

Abstract

This paper discusses in four moves the role of boundaries in the analysis of aesthetic objects. First, a general section on boundaries frames a discussion of boundaries as meaning production. Second, the paper tries to develop boundaries as constitutive of aesthetics and not just as a particular topic inside aesthetics. Third, through an example of a aesthetic object, Leonardo da Vinci's so-called *Vitruvian Man*, the paper suggests the use of boundaries as a methodological concept, focussing on four dimensions of the aesthetic object: *Theme, medium, communication, and context*. Fourth, a brief reading of Allan Ginsburg's *Howl* sets out to transpose the methodological approach from a visual to a verbal text.

Dette arbejdspapir drøfter i fire ryk den rolle grænser spiller i analysen af æstetiske genstande. Først vil en generel præsentation af grænser placere grænser som betydningsproduktion. Dernæst vil arbejdspapiret udvikle grænser som konstituerende for æstetiske genstande og ikke blot som et særligt emne inden for æstetikken. Videre foreslår arbejdspapiret gennem et eksempel – Leonardo da Vincis såkaldte *Vitruvius-mand* – grænser som et metodebegreb, der fokuserer på fire dimensioner: *tema, medium, kommunikation og kontekst*. Endelig prøver en kort læsning af Alan Ginburgs *Howl* at overføre dette metodiske greb fra en visuel til en verbal tekst.

Boundaries – Ontology, Methods, Analysis¹

Svend Erik Larsen

Boundaries as the production of meaning

Even fans of a hard-core constructivism will have to admit that there is a material world around us, penetrated by boundaries which are accessible to us through sense perception. In that basic respect, boundaries are aesthetic phenomena (cf. the general meaning of *aesthesis*). If I want to cross the street and at the same time deny the reality of the visible or sensible boundary between the sidewalk and the street designed for vehicles, I will be in serious trouble if I wish to claim that this boundary has just been made up as a constructivist ploy. On the other hand, if I want to cling to the idea that all essential boundaries in the human life world – and let us try to stay there – have the same ontological status as the curb just referred to, I will end up in just as serious trouble. Not only would I have to forget about the Kantian insight that the forms in which we perceive and conceptualize the world depend on our mental equipment; I would also have to hold that boundaries are not subject to human intervention except by chance. We have to perceive them as they are, and if they change, that's just the way things are, nobody knows how and why. But the foreseeable and repeatable changes made by humans in the boundaries of the world around us are just as real as any curb. Which of course *is* a human construct. Historical processes are real in the same sense as the curb is real.

Even with the simplistic point of departure I take here, we cannot deny that whatever it is and whatever its manifestation may be, any boundary implies at least two levels – one of its tangible *manifestation* and one of the *conditions* of this manifestation. With a less simple starting point, of course, the number and the nature of such levels may be much larger and more complicated. Avoiding for the time being any further complexity however, we may be tempted to separate these two aspects and consider them one by one. They would be seen as having different perspectives and thus requiring different approaches.

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These *manifestations*, like the curb, would have to do with things or with a given state of affairs, maybe with natural processes and forces, such as the boundary between sea and land, or maybe with social processes, such as throwing oneself into the traffic from the curb. The *conditions* would have to do with theories of why and how the manifestations are there, something we would only want to dwell on if we had the time or if that is our profession. Practical interaction between the two works all by itself; theoretical reflection on them has a space of its own. Theory and practice, never the twain shall meet.

But also this simple model will have to be abandoned as simplistic, even if we were to assume that the practical dimension can do without theory. Standing at the curb, I'm not facing a row of stones, but an ambiguous phenomenon, even in its simple material manifestation. Any given boundary shows the double face of Janus: it is always a boundary *between* and a boundary *to*, a distinction which is immanent in any material boundary, though not defined by its materiality. Hence, any given boundary met by any agency, human or not, presents this agency with the necessity of an *interpretation*: may it and can it be transgressed or not? By what means? The *between* presents a possible obstacle, the *to* a possible opening – a boundary is a barrier or a gate. Because of this element of interpretation, any boundary produces first of all *meaning*. No boundary is anything in itself – it is never an autonomous or absolute phenomenon – but is always determined by what is placed on either side of it, two domains which in turn substantiate and specify the meaning it produces. The curb as a row of stones or blocks of concrete is not a boundary in itself until it produces meaning. Thus, the curb necessitates meaning, not any old meaning, but a meaning related to traffic. *A boundary is a meaning-producing difference between at least two domains.* A boundary which does not call for meaning has simply no ontological status as boundary in the human life-world, whatever its material ontology may be. It does not exist in this life-world, although it may exist from other perspectives, on other conditions. From the point of view of their manifestations, boundaries are best looked upon, not as givens, *but as emerging or occurring when certain fields can be separated in order for meaning to be produced.* Phenomena *become* boundaries when they exercise this function. Conditions for the existence of boundaries

