 2008, pp. 7–28; J. Buursink, "The binational reality of border-crossing cities," *GeoJournal* Vol. 54, 2001, pp. 7–19.

Figure 1. Northern Europe with the location of Kirkenes and Murmansk



Source: Map by the author

The coastal region and interior of north-eastern Norway and Finnish Lapland are sparsely populated and rather vast areas by European standards. Their small villages are far between and remote from any major Scandinavian cities, but State subsidized airlines are operating connections to and inside the region.³ In adjacent NW Russia larger towns like Murmansk (pop. 307,000) and Arkhangelsk (pop. 348,000) make the Barents Region on average the most settled part of the high north in Circum-Arctic comparison. The borderland of Norway and Russia is beyond the limit of the pine forests, slightly mountainous and covered by tundra. There was never a significant agricultural or forest sector in the local economy to provide the landscape with a network of smaller roads. There was and is however a land-use based on the indigenous Sami peoples' traditional hunting, costal fishing and reindeer herding. Fishing and mining are economic activities of international importance and tourism is growing. Local but also national optimism regarding the future of the Barents Region is based on positive official policy-statements and industrial scenarios indicating the likelihood of future expansion in off-shore oil and gas extraction on the Exclusive Economic Zones of Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea.

This study will consider the Norwegian-Russian borderland in the subarctic part of Europe, and focus the "border passage" from the Norwegian

³ E. Gløersen, *Strong, specific and promising. Towards a vision for the Northern sparsely populated areas in 2020*. Stockholm: Nordregio – Nordic Centre for Spatial Development 2009 (=Nordregio Report 2009:2).

border village of Kirkenes (pop. 9,000) along the 250 km main road to Murmansk in Russia. During journeys along this road political discourses on northernmost Europe combine with other cultural predispositions to create social and individual experiences of cross-border travels between Kirkenes and Murmansk.⁴ This includes micro-social communication on interpreting observations and enacting typical events of the journey. One basic idea in the analysis to be undertaken in this article is that many of the cultural expectations and scopical regimes at work among the travelers are cosmopolitan in origin. While not denying national, professional and other identities that separate travelers from each other the contemporary access/exposure to global media makes it crucial to consider the mediated level of representations or simulacra, and how these become the basis for various simulations during journeys that are often possible to generalize on a collective level as e.g. styles of travels.⁵

The emphasis here will not be so much on the border as on the desire of whatever is beyond it as a driver of the passage; thus the interest for the road between Kirkenes and Murmansk. Concepts like “home,” “foreign” and “individual identity” will be treated as contingent assemblages of ideas, as will all goals and motives for cross-border study-travels and tourism. Meanings of landscapes are dependent on the traveler and the style of the journey.⁶ During guided tours and political fact-finding trips first-hand experiences and acts of see-for-yourself tend to be staged events that need scrutiny on behalf of the spectator and critical judgement of anyone taking part in the resulting journey narrative. Cross-border travels will be discussed based on a set of recurring events recognized by participant observation by the present author during some thirty trips of different character between Kirkenes and Murmansk undertaken for various purposes, and in the company of different constellations of travelers in the period 2006–2011.

⁴ On tourism experiences of this route see A. Viken, “Celebrating the Cold War. Tourism related to the Norwegian–Russian boundary,” *The 16th Nordic Symposium on Tourism and Hospitality Research, September 27-29, 2007*. Helsingborg 2007

⁵ J. Baudrillard, *Selected writings*, [ed. by Mark Poster] Cambridge: Polity Press 1988; 2001, pp. 169–87; C. Lukinbeal, “The map that precedes the territory: an introduction to essays in cinematic geography,” *GeoJournal* Vol. 59, 2004, pp. 247–51 (p. 248); A. Amin, “Regions unbound. Towards a new politics of place,” *Geografiska Annaler* Vol. 86 B, No. 1, 2004, pp. 33–44; Cf. A.F. Wood, “Two roads diverge. Route 66, ‘Route 66,’ and the mediation of American ruin,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Vol. 27, No. 1, 2010, pp. 67–83.

⁶ U. Wråkberg, “The quest for authenticity in narratives of Northern border lands,” *Nordlit* No. 22, Autumn, 2007, pp. 193–209.

Geopolitical discourses in the borderland

The way geopolitical ideas and outlooks enter conversations and happenings during cross-border travels depend on the composition of the travelling party. A template of different constellations is presented below, applied to road travels between the village of Kirkenes and the city of Murmansk.

