Borders as routes? Insights on borders with bicycles

This paper focuses on how cycling activates senses and constructs routes as a way of understanding environment, identity and borders. In terms of understanding movement at borders certain vocabulary has been used, such as, flows, paths, tides, waves, repetitions as well as corridors, gateways and places, often rendering the border as more or less invisible or as taken for granted. As I see it, the concept of routes allows further understanding of the way that the experience of motion creates a sense of route with different senses of border, resulting in a specific sense of being.

Border crossings have been considered as places where the experience of movement changes, but also sites where routinized ways of moving provide a different sense of being. For example, in terms defined and meaningful paths of interlinked places, but also when vehicles, such as trains, function as physical and cultural containers: people as learning skills and living different modes of travel, different moods and atmospheres (Löfgren 1999, 2015, O’Dell 2011).

In contrast to these approaches which tend to make borders invisible, I focus on how borders add to experience of movement as routes. Here the meaning of borders emerges as breaks, abruptions, changes and – a different sense of being and relating to environment, to some extent defining what is experienced as a real and true experience. Something which seems to be also in demand nowadays, it seems.

Bicycles change people’s affective capacities and perception on environment (i.e. Larsen 2014). Cycling means routinized embodied forms of knowledge related to sensing rhythms and flows of movement. Thus cycling means also a sense of border (Green 2012) in terms of knowledges which make boundaries meaningful. As I see it, cycling means a kind of throwntogetherness (Löfgren 2015) where the experiences, memories and skills, embodied skills, images create a sense of route as well as ways of interacting with landscape. A bicycle obviously transforms a landscape into sensescapes and taskscapes (Ingold 2000), but it is more than that. Cycling means perceiving and constructing a route en-route (Lefebvre), but, as I see it, routes suggest also a specific form of understanding, not as form of contemplation but as means for and locating yourself, sense of self and collectives, as well as borders with local and translocal features.

In this paper I will now look at cycling in the context of unusual cycling landscapes in the Arctic north, along, at and across the border between Finland and Sweden. This border seems like a pretty uninteresting border but in terms of a sense of route, border as a materiality, a signs and figure, I see it as opportunity to understand how European borders are made, or done in everyday life. To regard borders as phenomena, as a cyclist can do it, means a focus on the way borders shape but also are affected by the sense of route. This, I believe, can reveal the limits of the everydayness of border mobility and actually what are local borders.
In my focus is a group long distance cyclists, how they relate and become affected by the borders they cross and ride along with as well as when riding with others through different natural and cultural environments. The event in focus, the Northern Lights Route Marathon which is organized since 1980’s, takes approx. 100-120 riders every year along the Finnish-Swedish border through Lapland, for about 500 kms. The materials for this paper consist of ride-alongs, observations and interviews conducted with these cyclists, but my findings are based on many events and borderlands\(^1\). My approach here is also an autoethnographic one.

It happens that long distance road cycling is often connected with such intentions effort, socializing and escaping the demands of everyday life, but there clearly is more to it as an interaction with environment. Some research suggest road cycling providing a common frame of reference as it provides some kinaesthetic and symbolic consistency to the way riders interpret their doing (Spinney 2006), but for me the insights came to lie elsewhere: the events, differences, the disturbances and changes. After finishing the Marathon ride in 2015, I noticed how difficult it was to explaining why or how the effort of riding this route had been specific. On the outset, riding in this event focused on following the border and enjoying the Arctic landscape, but it seemed difficult even to give meaning to the ride afterwards or to locate any events on the ride. Riding had felt controversial.

This initially forced me to think the phenomenon and knowledge involved. To think borders as signs and figures around which different affects accumulate connecting and giving insights to alternating subjectivity and lived spaces that borders and borderlands are. How similar moving can mean so different things. For me, riding came to be an opportunity to look at things and situations as they are and keep an open attitude and reject ready-made assumptions and interpretations, a form of avoiding phenomenological reductionism. Cycling means you just do it but also that you can be in a situation intensely, without thinking about it. How riding makes nature and cultural landscape come at you. So, a border crossing can be a simple ride but it can also turn into a reflection.

The focus on sense of route means seeing the affectual side of borders. Affects suggest various ways of bodies as means of knowing the world before it becomes part of conscious reflection. These embodied experiences often remain not noticed, unseen and unrecognized (i.e. Frykman 2012). As part of sense of route I see affects, which often imply passivity, the way that something is done to one, I see affects as means for “understanding” environment and borders as a sense of being. The bicycle is a tool, making regions and therefore also borders attainable, understandable, contextualized in new ways. The ride-along method means that I use these cycling events for assessing the potential borders open up for imagining a local region but also for doing it, how activities form lives rather than what is told and represented.