are, more precisely, conditions for their *coming into existence* and will have to be taken into account in the interpretation of their manifestations.

Even if we still try to keep things simple, we have to admit that not only the manifestation of the boundary is ambiguous, but so also are the *conditions*. They are not only conditions for the *existence*, or rather the coming into existence of boundaries, but also for the possible *interaction* between the fields delimited by boundaries and the agencies responsible for their interpretation – machines, humans, animals or any other instance making an interpretation that specifies the boundary. Interaction can be anything from perception via interpretation or transgression to material construction and destruction. But the main point is that *it is because of the ambiguities of the level of manifestation and of the level of conditions that the two levels are inseparable and interdependent*. Boundaries are never simply given, never simply *there*. They occur or emerge once the conditions for them to produce meaning are satisfied. In certain cases this simply requires training of the senses, a certain attention, like learning to watch in the dark; in other cases some new knowledge is required, either in the radical scientific sense of the word, in order for us to detect differences between, say, electrons or quarks, or just in the sense of a broadened cultural knowledge, like learning to watch a sport we did not know before; in still other cases new technology must be available to perform the interpretation, from glasses to highly-developed microscopes or computers. And, most importantly, the role of a boundary as a barrier or as a gate can be changed through interaction.

With conditions for boundaries always being both conditions of existence and of interaction, we cannot help – and I'm bringing in a certain level of complexity here – but consider the *medium* that manifests the boundary. Not all species are able to recognize or interact with boundaries in every medium. Only by taking the medium into account, can the conditions of boundaries be seen as conditions for possible changes to boundaries. The material manifestation of boundaries has to be specified according to its medium in order for it to be recognized as a manifestation at all. The medium corresponds to the perceptual and cognitive capacities of the agents that interact with the world through the boundaries in question. We know that we cannot interact with

binary boundaries as rapidly as a computer; we know we cannot interact across olfactory boundaries as well as a dog etc.

To sum up: *My claim is that boundaries in any context, organic or non-organic, human or non-human, involve at least two interdependent levels – a level of manifestation and a level of conditions, each of them with two aspects that produce their interdependence. On the manifestation level there is an opposition between boundary as a barrier and as a gate, on the condition level there is an opposition between conditions for existence and conditions for interaction. The interdependence requires a specific medium for the boundaries to emerge and for the conditions to produce changes.* Not all things and beings possess a capacity to choose and to handle media that can produce new boundaries which, in turn, actually change the material layout of the world. Neither do they necessarily possess the cognitive apparatus with which to reflect on and regulate this capacity and thus interfere with the conditions through which boundaries come into existence. But humans do possess these abilities, mainly through language and other symbolic media that guide their practical interaction with material boundaries. It is here that aesthetics, in the narrower sense of cultural practice, comes into the discussion.

Aesthetics and boundaries

So, in the specific case of boundaries of the human life world, aesthetics not only enters as a dimension of the level of manifestation of boundaries, by the fact that they are perceptible and part of our worldly experience. Aesthetics also comes into play in the more specific sense of aesthetics as the study of sensible forms created by humans in the various media we are able to use in order to produce meaning about our world of experience. In this way do our bodily movements and behaviour acquire goals and directions.