Table 1. A template of border crossings: Scandinavians travelling between Kirkenes–Murmansk

Car registered in Norway	Car registered in Russia	Buss registered in Norway	Buss registered in Russia
Scandinavian driver, alone	Russian taxi	Together with Scandinavians	Norwegian or Russian tour-operator
Scandinavian group of friends or associates	Driven by Russian friend or associate	Russians and Scandinavians	Russian regular bus Murmansk-Kirkenes
Many nationalities	With a Russian group	With or without a guide	

The participation of an active guide, or any casual commentator, makes a difference in most travels. If this person is e.g. a Russian professional colleague to you, or a Russia or Norwegian tourist operator makes certain differences, as does of course the identity, composition and political level of the majority of the accompanying travelers. If you ride as the author has done on occasions together with only Russian passengers and/or a Russian driver of a rented car this means that conversations are likely to touch upon certain visions of the borderland and e.g. its business or recreational opportunities. As we will discuss further in the following, travelling in a Russian registered car means that an accompanying Nordic citizen might more easily depart from the high way and perhaps access roads and visit sites that are allowed for entry only to Russian citizens and foreigners with special permits.

Comments and directions on what to notice, as well as conversations between travelers, give ample scope for political and other lay or expert reasoning. To stop the car or bus and embark on joint enactment of observations makes it easier to arrive at a consensus on what conclusions to draw. Of course the amount of critical individual reflection that goes into such processes varies, but in the borderland a lot of this is based

upon micro-social manifestations of new and old geopolitical ideas. I am following Martin Müller's suggestion about conceptualizing discourse not only as language but as language *and* practice in order to deal with the discursive constitution of geopolitical identities.⁷ Border discourses on threats or opportunities in the Euroarctic, generalized from contemporary mainly Norwegian visions across the borderland with Russia, can be grouped under eight partly conflicting headings:

1. Big time oil and gas scenarios
2. East-west industrial clustering
3. Environmental catastrophe
4. Opening the Northern Sea-Route between the Atlantic and the Pacific
5. Expanding cross-border tourism
6. Facing Russia's north-western military flank
7. Building professional alliances/consensus
8. People-to-people collaboration and understanding

These geopolitical and geo-economic discourses are based on perceived opportunities for economic and social developments in the borderland, but also on fears of environmental catastrophe e.g. at some deteriorating nuclear installation, or a "bad turn" in the good political relations between Norway and Russia. On the whole this subarctic border region is peaceful, and the Norwegian border-guards have registered very few deliberate attempts to cross the national border illegally in recent years. But this was not always the case. Before 1826 there was no border at all only Skolt and other Eastern Sami nomads on the tundra, traced seasonally by competing tax collectors from southern state capitals. During the Second World War German troops were fighting the Red Army along the road between Kirkenes and Murmansk, and in the Cold War the border was almost completely closed as one of the few instances of a NATO member state (Norway) bordering directly on the Soviet Union.⁸

There are at least three ways that geopolitics and geo-economic ideas may enter the mind of the northern borderland traveler. Business scenarios forecasting grand developments in the region have already been

⁷ M. Müller, "Reconsidering the concept of discourse for the field of critical geopolitics. Towards discourse as language and practice," *Political Geography* Vol. 27, 2008, pp. 322–38.

⁸ T.N. Jackson, J.P. Nielsen, eds, *Russia–Norway. Physical and symbolic borders*. Moscow: Languages of Slavonic Culture, 2005; J. F. Gebhardt, *The Petsamo-Kirkenes operation. Soviet breakthrough and pursuit in the Arctic, October 1944*. Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1990 (=Leavenworth papers No. 17).

mentioned.⁹ In recent years the vision of a future boom in off-shore oil and gas extraction on the continental shelf adjacent to the Euroarctic coast has been the source of much regional optimism. Such scenarios are typically communicated in presentations at industry conferences and in newspapers in e.g. Kirkenes and Murmansk. After the Norwegian–Russian settlement in 2010 of a borderline at sea between the Exclusive Economic Zones of these countries on the Arctic continental shelf, followed by several new finds of hydrocarbon deposits made by international off-shore industry on the Norwegian side of the shelf, such outlooks have begun to materialize. This has created a feeling of being in the initial days of collaborative industrial expansion between the Norwegian and Russian petro-industry.¹⁰ (cf. Brunstad, 2004) In this some see new job opportunities and regional economic growth, while others see security risks, environmental threats and loss of traditional ways of living.

The second route by which geopolitics may enter the minds of northern borderland travelers connects more directly to the world of science and scholarship. It operates by the regular output of various research communities of articles in professional journals, and by popularization of its findings made by journalists and the researchers themselves. In much western academic research on the Euroarctic Russia is still mainly seen as a source and exporter of “problems.” A problem-obsessed paradigm can be detected in many publications from social as well as natural science research projects. Funding seems to have been more easily found for biased and alarmist investigations, nevertheless the initial post-Cold War indignation over environmental hazards and water- and airborne pollutions crossing the borders from Russia, along with trafficking, organized crime and prostitution, has calmed down in recent years.