Borderlands have become seen as immensely variable and borders tend to be addressed as indexical, in a way the distance and direction to borders is suggested. As I see it, the route

\(^1\) Such as Finnish riders on Åland Islands and Polish riders on the island of Uznam/Usedom at the Polish-German border.
suggests a different location. Marathon cyclists reveal an understanding of environment and society as experienced by own means, own effort, and also movement with an intentionality that can easily be dismissed. Here the body of the rider obviously is a location in itself: it interacts with others, the elements and things. People think with these things even they don’t specifically reflect on them. As I will next discuss, sense of route means also changes and disruptions, such as a danger that collective/familiar border route transforms into something else, for example, when a local ride and landscape suddenly transforms into a border ride.

In case of (Finnish and Swedish) Lapland, narratives of environment often point out the visual senses and the aesthetic appreciation of landscapes, such for tourism purposes. On the other hand, recent descriptions of the cycling experience, suggest Lapland as “monotonous nature” with little to offer in terms of changing landscapes. In other words, riding here is a way of thinking and contemplations, reflecting life and the idea of borders, i.e. what is that makes people draw borders (Huthmacher & Franz 2016, Haraldsson 2010). The barren landscapes seem to remain at a distance like in a vehicle such a train or bus.

From the viewpoint of sense of route, these images of the role of nature in cycling might be misleading. The Marathon ride which takes place in set groups in set speed, cycling allows specific collective sense of route to take shape, also as a transmission of force across bodies. A specific sense of “we” emerges and movement resembling traveling by bus, but also in terms of not having to get to know the others, as “we are cyclists”. The marathon riders ride in a group almost all day. The group is needed in order to advance safely and effectively. Cyclists seem to form a collective of bodies, moving in sync. Cycling is suggested a specific form of sociality: the transmission of force and or intensity across bodies (Frykman 2012 < Clough 2010).
Lapland in the Tornio River Valley is mostly very sparsely populated. Reindeers occasionally block the road and occasionally some RV’s or trucks carrying salmon from Norwegian fisheries or cars bypass the group, often disregarding the traffic rules. You easily start to think of the state of law and order in these barren lands, and remember stories about locals seeing people from Southern Finland as different. There is clearly a sense of throwntogetherness emerging while riding the group. The designated ride captain or the veterans of the ride give instructions on how riding in the group should be done, especially for the “newcomers”.

However, when riding first, leading the group and setting its pace, you forget the others when your routinized riding habits take over. The specific rules of group riding suggest a more bodily than socially organized form of riding, one which allows a sense of collectivity emerge. The meaning of the group becomes first visible when the group suddenly splits, and the rider finds himself alone on the road.

The marathon ride involves a so called free ride section of 50 kms. You can now ride as you like. Many choose to ride alone, but this freedom come with a price tag. Now a different feeling of vulnerability emerges. Stopping is no option even if beautiful lake views suddenly come in sight. You seem to feel the hard and soft contours of the road: its every turn, crack, ascent and descent becomes meaningful (Fieldnotes 6/15). What had been reactive riding changed to a focus on materiality and environment. You have also changed from being a vehicle, to a human in nature. You feel an abrupt change of sense of route. You are now en-route with the elements and depend on moving forward.

The senses (touch, smell, taste and hearing) don’t make you reflect on the route. You simply ride, feel things, use, enjoy and also become provoked by the elements, perhaps far more than what you think. The well-known way to refer to a good ride is call it as a “flow experience”: You feel one with the bike and the road. This requires s a smooth relation to the elements. However, this notion of flow can also hide the different senses of border and control involved.

An example is an experience where a tough, hilly, but picturesque route makes the rider first focus on smoothness of the road as an effort to ride with speed, to ride properly with “a flow”, but then changes to a focus on landscape, asking in his mind “Am I really riding in Lapland?”. He feels he changes focus consciously: locates himself in to the narratives of Lapland landscape. Instead of just riding, he becomes to reflect the route. This lowering of speed can also be a strategic decision in order to reach finish, which after 200 kms can become really hard. All this suggests how one needs to have sense of control over riding. For this rider, “nature” now forms a cycling landscape, a place to ride.

2 Newcomers count as much as half of the riders. Veterans of the ride don’t have number tags on their backs. Instead they use name tags with their first names written on them.
However, an additional tool for analysing sense of route is the bodily data many cyclists gather. This can suggest that lower speed is a result of the body shaping your perception of environment, of elements and situations, and thus the affectual makes you prioritize perception differently. The choice of how you ride might not be a conscious move, but rather a thing that happens, as between senses and environment. The bodily data suggests that even after slowing down, the heart rate of the rider does not slow down, but stays on high, which is a clear sign of exhaustion. Thus, rather than a conscious decision, “not to miss the landscape”, or strategic survival, what was at stake was also the changing perception of body en-route, allowing the elements of nature now came at you and formed the route to be remembered as a specific location. You felt as in place, although still riding pretty fast.