From this perspective aesthetics may be characterized as the study of the human capacity to themselves produce material boundaries in various media – linguistic, non-linguistic and combinations thereof. Such boundaries create meaning that may transform already existing boundaries otherwise created. Furthermore, aesthetics will also be the study of the changeable

conditions of this production and the changes brought about by humans themselves. Thus, looked upon in a boundary perspective, *aesthetics is the study of human interaction with already existing boundaries with the possibility of changing them*. From this point of view aesthetics is the study of the basic activity that creates culture, and not of specific objects of art inside this culture. The study of the arts is a means to an end which is not art in itself but the culture it produces. The general reflection on boundaries allows us to place aesthetics in relation to and necessarily intertwined with other human cultural transformative activities, such as, for example, translation, transculturation, migration.

In order to develop aesthetics along those lines, we cannot just reproduce the general elements and terms of the discussion of boundaries as the production of meaning. First of all, the boundaries under scrutiny in aesthetics are the boundaries produced by humans in specific media making up the aesthetic product. Boundaries with an ontological status outside the aesthetic object, that is only with an aesthetic status only as the objects of sense perception, only acquire an ontological status in the cultural aesthetic perspective when represented or reproduced in the aesthetic work. They must be based on methodologically defined and media-specific selection carried out by the artist. The seashore in a poem and in reality is an essentially different phenomenon, as we know. And boundaries represented aesthetically in this way do not have an ontological status different from other media-specific differences as for example that between colors in a painting or between stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem.

Georg Simmel's claim concerning the sociological boundary also goes for cultural and aesthetic boundaries: "The boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact with a spatial form" (476). When dealing with boundaries in culture in a broader sense or in aesthetics in a narrower sense we are faced with cultural or aesthetic facts that take on a spatial, that is to say, a material form.

I cannot blame those who now think that I have subscribed to the theory of the hard-core constructionists I distanced myself from in the beginning – the ontological boundary between fiction or construction and reality is a matter of no importance. But the predominance of a methodological approach to

boundaries in matters of aesthetics does not mean a neglect of ontological issues. Quite the contrary. This approach is a way of specifying them on aesthetic conditions. It is a way of confirming that the principal difference between fiction and reality does not hold between reality and non-reality, but between two different but equally important ontological spheres whose internal boundaries come into existence on different conditions, and whose mutual boundary is bridged by the aesthetic object. The unique force of the aesthetic object is to be constituted by the boundary between fiction and reality – true literature has to be truly lying. But the aesthetic object also, and exactly because it is thus constituted, transgresses this boundary once it comes into existence. The reason is that the symbolically represented boundary may be approached and maybe changed through the aesthetic object itself. This is the content of the myth of Orpheus –irretrievable loss transformed into art.

If we look at the rather complex opposition between manifestation and conditions in the field of aesthetic objects we must adapt and modify the general opposition between ontology and methodology in relation to boundaries. On the level of *manifestations*, or the aesthetic objects themselves, boundaries are seen on the one hand in a *static* perspective as given boundaries, for instance the order of nature in classicism which is mirrored, selectively, in the works of art. On the other hand they are seen in a *dynamic* perspective when boundaries are shaped and reshaped by the art, for instance in the post Eighteenth_Century theories of linguistic form as determining the form of our world. On the level of the *conditions* boundaries are looked upon primarily as *strategic* phenomena that point to the various *methodological* steps to be taken in order to carry out the strategy of the artist, the creation of aesthetic objects being a systematically organized process resulting in a complex of media-specific boundaries. So, here we have a *static* and a *dynamic* perspective, too. The static perspective is embedded in the application of given methods as they have been known for centuries in the tradition of imitation and emulation as the basic principles for artistic creation. The dynamic perspective is indicated instead by the tradition – flourishing after Romanticism, but known before – according to which art is not a craft, but a radical and unique inventiveness that changes both art itself and the world around it. The conclusion is that *the ontology of the manifested*

boundaries is always determined by the methodological conditions for their coming into existence.

Since Aristotle's treatise on poetics, metaphors in particular have been a central device in that respect, playing games, according to Aristotle, with the natural boundaries between the species of things and beings. This is a methodological device in poetry and rhetoric which, then, suggests new boundaries in the world of experience through the four types of metaphors which Aristotle himself lists, combining generic and specific dimensions through analogical inferences. Hence, as interpreters of aesthetic objects, we may create or suggest boundaries that are methodologically based, but must at the same time be challenged by the media-specific ontological facts of the work of art that determine our inferences. But the point of departure is the suggestion, not the observation or detection of boundaries. The suggestion of boundaries is founded on a methodological procedure that leads to the meaning created by and not contained in the aesthetic objects, faithful to their cultural function at large – to engender and transform culturally significant boundaries.