A third way of communicating geopolitical ideas during cross-border travels is by a narrative device that I will call the geopolitical anecdote. It is common in the narratives of guides, and in conversations in travelling parties consisting of local experts and guests to the region. The geopolitical anecdote is often entertaining by the surprise it creates; or by relating apparently insignificant or puzzling objects along the road to unexpected political contexts; or by scalar jumping in historical time and geographical space to a global frame of casual explanations.¹¹

⁹ On the origin of scenario research see P. D. Aligica, “The challenge of the future and the institutionalization of interdisciplinarity. Notes on Herman Kahn’s Legacy,” *Futures* Vol. 36, No. 1, 2004, pp. 67–83.

¹⁰ Cf B. Brunstad, et al., *Big oil playground, Russian bear preserve or European periphery? The Russian Barents Sea Region towards 2015*. Delft: Eburon ECON Analysis, 2004.

¹¹ On the political uses of social re-constructions of geographical scales normally regarded as ontologically pre-determined see D. Sidorov, “National

The geopolitical anecdote tries implicitly to establish a consensus with the listener on the geopolitical ideas of the narrator by projecting a biased worldview or moral idea of the anecdote, often by appealing to prejudices that the listener may have and thus find pleasing to have confirmed. A geopolitical anecdote can be invented by anyone but the most influential ones are those told by professional guides and frequent local travelers. The propagation and popularity of a geopolitical anecdote is based on attaining a consensus between teller and listener, and a shared fascination in it. But often the geopolitical point of the border anecdote is blurred by rather obvious anomalies or contradictions; the main reason why this doesn't seem to hamper their recurrence is that they are in line with widely held geopolitical ideas.

One example from the road between Kirkenes and Murmansk – we will return to the geopolitical border anecdote in the following – is occasionally stated on the bridge across the Pasvikelva, or the Paz River as the border river between Russia and Norway is sometimes called in English (despite identical names not easily confused with the border river between Guatemala and El Salvador). Step one in this anecdote is to note, what few have thought about before, that this bridge could be regarded Norway's "gate to the east," as it is its only road connection with Russia at the border station some kilometres further down the road. It's also where Norway is "at its slimmest" since the bridge is the only link to a Norwegian enclave of land on the eastern side of the Pasvikelva.¹²

monumentalisation and the politics of scale. The resurrection of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol. 90, No. 3, 2010, pp. 548–72 (p. 552 and passim).

¹² In Norwegian: "porten til Norge" stated e.g. in a local daily news article (B.S. Kristiansen, "Ny bru kan bli 'porten til Norge,'" *Sør-Varanger Avis*, August 13, 2011, p. 4). Norway at its slimmest: "Norge på sitt smaleste" e.g. on the tourist map (*Turkart 1:100 000 Sør-Varanger: Grense Jakobselv, Kirkenes og Bugøynes*. Oslo: Den Norske Turistforening, 2007).

Figure 2. The Pasvik River bridge at Elvenes.



Source: Vidar Andreassen, Wikimedia Commons

On this already rather unusual bridge, according to this parable styled borderland anecdote, nothing less than the northern outposts of the civilizations of the ancient empires of Rome and Byzantium are symbolically standing face-to-face fossilized by age, frozen by the climate, after long marches over the centuries from their respective points of origin in Rome and Constantinople. I first heard this anecdote from a senior advisor of the foreign ministry of one of the Nordic countries during a trip with a chartered bus from Kirkenes to Nikel.¹³ Most travelers find this idea very odd, particularly at first. Part of its mindboggling effect is based on its monumental transferal of geographical and temporal scale. Maybe it is just fascination with early modern history of Christianity, or maybe some people like to estrange themselves – and others – from Russia and its European identity? Russian Orthodoxy does have a geopolitical dimension and fictional history and fantasy novels with imperialistic messages have reached large readerships in Russia in recent years, so dreams of empire and wandering and clashing civilizations are still viable.¹⁴ The spiritual importance to religious people in Russia of the surroundings of this bridge is also mirrored in the increasing number of orthodox pilgrims who are

¹³ Specifics details on the cross-border journeys and names of persons who have made statements during these which the author has noticed as participant observer are suppressed in this article.

¹⁴ D. Sidorov, “Post-imperial third Romes. Resurrections of a Russian Orthodox Geopolitical Metaphor,” *Geopolitics* 11, 2, 2006, pp. 317–47; M. von Hagen, “Empires, borderlands, and diasporas. Eurasia as anti-paradigm for the post-Soviet era,” *American Historical Review* Vol. 109, No. 2, April, 2004, pp. 445–68 (p. 450); R. Marsh, “The ‘new political novel’ by right-wing writers in post-Soviet Russia,” *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte* Vol. 14, 2011, pp. 159–87.

seeking permissions from the Russian border-guards, and assistance by Norwegian tourist operators, to visit the nearby orthodox church of Boris and Gleb and the “crevasse of Saint Triphon,” a site in one of the mountain cliffs sloping into the border river where the holy monk Triphon of Pechenga experienced a revelation during his missionary work among the Skolt Sami in the beginning of the sixteenth century.¹⁵