What this also means is that at the finish, after the 250 km ride, the hills in the ski resort, which looks ugly brownish during the summer, as part of the sensed route becomes filled with ingredients and meaning other than some aesthetic or environmentalist ones. The route has taken on it a specific sense of being – and understanding. The rider seems to understand the brownish hill now as a place for people, of culture, enabling people to live there, in place. This suggests how the intentionality of riding easily escapes out of sight, the elements coming at you and also forming the sense of route.

Any movement, such as travelling, means also a loss of subjectivity due to restrictions but in case of cycling, when the body takes over and the elements, the affects that take over the sense of route, suggesting riding as a different way of sensing environment due to the closeness of elements, perhaps also as a kind experience of ontological security (Frykman 2012, 87). Here the boundary between nature and culture. A cyclist, is like a borderlander, a “liminal being” who adopts skills of movement which can require effort to learn, but also become invisible. In a landscape that is not only unfamiliar but “un-usual”, the elements can extend experience to another level, as being lost in movement.

On the second day of riding the Marathon riders, riding in groups again, actually come to cross the Finnish-Swedish border for the first time. So far they had followed the Finnish-Swedish border but the only point it had been discussed was at the start where the “mountains on the Swedish side” still had snow. Now the riders come to agricultural and inhabited regions where diverse and effortless cross-border movement has defined the cross-border region through decades. When the long-distance marathon cyclists approach these inhabited regions of the border area the collective (of moving bodies) seems to break up again. So far the border had been invisible in the event, but now it forces itself through the group.  

In this region the local sense of border is attached to a local symbol, the border river. Across this border local everyday border crossing take place without noting the border. The borderline runs through a local town-border square next to a shopping mall and even the local bus station is

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3 Any inquiries about whether we ride the “Swedish” or “Finnish” side seemed irrelevant for the organizers. It seemed a relevant question due to rumours of road constuctions across the border and my own earlier experience of heavy traffic on the Finnish side close to Tornio (Fieldnotes 6/15).
situated only on the Swedish side of the urban area. This means that for the local riders this border crossing means the ride gets a character of everydayness. What is significant is that for local riders the border crossing does not mean going abroad, but rather to a local cross-border region defined by its borderlessness. Things that look different don’t change their sense of route. Differences across the border include, for example, the still surviving buildings from the times before Second World War which are well-kept and marked with signs bygdegård (as a rustic site of specific value).

Important to note here is that local riders, or local event organizers, do not see this riding as reflecting regional heritage as such, that is, the common narratives of this cross-border as a region of the Meänmaa heritage and the specific Finnish dialect spoken here across borders. Instead, local riders connect with a sense of border, the river as a route itself. For them, the border bridge does not differentiate between banks, but allows the riding, of doing this river as a symbol of localness: local riders ride the river rather than cross a border. Importantly, the river provides also the intensities important for good riding, “floating” with the light weight road bike, faster than the river. As a result, also the riding style in the group changes (ref data): focus is put on the effort and speed. There seems to be a strong correlation between seeing and feeling the river. Riders emphasize the scenery to the river which can be seen from the “Kingdom of Sweden” better (Fieldnotes 7/15). In a way, the sense of border coincides with sense of route forming a border as coherent local system of classification. The river-border is as a thing that enables connection with the area.

What happens among the Marathon riders is that the sense of collective gives room for diversity of the group. There is no conscious intention to differentiate between locals and others among the riders, but this is just what happens as there is communication, via different senses, between cyclists and things around them. A sense of border suggests the location of the person, but when the person is on the move, this location is conditioned by the route.

As we look at the other (Finnish) riders in the group, especially the newcomers, they sense borders as passages and markers of differences. So far the group ride had been a matter of moving together including only minor interaction between the group and the environment but now many riders feel like Finns riding in Sweden. After crossing the bridge these riders start to see the different materiality and language (signs manifesting “Det goda livet”, good life on the Swedish side) and they also imagine they hear even dogs bark on the side of the road in Swedish: “Don’t bark at us, we don’t understand Swedish” (FN 7/15). They seem to ride into a new territory filled with markers of differences, a route filled with signs of Swedishness.

For those who are not locals, the border river is just nature as border, not a matter of sensing and locating oneself in a local region. As on the first day of the ride, nature now creates a sense of border but also provides a different location. Riders see and imagine differences in the cultural environment. Some of these are visible such as the old architecture in villages is missing on the

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4 This Meänmaa identification has been seen as more important in Ylitornio than in Tornio.
Finnish side of the border due to past wars. Also for the local riders, who are used to simply riding the border river, the focus on differences that occurs among non-locals, makes also them to communicate their sense of route. The group not only rides faster but starts to talk about cross-border heritage, this Meänmaa heritage. As a result, also locals seem to start to rely on the narratives of the region rather than the doing of the region as riders, the way they had become so accustomed to do it.