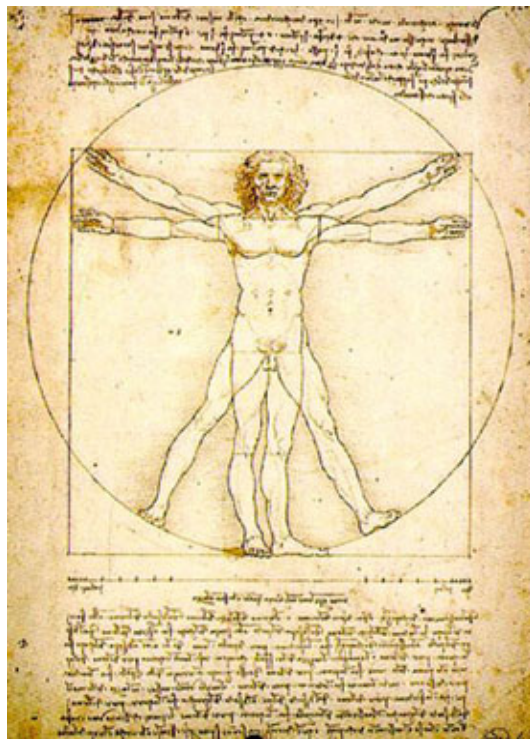
We can of course legitimately read works of art as non-aesthetic objects in a sociological context, as historical documents and from several other perspectives. I have no problem with this; aesthetic objects are not ours to possess because we happen to be professionals in the field. But to conceive of them as manifestations of methodologically produced boundaries enables us to regard aesthetic objects as active elements in cultural processes, exactly because of their aesthetic qualities. Let me suggest two examples, one concerned with general dimensions of boundaries relevant in this context exemplified by Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, the other with the particular boundaries, or some of them, of a specific poem, *Howl* by Allan Ginsberg.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*

Leonardo da Vinci's so-called *Vitruvian Man* is just one isolated sheet from 1493 out of the scattered scribbles of Leonardo, later collected as his notebooks.² Two boundaries are immediately

² See different drawings and references to the numeric system behind them and their hidden meanings, <http://www.aiwaz.net/Leonardo/vitruvianman/index.html>,

visible: the frame drawn up by the geometrical form, circle and square, indicating the boundaries of the outstretched body, and the boundaries above and below the picture separating the visual part and the verbal part of the sheet. I hope that my previous reflections have made you suspicious of the immediacy of boundaries without recourse to methodological principles and of the assumption that those boundaries which are the most immediately visible are those which are the most important. We must never forget Simmel's statement, here slightly transformed: 'Boundaries are not spatial facts with an aesthetic effect, but aesthetic facts with a spatial form.' So far we have simply noted some spatial forms or visual boundaries, but not focused on the aesthetic facts that may take on these and other spatial forms. I'll will list four such aesthetic facts that have the status of being boundaries which take on an spatial form, that is are manifested materially in the aesthetic object, meaning here any aesthetic object or, rather, any object looked upon from an aesthetic perspective: *Theme, medium, communication, and context*. They constitute the methodological foundation for the study of aesthetic boundaries.



<http://www2.evansville.edu/drawinglab/vitruvian.html> and <http://thealchemicaegg.com/VitruviusN.html>. See also Crowe for a broader cultural interpretation. For interpretations of the drawing in different contexts, see Larsen (2005a, b).

The picture shows a moving male body inscribed in a circle and a square with small lines crossing parts of the body as if subdividing it. Even if we cannot read the text in Leonardo's hardly decipherable handwriting, it is not hard to guess without explicit verbal guidance that the circular and quadrangular geometrical forms in some ways refer to the proportions of the body, inscribed in it by small lines. It is a fair guess that this boundary constitutes the *theme* (the proportions of the body) of the verbal-visual whole, uniting both the figure and the frame and the verbal and the visual. In a particular way the outlines of the square and the circle represent themselves as boundaries, self-reflectively at it were, in the lines on the body and the semantics of the text. *These boundaries are projected on the body in order to articulate a specific meaning.* The visible boundary between the interior and the exterior of the geometry, the white or yellowish paper without verbal text, has no importance, as it would have had in, say, concrete poetry.