Cross-border simulations

The individual and collective experience of travels are today formed by a hyperreality of signs, images, narratives and standardized events developed or reproduced by the media industry but also in the general knowledge production of society. Baudrillard’s dismissal of any direct or stable relationship between “basic reality” and the sign or image that pretends to represent it seems congruent with a cultural relativistic view on knowledge formation the explanatory force of which has been demonstrated in much research over the last several decades.¹⁶ Baudrillard in his critique moves from the epistemological stance of the image as a reflection of basic reality, to that of a mask or perversion of it, into a representation hiding the fact that there is no reality behind it; finally to suggest that in contemporary society, after a historical/cultural shift along this route, signs and images should be understood as floating in a Western hyperreal system of simulacra that lacks any definite connection to basic reality or whatever is out there, but which instead creates its meanings by references and associations within the same system of simulacra.¹⁷

Applying this to the travelers on the road between Kirkenes and Murmansk means that most of those that are in the tourist or investigators typical mode of heightened senses and awareness, while floating in this culture will understand old and especially new observations and happenings by relating them not only to actively held pieces of knowledge believed to be correct but also to less conscious tropes and bits and pieces of fiction, adventure or exploration. They may be helped by tour operators (or not) to develop their trips into a simulation of something cultural,

¹⁵ B. Wisur Olsen, “Hatle ber Putin om hjelp: Russiske pilgrimer valfarter til Kirkenes for å se den helige munken Trifons hule,” *Sør-Varanger Avis*, October 26, 2013, pp. 4–5.

¹⁶ For an overview of some of this see J. Law, “On sociology and STS,” *The Sociological Review* Vol. 56, No 4, 2009, pp. 623–49; W. K. Bauchspies, J. Croissant, S. Restivo, *Science, technology and society. A sociological approach*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

¹⁷ J. Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, 173–4.

a stylized journey that follows a meta-script. The mind-switch into sorting observations, making comments and enacting standard events from a simulacrum is triggered in the individual, I will argue, either at moments of the journey that exhibits striking similarity with elements in a collectively held hyperreal meta-script, or by a more gradual process leading to such an association by the montage-like experience of filmic storytelling that the passenger may experience when the vehicle moves through the physical landscape. Journeys are turned into simulations of meta-scripts of cultural fiction and of pre-conceived ideas, rather than fact finding field excursions simplistically inspired by the call “the truth is out there.”¹⁸ The simulation will guide and filter the observations and interpretations made and thus in practice create experienced reality.

The simulations investigated in this article entail associations based on aesthetic effects, and they also seek aesthetic qualities as goals for the travel experience and the narratives told about it in social interactions, either during the journey or after the journey has been completed. Recognizing that journeys, particularly in regions unfamiliar to the traveler, are prone to be influenced by a certain kind of cultural meta-script facilitates seeing and recognizing the enactments taking place en route of the script’s typical events of for example geopolitically laden observations and cosmopolitan fiction. This also motivates discussing styles of travels. In adventure tourism and in journeys styled in such a format the re-enactment drama is inspired by the desire to succeed in the sublime act of handling danger. Enacted travel dramas are important topics in the adventure-narratives that may be told to impress others afterwards; this may also entail propagating geopolitical anecdotes.

Simulations, following two particular travel meta-scripts, are suggested here for application on journeys in the Norwegian–Russian borderland. One has the colonial scientific expedition as a model; the other is based on the film genre of the road movie. The colonial expedition has been identified as an important but non-acknowledge model in ecotourism.¹⁹ This style of travelling can often be detected in study-trips in the northern borderland. The “big time oil and gas cross-border scenario” mentioned previously

¹⁸ Pointedly even these words were turned into a popular media trope as the slogan of *The X-Files*, a trendsetting science fiction TV series of the 1990s which hailed the idea that public corruption and cover-ups traceable in state archives could be fully disclosed by combining paranormal and scientific field observations. See T.A. Combs, R. Westerfelhaus, “Criminal investigations and spiritual quests: The X-files as an example of hegemonic concordance in a mass-mediated society,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* Vol. 22, No. 2, 1998, pp. 205–20.

¹⁹ H. Gilbert, “Belated journeys. Ecotourism as a style of travel performance,” in H. Gilbert, A. Johnston *Transit. Travel, text, empire*. New York: Peter Lang 2002, pp. 255–74.

in the list of active borderland simulacra represents a reterritorialization of capital and economic development by expansion into the European north.²⁰ It has been simulated in cross-border business development trips with participants active in the industrial sector; during these old colonial concepts like “frontiers” of raw material extraction and the “opening of transport routes”, are often used.

There are two sides to the identification of the Kirkenes-Murmansk borderland crossing with the road movie genre. It is useful to draw upon the scholarship of film genre analysis as an interpretative resource,²¹ but also because the road movie genre provides a meta-script which may cause factual travels to include re-enacted elements from it. A road movie simulation may determine the experiences, narratives, and knowledge of the travel; it is a hyperreality with an aesthetic logic that can be artfully enacted. In the following the re-enactment of the elements of the road movie genre will be traced in individual and group travels along the highway between Kirkenes and Murmansk. It is most likely to influence the minds and practices of travelers in small groups, taking part in non-official journeys, the constellations marked bright green in table no. 1.