So, why borders as routes? People in borderlands adopt specific skills, capabilities and subjectivity which tend to make the border invisible. The cyclists suggest movement, in terms of routes, not only as a specific sense of being but a way of relocating borders. Borders can be seen as part of the throwntogetherness, the material and imaginative aspect of sensing location. And this happens in terms of doing where subjectivity and reflection might have less meaning than the power of (bodily) movement with its potential for changes and abruptions. Sense of route becomes a means for understanding the intentionality of moving, the ways of moving with different level of control, as suited to situations and elements.

The sense of route is affected by bodies, things, technologies, images and the elements. This means that also sense of border diversifies as does the knowledge it is based on. Borders as routes are different as ways of categorizing and classifying differences. Sense of border becomes affected by the intensities of experience, and the question of “being there” means increasingly different answers to the question of “being where and how” - and its relevance altogether. Location depends on different elements and ways of moving, even if movement from the outside looks very similar, a road cyclist pedalling the bike. The bicycle makes things visible for the perceivers, and can also make things objects to be reflected and objects to be done.

The significant difference is formed between what is sensed as mobile or static. Thus also sense of border can relate to nature which offer different elements for the route (rivers, islands, sea, forest) and culture (buildings, heritage, others, narratives, representations). The experience of movement is formed as the “things” people “move with” contribute in their way of being en-route. Movement affects perception of body and ways of prioritizing perception, but it also seems that borders with bicycles exist in a different way than as seen from a more static point of view.

Among Marathon riders also local riders become to reflect about heritage, the thing they are used to do by simply riding. In other words, heritage becomes active part of forming the sense of route but a more intense way to sense a border for them is, however, the way they can do the border by riding it. This “sense of border en-route” type of throwntogetherness not only differs from common narratives about borders or landscapes, but it also explains how Marathon ride felt so different from any other ride I had done. The ride involved involved different sense of border (nature/culture as well) and suggested what is self-evident for people, such their sense of border, and the role of confrontations and abruptions borders are, suggesting moving as a different way of

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5 The retreating German soldiers adopted here the tactic of burning the land, thus destroying most of the buildings on the Finnish side of the border. Escaping Finns could see their homes burned down from the other side of the river.
locating oneself. It is a specific feeling when you feel that different senses of borders move with you.

As a final point to make, I suggest we extend this sense of border in understanding reactions to asylum seekers. 25 000 arrived to Finland in 2015, mainly across the same border I have discussed today. This “flow” of people from Iraq and Syria, was an event very hard to imagine before it happened. It caused protests at the borderline, people said borders were broken and that European borders need to be closed. This looks like a simple argument, adopting a non-indexical idea of border, but as I see it, we need to also look at how the route and protests were done. As I see it, this also suggests the same things I looked at, that is, how borders as routes are something really hard to get a grip of. And this is a matter of research as well as everyday life contexts.

It is very easy to see Finland basically as an island in terms of its borders and routes to Europe. In 2015, the asylum seekers reached the Finnish-Swedish border using buses and trains across Sweden. Here they simply walked across the border. Those people who protested against open borders obviously were not interested of borders as routes: as some said it, they saw these “young dark, Islam, men just walk across borders”, “aimlessly wandering around, uncontrolled” (similarly as asylum seekers actually did bicycles at the eastern border). What seems to cause most anxiety was the perceived mismatch between the intentionality of moving and the means asylum seekers were able to cross borders.

Picture 2. The local Finnish-Swedish border monument consists of a water pool at a town square located exactly on the borderline. Here seen from the Finnish side. Border as a fence is nonexistent, but also the local joint bus station of Swedish Haparanda and Finnish Tornio, is actually now located on the Swedish side of the border, next to the IKEA. Photo: K. Kiiiskinen
Further confrontation emerged when the protesters created a border, a wall of bodies at the border. They stood in a row blocking one of the two main roads crossing the border line, next to IKEA, local bus station and shopping center. Unintentionally, with their static bodies they also seemed to oppose the local, everyday sense of border. As it then turned out, the asylum seekers walking or traveling the border were not a local problem, but now the protesters were. They were not only creating a wrong “image” of the region, but also went against local sense of border in a more profound way, as suggested by the riders ways of doing the river-border.

Sense of route has specific power which does not reveal itself in verbal and reflective accounts, but rather at the breaking points and traceable routes for the ethnographer of phenomena. Perhaps these can be understood as creating new locations, senses of living at border. A further point to make therefore is that we need to recognize how European borders become constantly realized by its citizens, making perhaps the idea of Europe more real, even if in the invisible. Importantly also borders do seem to add an aspect of “true” and personally engaging relation with the environment as routes. Borders as routes are a source of friction. The policies should be aware of this power of everyday life although it is also a two edged sword since the invisible borders, become visible when different senses of borders become confronted.

Literature


http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se