If we scrutinize Leonardo's scribble, this view is confirmed. This *media-specific* boundary, in this case between visual and verbal medium, is used to articulate the meaning of the picture. We are dealing with what Roland Barthes called *ancrage* in contrast to *relais*. In this text we first have a brief summary of Vitruvius' *De Architectura* (ca. 20 BC), followed by a paraphrase of the same text which is as close as is possible to being a quote (Vitruvius Book 3, 1:153-54). Here Vitruvius explains in numerical detail the ideal proportions of the human body in order to provide us with knowledge of the order of nature and, hence, with a knowledge of the ideal place of humans in nature. This quantitative approach allows us to apply the principles of nature in our constructions of places, dwellings etc.

With the reference to Vitruvius, Leonardo contextualizes his own drawing in a particular historical and cultural context, that of architectural and spatial ideas and practices. Thus there is here a new boundary, that of text and context, manifested in this case as a quote or simply as a reference. The contextual boundary is often manifested in a very discrete way and often requires some pre-established cultural knowledge or the definition of an underlying theory. It is rarely self-evident as here. Here the *contextual* boundary is primarily of historical nature, referring as it does to a writer of the

past. But on the other hand, with the depiction itself Leonardo contextualizes his sketch in an ahistorical context, that of nature and natural order – the naked body and the basic natural forms. The two contexts are embedded in one another – nature is being made culturally accessible through bodily experience and quantitative measurement, allowing it to be used in the spatial layout of sites and construction of buildings, and in the same move culture is being given a natural and ahistorical foundation that marks certain built spaces as better human living spaces than others because they are shaped according to unmediated natural bodily forms and experiences. *The contextual boundary articulates the relation between history and ahistorical dimensions, one variation of the static-dynamic opposition I have indicated above.*

However, Leonardo does not state this argument explicitly. He just makes a drawing, quotes Vitruvius and adds a brief summary of Vitruvius' ideas about the ideal proportions of the body from the third book of the Roman treatise. Up to this point Vitruvius has been dealing with the practical skills of the architect, the proper material for construction purposes and the requirements for the construction of walled cities. But now he centers on the construction of temples and the layout of holy places. In this case humans are faced with the gods in an immediate confrontation with the built environment. Therefore, he states, with copious references to older Greek and Roman architects, it is of utmost importance that those parts of humans that are in natural harmony with the divine cosmic order are used as the constructive principle for temples. This is the body.

Both the units of measurement (finger, foot etc.) and their proportions in relation to each other are derived from the body and indicate the height and length of the building and its parts as well as its position on the site. In this way the immediate sensory perception of the temple – that is the temple as an aesthetic experience in the broad sense – can be translated into transcendental knowledge of the basic principles of the universe. In book three Vitruvius lays down the numerical principles incorporated in the body, and in the next book he shows at length how columns and temples of different types correspond to these ideal proportions.

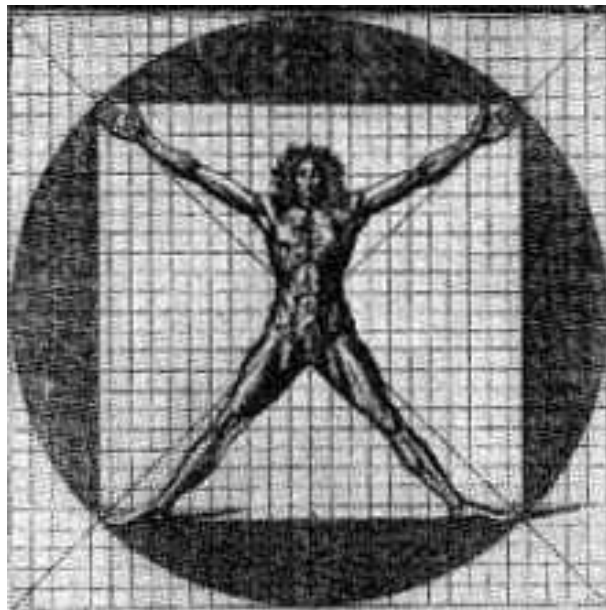
According to classical metaphysics the validity of this process is based on analogy. Vitruvius agrees and so did many Renaissance scholars. Therefore he focuses on the human body in so far and only in so far as it corresponds analogically to the order of natural forms (Book 3, 1: 159), that is through the proportional boundaries of the body parts based on ideal numbers, not through any other material or mental aspect.