Figure 3. Driving by the industrial plant at Nikel in Russia, on the road between Kirkenes and Murmansk.



Source: the author

²⁰ On reterritorialization see B. Massumi, “Realer than real: the simulacrum according to Deleuze and Guattari,” *Copyright*, No. 1, 1987, pp. 90–7.

²¹ W. Everett, “Lost in transition? The European road movie, or a genre ‘Adrift in the Cosmos,’” *Literature/Film Quarterly* Vol. 37, No. 3, 2009, pp. 165–75; M. Atkinson, “Crossing the frontiers,” *Sight and Sound* New series Vol. 4, No. 1, January 1994, pp. 14–7; N. K. Denzin, “Paris, Texas and Baudrillard on America,” *Theory, Culture & Society* No. 8, 1991, pp. 121–33.

Re-enactments en route

The American and to a lesser extent the European road movie are parts of a cosmopolitan media experience; reminiscences and associations to its standard events, emotions and problems can be invoked in many individuals. The recurring inspections at the border station and checkpoints in the security zones of the Norwegian-Russian borderland create an uneasy feeling in most people of being on the run from the law. This is among the trigger elements which may establish the mind set of “being inside” a (road) movie, this opens a stream of associations to the typical plot of the films of this genre and cause those entering the simulation to enact its meta-script and make it reality. This means activating certain expectations with the traveler and not others. Another trigger of this association is the odd similarity between the classic barren landscapes of many American road movies, e.g. those filmed in Pennington County, South Dakota, and the man-made “Badlands” around the Russian industrial town concisely named Nikel on the Kirkenes-Murmansk highway. The deforested tundra and industrial wasteland at Nikel is caused by the massive sulphur dioxide emissions from its polluting metallurgical plant and its heavy-metal leaking slag heaps.²² In this desert land close to the border the highway exhibits strait strips which vanish into the horizon, this in itself being a classic road movie vista. In that genre the freeway crossing through the desolate badland serves as a metaphor of passage, a passage that may challenges the protagonists with various transformative experiences. Terrence Malik’s road movie “Badlands” is an exquisite example of the genre which is instructive to consider in this analytical context among other because this film presents, along with the strong feeling of doom looming over it outlaw adolescent main characters (as such constitutive of the genre) a striking visual poetry in its slow, reflective movement manifest in the time that it takes for the protagonists and their vehicle to transfer through some barren but monumental landscapes of the US Midwest. This evokes the viewer into a tempo and mood resembling real-life road travels more than what is the case in most earlier and later road-movies in which action scenes make up a larger portion of the drama.

The less well-known European road movie genre exerts influence in the minds of a smaller number of people but is interesting in this context as

²² R. Boyd, S.J. Barnes, P. De Caritat, V/ A. Chekushin, V. A. Melezhhik, C. Reimann, M. L. Zientek, “Emissions from the copper-nickel industry on the Kola Peninsula and at Noril’sk, Russia,” *Atmospheric Environment* 43, 2009, pp. 1474–80; G.V. Kalabin, T.I. Moiseenko, “Ecodynamics of anthropogenic mining provinces: from degradation to rehabilitation,” *Doklady Earth Sciences* Vol. 437, No 1, March 2011, pp. 432–6.

several of its films problematize the idea and reality of home, and of borders, and ethnic or national identity in historical contexts.²³ This also applies in the Norwegian-Russian borderland. In 1920–1944, as a result of the Peace of Tartu a corridor of Finnish national territory crossed right through it and connected Finland in the southwest with the coast of the Barents Sea. Its Finnish immigrants and indigenous Sami population were forced to re-settle in Finland after WWII when the original 1826 border between Norway and Russia was re-established.²⁴ Where the passage of the American road movie brings the travelers social challenges in meeting unexpected others in a supposedly “domesticated” national territory the European landscape brings anxiety by its age-old divisions of ethnicity, nations and people. In the Euroarctic borderland this is evoked by many visible surveillance installations in use or abandoned by today’s border guards.

The exposure to the agents of law enforcement in the road movie, with its often dramatic and destructive ending, should be expected to characterize any simulations made of it. When travelling from west to east an uneasy feeling is established quite soon after crossing the Pasvik River, by the lengthy passport and custom clearance in the national stations at the border from Norway to Russia. Another site driven through half an hour later seems conceived in a movie script to establish initial gloom and ominous feelings of things to come. It is the large cemetery on both sides of the road leading into the metallurgical town of Nikel. The present writer has heard many persons, including a Russian diplomat, expressing concern over the size of these graveyards in relation to that of the town. The speculations on the causes have included deficient local health care, some hushed up major calamity of the Soviet past, or that it is the sum result of the post-war era of Stalinism and work hazards in the mines and smelters in and around the town. But perhaps the impression is due to the fact that the cemeteries are highly visible from the road because, for convenience of access, they have been located on both sides of the southern entrance of the main road passing the town – the highway to Murmansk. But the basic issue of the geopolitical anecdote, and even less so the dramatic or mood setting event in the road movie simulation, is not establishing solid or neutral facts. This happens to be hard in this case because regional statistics are misleading as many residents of Nikel leave it for good at some point, especially on retiring. But observations made during cross-border journeys tend to be part of some culturally determined simulation the enactment of which is given meaning by an aesthetic meta-play of emotions and knowledge in the

²³ E. Mazierska, L. Rascaroli, *Crossing new Europe. Postmodern travel and the European road movie*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006.

²⁴ Siida Sami Museum, “From Petsamo to Inari.” Inari: Siida Sami Museum web site 2011. Available online: <http://www.samimuseum.fi/saamjiellem/english/historia.html> (accessed on March 1, 2017).

participant. In this mind-set driving by the cemeteries of Nikel mainly adds an ambiguous aura of doom.

Figure 4. Photo-stop on the hill overlooking Nikel on the Kirkenes-Murmansk main road. This is the standard site for anyone in a hurry to re-enact an environmental inspection of this metallurgical combine and its surrounding wasteland



Source: the author

The photo-stop on the road at the ridge overlooking Nikel is a standard event on most tours with new guests to the region, including anyone from plain tourists to fact-finding professionals and official delegations including in recent years one where both the foreign ministers of Norway and Sweden participated. This event fits a recurring simulation of ecotourism in its pretention to provide authentic individual observations of the real facts based on lay re-enactment of the scientific field expedition. Leaving the size, severity and political-historical contingency of the related environmental issues aside,²⁵ the lay scientist's tourist gaze from the hill overlooking Nikel is often accompanied by comments of official guides or self-appointed experts telling you what should be learnt from the obviously damaged vegetation of the surroundings, including hints on the best ways to do photography on the site.²⁶

²⁵ M. Aanesen, *To Russia with love? Four essays on public intervention under asymmetric information. The Petsjenganikel case on the Kola Peninsula*. Tromsø: NORUT samfunnsforskning, 2006 (=Rapport NORUT samfunnsforskning Vol. 08/2006).

²⁶ Cf. C. Jenks, "The centrality of the eye in Western culture. An introduction," in C. Jenks, ed., *Visual Culture*. London: Routledge 1995, pp. 1-25; J. Urry, "The

Further east on the road to Murmansk, still within the Russian so-called outer security borderzone, there are heightened restrictions on photography at a place called “19 Kilometre.” It consists of the military camp of an infantry regiment of the Federal Russian Army. Like the cemeteries of Nikel it is located ostentatiously on both sides of the highway, but following military logic it is not marked on public maps of the area, which also explains its secretive name. Geopolitical anecdotes are often spoken here regarding the units standard of armory and amount of new equipment possible to glimpse in passing by some of its camp and by comparing observations from previous drive-troughs – provided some commentator is thus experienced and holding real or imagined expertise in relevant military details.

Towards the end of the WWII, on the October 25, 1944, the 99th Rifle Corps of the 14th Army of the Red Army was the first unit to break through the defense lines outside Kirkenes given up by the retreating 6th Mountain Division. Thus the northeastern corner of Norway became the first piece of its territory to be liberated from the Nazi occupation. For this (and its voluntary redeployment to Russia soon thereafter) the 99th Rifle Corps and its soldiers have been honored ever year in Kirkenes at an official annual celebration. This combat group and other Russian wartime units were reorganized into the infantry regiment which today has its training camp at 19 Kilometre. Whether its present location on the highway to Kirkenes should be understood as a promise to save the neighbor yet again from any external enemy, domestic turmoil – or himself – is not politically correct to speculate upon by official Norwegian guides; they would rather remind you that photography is not allowed and that you should at least remember to turn off the flash if you intend to violate regulations. Maybe the location of the infantry camp on the highway simply indicates that a tank column with motorized infantry would still today run into difficulties if it tries to depart far from the main road into the blocky terrain of the subarctic tundra with its many small lakes and treacherous bogs.²⁷

tourist gaze ‘revisited,’” *American Behavioral Scientist* 36, 2, 1992, pp. 172–86 (pp. 181–4)

²⁷ A. R. Jacobsen, *Nikkel, jern og blod. Krisen i nord 1939-1945*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2006; J. F. Gebhardt, op. cit.