After this cosmological justification Vitruvius explains in great detail the different ideal relations between the height of the body and the span of the outstretched arms, between distances from top of the head to the nipples etc. In a short narrative he imagines a body lying down with legs and arms spread out. Then, the tips of its fingers and toes will be placed on the periphery of a circle and in the angles of a square (both of which are ideal geometrical forms), if we at the same time place the navel in the centre of the circle. The dimensions of both the circle and the square correspond to the relational order between body parts, looked at from above.

In his quote from Vitruvius, Leonardo makes a particular selection of Vitruvius' view points. He only summarizes and quotes the plain numerical principles and units of measurement, leaving out their contextual relation to holy places or to any metaphysics using analogy as a basic principle of recognition. More importantly, he neither quotes nor refers to Vitruvius' suggestion of how the drawing of the body in the circle and the square is supposed to be made. He just makes his own version.

However, compared to Vitruvius' directions for the drawing, Leonardo makes an important change that opens for a new historical and cultural understanding and use of bodily proportions. First, the man drawn is not lying down in static position and seen from above as follows from Vitruvius' suggestions, but is clearly poised in an erect position facing the viewer directly with a stern gaze. Ideal or not, he is standing on the ground together with the viewer, not seen in a bird's eye perspective. Second, he is moving. In one position he is inside the circle with his feet touching the periphery, but his fingers stretch out to both the circle and the square; in the other he is simultaneously touching the side of the square and the periphery of circle with his feet, while his hands just reach the square. Third, the navel is not the only centre, but the male sex is now placed where

the diagonals meet. Thus, Leonardo exploits the fact that Vitruvius only mentions that the centre of the circle should be in the navel, but does not spell out clearly the bodily position of the point of intersection of the diagonals. To the best of my knowledge, all other contemporary and earlier drawings referring directly to Vitruvius (and not Leonardo's more famous drawing) also place this point at the navel, and therefore place the square entirely inside the circle, leading to a rather awkward and far from ideal and static bodily appearance. Here is Cesare Cesariano's suggestion from 1521:³



In contrast to this distorted body, Leonardo's man could be shown in any trendy and sexy health magazine of today. Leonardo places the man inside the two basic geometrical figures in such a way that they are both inside and outside one another, and their centres and outlines are therefore mutually displaced. They appear as two independent forms united through the body and its movements, not two completely synthesized cosmic forms. The body, shaped by the geometrical boundaries in turn articulates the boundaries. The manifestation is clearly *dynamic*, and not *static* as in Vitruvius and Cesariano.

The effect of this representative strategy is double. First, not the navel, the sign of Man created, but the male sex, both the sign and the active agent of Man the creator, is a new centre.

³ Reproduced on <http://thealchemicalegg.com/VitruviusN.html>.

Second, Man places himself actively through his movements inside both the mutually displaced square and the circle, and thus *he* constitutes the harmony of the ideal proportions, in contrast to Vitruvius where he is just inscribed, expressing statically the cosmic order seen from above. In Leonardo, Man is the self-confident subject in a horizontal and thus secular world creating and upholding its order based on his own bodily proportions and movements. This body is more than just ideal proportions, it is also a bodily subject actively moving, as we can see, inside the ideal forms and thereby also setting them into motion, shown in their displacement. No wonder Leonardo omits the specific religious context of Vitruvius' rumination on the bodily proportions. For Leonardo the body comes first, and only then the geometrical boundaries. At the same time the body both expresses the geometrical figures and actively incorporates them and defines their positions.