Going off-road

Reminiscences of the road movie are invoked again by the odd motel in Titovka, another standard stop now at the midway point on the Kirkenes-Murmansk highway. Here you can have a coffee or a beer and a small Russian pirog pie. The place seems to be a nice example of new Russian small business and has had its share of difficulties with regional authorities such as accusations of violating food management regulations. The motel runs on electricity from a diesel driven power generator of its own that is persistently humming or roaring in the not so distant background. No deal has been possible to strike on tapping the power line passing right through the site which supplies nearby military barracks. The Titovka road inn is “always open,” except when there is a power-outage, and is built from makeshift parts, mainly once mobile cabins of Norwegian origin. It was initially a place to rest and sleep out for personnel engaged in clearing the road from snow in the winter. Apart from serving the travelers on the highway, local military residents are often its guests. In the 1990s it used to be the scene, some say, of prostitution, while today the foreign visitors that stay the night are anglers.

Some of the fishing business around Titovka is run in Norwegian-Russian collaboration. Regarding it environmental and geopolitical anecdotes have been spoken, and published on the Internet, implying that it is a shame (with moral overtones) that these operators let their customers run their small all-terrain vehicles (ATV) four wheelers, to reach the good fishing spots at the brooks and streams on the difficult to walk surrounding tundra. Such actions are supposed to inflict injury to the sensitive ground vegetation that will take forever to “heal.” This anecdote implies the superiority of Scandinavian environmental legislation and its enforcement and proposes a consensus on this. But there are anomalies in this projected understanding already on the regional level. In the County of Finnmark on the Norwegian side of the border there is a locally very well-known debate raging since long between legislators in the southern capital of Oslo, the police of the county and its majority of snow scooter owners and off-road vehicle enthusiasts who dislikes the Norwegian regulations and are longing for, and envying, the freedom of neighboring Russia. Norwegian guides on official trips in the borderland tend to present simplistic scientific reasoning and seldom mention local Finnmark opinions when they happen to depart from the homogenized national policy.²⁸

²⁸ On the public understanding of scientific “facts” see for example J. Law, “Enacting naturecultures. A view from STS,” *HeterogeneitiesDOtnet*, 2004. Available online: <http://www.heterogeneities.net/papers.htm> (accessed on April 2, 2016).

Figure 5. The Titovka road inn under early spring snow-slush conditions



Source: the author

Driving off road in the border security zones in a foreign registered vehicle is a crime against Russian law which may cost the traveler a day or two in police custody, and result in fines and a moratorium on any new visa to the country. Travelling with Russian friends and colleagues in a car registered in Russia could thus open unique adventurous avenues to self-insight in the road movie simulation by off-main road detours. Unlike the message of the one-dimensional geopolitical anecdote some such experiences may come in the shape of enduring enigmas with the potential of opening the mind of the traveler to the relativity of knowledge, the multiplicity of worldviews, and the contested meanings of sites.

One relevant example is a small house in Luostari where the first man in space the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin once lived with his family. It is presently a museum occasioned by the fact that it was at the nearby, now closed, airbase where Gagarin got his basic training as a pilot. It stands out among the surrounding houses, obviously built at the same time for the same group of air force personnel, which are today in poor condition. The house in Luostari, it turns out, is just one of several still preserved in Russia in which Gagarin and his family once lived. The power vertical to the federal capital is manifest by the landmark monolithic stainless steel statue of Gagarin standing tall in the Moscow square named after him. It is kept in perfect shape while the monument over USSR heroes of aviation close to Gagarin's house in Luostari is falling apart. The phenomenology and

aesthetics of ruins have profound significance in European culture.²⁹ The meaning and emotions of ruins are further intensified when they include neglected memorials. As these were always erected to celebrate and to fix attention on certain values their degree of decay becomes a meter of the strength of that which it is made to signify in posterity. The monuments at Luostari of Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, illustrate the role of ruins in the stream of time.

Figure 6. Monument of Soviet aviation heroes at Luostari with one Antonov An-2, the “Annushka,” a biplane utility and school aircraft designed in 1946 and in production until the 1990s. Yuri Gagarin’s bust is the second from the left



Source: the author

Other sites in the borderland from the same period are harder to reach, and controversial even to ask about, such as the sites of the Gulag camps that used to be found outside all major towns and villages on the Kola Peninsula. On the other hand, the large number of comparably well-off scientists and Komsomolsk pioneers living then, and now reformed partly still so, in the privileged defense towns and in the research resort of the Kola Science

²⁹ L. E. Patrik, “The aesthetic experience of ruins,” *Husserl Studies* Vol. 3, No. 1, 1986, pp. 31–55; M. S. Roth, “Irresistible decay. Ruins reclaimed,” in M. S. Roth, ed., *Irresistible decay: ruins reclaimed*. Santa Monica: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1997, pp. 1–23.

Centre at Apatity (also a metallurgical town), are important parts of any historical picture with some real explanatory power.³⁰ The USSR simulacrum is corroding into fragments and dust all over the Russian borderland. It has become akin to an unviable 1x1 full-scale utopia the size of the landscape into which it is withering. Looking back at the decaying manifestations of the old empire as a Russian you would be compelled to compare its works with the achievements of the present in terms of infrastructure, constructions, public works, but also your own living standard, job opportunities, culture, education, freedom to travel, etc.

To surpass the achievements, state organization, affluence, science and technology of the ancient Roman Empire, as manifest by the ruins of the public buildings in its capital, the West needed roughly a thousand years.³¹ Modern Russia is moving at a speed of an entire different magnitude, thus living entirely among the ruins of the Soviet past as many once did among those of Rome is unusual. In what resembles the unexpected turn in the plot of a road movie you may depart from the highway between Kirkenes–Murmansk to follow a small southern road into the tundra and reach the inhabited Soviet ghost town of Prirechny. This former mining community and its resident pensioners were featured in 2007 in a Norwegian film by Tone Grøttjord, “Prirechny – Byen som ikke lenger eksisterer” [Prirechny the non-existing village]. Among the several striking aspects of this outstanding piece of documentary film-making are the traumatic experiences conveyed in interviews with the older generation of hard working people of the Russian economic transition of the 1990s. No doubt unexpected before the financial melt-down of 2008 this has today renewed political and moral interest, not least outside Russia, where many individuals now want to discuss the costs of societal re-structuring, market based economic reform and state financial austerity trumpeted out as the ingredients believed necessary in the brew for some to swallow to save everyone else from the ailments of the stagnant economy of the Eurozone and of Western Europe.

The city of Murmansk, the eastern terminus on the Kirkene – Murmansk road movie simulation, offers another set of mirrors to ponder as much on the minds of the self-absorbed visitor, the reactionary resident, and the reform-minded opportunist as on the character of that which is believed to have been objectified for analysis. Regarding the recent past of Murmansk it was never even fully a northern center of the USSR Empire as its character was tainted by the role the town played as a base for the White Guard

³⁰ P. Josephson, “Industrial deserts. Industry, science and the destruction of nature in the Soviet Union,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 85, 2, 2007, pp. 294–321; G. P. Luzin, M. Pretes, V. Vasiliev, “The Kola Peninsula. Geography, history and resources,” *Arctic* 47, 1, 1994, pp. 1–15.

³¹ C. Woodward, *In ruins. A journey through history, art, and literature*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2001.

and the British, US and French interventionists during the Russian Civil War 1917–1923. Despite its heroic defense and sufferings during WWII the city remained slightly suspect in the Soviet mind by its character of border outpost. Thus Mikhail Gorbachev's pivotal Murmansk declaration in 1987, during the height of the Perestroika, which opened new avenues for multilateral collaboration and provided many ideas for the innovative post-modern policy-making to come to the Circum-Arctic, was made at a ceremony focused on the past and the act of finally bestowing the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star on the city of Murmansk.³² It was entered, in the eleventh hour, into the hall of fame of Soviet patriot cities like St. Petersburg and Minsk, all named on stone tablets at the great "Alyosha" war memorial on one of the hills overlooking the city.

Some still yearn for the lost superpower glory of Russia but more common is the distrust of capitalistic foreign business. This is underestimated by many Nordic cross-border business activists. They are often puzzled by, or at least always disappointed with, the recurring lack of opportunities for foreign investment and the slow progress, by their standards, in the attempts to expand markets for foreign firms in Russia. A non-official Russian conspiracy scenario lurks in the background calling new and old guards to its mission of saving Russia from foreign molesters disguised as capitalist, wishing in secret to strip her of natural resources and by that weakening her powers.³³ On the other hand NW Russia and in particular Murmansk is singled out by modern makers of Russian federal policy to receive infrastructural investments promising the city an increased role as export harbor, and a global transport hub on the Northern Sea Route.

Returning to our Nordic travelers in some of the Murmansk hotel bars during any of the white summer nights we may find the tourist guide from Kirkenes exposing himself to the labor hazards of regular drinking with his group of weekend guests. Relaxing in spas, hanging out in hotel lounges, dining and partying being among the seldom acknowledged but important events of any simulations of eco- and adventure-tourism alike, as well as in the fact-finding journeys of most bureaucrats.³⁴ Of this guide in the northern borderland, everyone will expect an easy-going liberal humor and

³² M. Gorbachev, "The speech in Murmansk at the ceremonial meeting on the occasion of the presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star Medal to the City of Murmansk," October 1, 1987. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency 1987; K. Åtland, "Mikhail Gorbachev, the Murmansk Initiative, and the desecuritization of interstate relations in the Arctic," *Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association* 43, 3, 2008, pp. 289–311.

³³ A.P. Tsygankov, P. A. Tsygankov, "National ideology and IR theory. Three incarnations of the 'Russian Idea,'" *European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 16, 2010, pp. 663–86 (p. 669).

³⁴ Cf. H. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

penetrating insights to the possibilities of amusements and the whereabouts of the subcultures of the city, and trust in his business-minded near total amnesia when returning with his party to Norway on Sunday.

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