Leonardo's body, matter and form as it were, is both a genuine part of the human life-world it refers to, and a condensed sign of it as created by Man according to the basic principles of human form. Leonardo's man as a creative being is part of the material and social world to which it refers through his erect position and horizontally oriented gaze, carrying with it the real principles of creation – the sex and the proportions to be used for the material construction of a human life-world. He shares the world with the viewer. Thereby, another boundary is brought into play, manifested by the erect position and the gaze, the *communicative* boundary between image and viewer, from a vertically to a horizontally-defined boundary.

To sum up: This well-known image indicates four basic and prototypical boundaries that have to be taken into account in all analyses of aesthetic objects concerned with the problem of how boundaries articulate meaning in a larger cultural perspective. Such boundaries show different manifestations in different types of aesthetic objects, but all are defined from a methodological point of departure. They are not all immediately visible or readable, but the task of theories is to make us see them, *theorein* in Greek meaning 'to oversee' or 'to overview.' The four dimensions referred to indicate the lines which an interpretation will have to follow in order for us to understand the role of aesthetic object in the shaping

our world of experience: theme, medium, context, and communication.

Allan Ginsberg: *Howl*

When we approach an exclusively verbal aesthetic object, a poem, like *Howl* we cannot rely on the immediate visibility of boundaries. Language does not work like that. Only in marginal cases of concrete poetry do the visible outline of the poem on paper have any important bearing on an understanding of the poem. Of course, we can focus on boundaries related to the book as a particular verbal medium, which is not without importance, of course, but only rarely tells us anything about the particular text. On such conditions an interpretative approach through the investment of boundaries will not bring us very far. In other words, without preliminary generalisations, like the listing of four dimensions of boundaries, or without theoretical reflections on how boundaries that lead to meaning production can be manifested in language, we cannot do very much.

Howl is one of the cult texts of the beat generation, a hymnal and expressionistic manifesto of 1956, almost biblical in its repetitive structure. It consists of three parts, each consisting of stanzas of uneven length. Added is also a so-called *Footnote to Howl*.⁴ On the one hand the poem is a provocative appeal to unlimited freedom on individual conditions, on the other hand this freedom is embedded in a heavy load of traditional references to multiple religious and quasi-religious and also nationalistic sources, first and foremost Walt Whitman. A true anthology piece for schools and universities, perhaps slightly outdated in its ecstatic spontaneity. But let's leave these comments aside and look into boundaries.

With the regard to *theme* we are dealing with the semantics of the poem, that is representations of boundaries referred to, not boundaries in themselves (as with the geometrical figures in Leonardo). In spite of the multidirectional meaning structures we can boil the relevant boundaries represented down to a single basic one. First, let me offer a few fragments:

⁴ References are part and stanza, e.g. (I, 38).

“cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism” (I, 31)

“who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah because the instinctively vibrates at their feet in Kansas”(I, 24)

“who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg” (I, 53)

“who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset” (I, 42)

“who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication,
who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts,
who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy” (I, 34-36)

In all these examples it is the boundaries of the body, explicitly mentioned or not, that organize the experience of *feelings*, invested in sex, hunger, crime, joy, suffering; of *movements* into the body, as in sexual penetration, or reaching out from the body, like dancing; of *visibility*, when seen on the roof or in the sunset; or, finally, of *mental reflection*, when studying. All the semantic fields of the poem, often rather incoherent when catalogued as separate or specific fields, are united in being representations of experiments with the boundary between the body and its surroundings and thereby with the elementary presence of the body in the world of experience. At the same time, this boundary is incessantly transgressed in this world in a continuous bodily movement. The body is always marked out and transgressed in the same move.

From this observation we can easily see that the *media-specific* boundary of the poem is precisely related to the articulation of presence in and through language as a linguistic process. This is manifested in two ways: as a media-specific boundary between everyday language and poetic discourse, and as a boundary between the textual universe and the universe of non-textual experience. The first boundary is marked by the meticulously

elaborated rhythmic structure with abundant biblical references – it is impossible to overhear the phonetic similarity between ‘Howl’ in the title and the insistently repeated ‘holy’ of the footnote (Ginsberg 27-28).⁵ However, we also meet sacrilegious and obscene words going against this tendency *en masse*, even though accompanied by the claim that there is no difference between holy and profane. In other words: the demarcation of a boundary that is at the same time transgressed.

The second media-specific boundary, between two ontologically different universes, the textual one and that of everyday experience, is articulated through the use of deictical elements. All media, verbal or visual, carry out deictic functions, that is functions by which a media product is anchored in the universe of experience where it occurs. In language the elements that bring about such functions will be those that articulate the enunciation – like the pronouns *I* and *you*, certain noun cases such as the vocative, verbal aspects like the double past tense in French, verbal tenses like past and present, certain adverbs like *here*, *there*, *now* etc. They all anchor the text in relation to the here and now of its utterance.

Here I’ll leave the general theory and exemplification of the deictical elements and restrict myself to pointing at a subtle use of them. The two first words of the poem are ‘I saw ...’, but then the *I* disappears almost from the entire first part. We simply get a picture of the terrifying and bodily constituted world. The whole situation is anchored by the enunciative *I* plus a past tense and thus distanced from the actual experience, ‘I saw’. The boundary between enunciation and enunciated is clearly marked – I’m not there, I observe and tell from another position. In the second part of the poem, presenting the horrific description of Moloch, we have no explicit subject, but a listing of destructive instances – first in the past tense, then in phrases without verbs, and then with more and more verbs in the present tense. But gradually the *I* emerge, too. Thus, this movement runs counter to the development in first part with regard to subjectivity.

⁵ In order to produce the jazz-like rhythm Ginsberg also worked in an unorthodox manner with prose rhythm in the mode of mediaeval religious rhetoric of the *cursus*, that is the final 8-9 syllables of the clause.

But at the end of the second part we encounter a mysterious *they*. Important to note is that 'they saw', like the *I* that opens the entire poem in the first part, and what *they saw* is exactly what unfolds under the eyes of the *I* in the longer first part. One may say that the second part makes room for the *I* to be the subject of the whole list of wild actions represented in the first part, but now as the subject creating the poem in front of us – distanced from but overlooking the events and responsible for what the reader perceives. The *I* is destroyed in the second part by Moloch only to reemerge in the first part as the poetic subject, creating its own universe.

The third part, however, containing a direct reference to a real person in a real place, Carl Solomon in the Rockland Asylum, is clearly articulated by the *I* in the present tense – not I see or I saw, but I *am*: "I'm with you in Rockland" (III, 1). It is like the biblical words by Jesus: "and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Math. 28, 20). Here reality is the promise of Jesus, a promise which is real for the believers whenever it is uttered as a repetition of the biblical words. The utterance is itself always a real promise, creating the *I* as a real being. This is what happens in the third part of the poem. Thus the media-specific boundary is a marked boundary between the observing *I* and the reality looked upon, but also a boundary transgressed by the poem, which is at the same time constituted by this very boundary. The *I* vanishes in part one, reemerges as poetic subject in part two and as a real subject in part three through a purely linguistic process related to the act of enunciation, with poetic creation and the promise as the essential speech acts.

The *contextual* boundary runs between the present poem as a single exclusive instance of enunciative presence and as a generally valid message, through its extensive references to a cultural tradition. The poem is explicitly individualized by the theme – the experience and the story of this specific *I* – and by the medium, referring to the emergence of this particular poem. It is at the same time embedded in a larger literary, religious and cultural tradition.

The last of the four dimensions of boundary, the *communicative* boundary between reader and text, is frequently underlined by the overall presence of the evocative elements, more

stressing the unbridgeable boundary than transgressing it. There is clearly an *I* expressing itself monologues, not an *I* reaching out in dialogue. But although the poem stands out, emphatically, as a self-referential and expressive monologue, it cannot help to use evocative and thus dialogical elements.

The most important boundary in this poem is the media-specific boundary that constitutes the text as a poetic text with a specific position in the world where it is produced and used. Other texts, of course, may highlight other boundaries.

I have here tried to demonstrate that focusing on boundaries is a methodologically-based procedure that makes visual and verbal texts display most distinctively, not their internal structures of differences, but their embedding in the culturally-formed world of experience from which they spring and which they shape. We may approach boundaries in theory, in visual or verbal analysis, but the conclusion is the same: *A boundary is not a thing, but a sign.*

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