

REVIEW ARTICLES

ASPECTS OF LIMINALITY IN KNUT ERIK JENSEN'S *STELLA POLARIS* (1993)



Revisiting contingent pasts in Stella Polaris (image courtesy Knut Erik Jensen).

Introduction

This review article provides an analysis of Knut Erik Jensen's feature film *Stella Polaris* (Norway 1993) and shows how it relates to various forms of liminality. Firstly, I argue that Jensen's film articulates an understanding of Norway's northernmost county of Finnmark as a liminal, rather than marginal location. Secondly, I argue that *Stella Polaris* presents history as a constantly changing contingent product of various and often competing individual memories, negotiated on elusive liminal grounds in-between the past and future, and thirdly, I direct attention to Jensen's peculiar aesthetics which activate the liminal transitory spaces between shots, and between image and sound, in order to get its message across.

Knud Erik Jensen's *Stella Polaris* and liminality as a frame for analysis

Following a long series of documentary movies, *Stella Polaris* was Jensen's first feature film. It can probably be best described as a constellation of memory fragments pertaining to life in a northern Norwegian fishing village over a period of 50 years. It is a peculiar film in many ways, for instance without voice or dialogue; a film that challenges the

audience into a constructive endeavor rather than employing explicit imagery to tie down reimaginative activities. Jensen's film is at once stunningly beautiful although at the same time deeply tragic, and can be seen as emblematic for the county of Finnmark and its most recent history. *Stella Polaris* has received both Norwegian and international film critics' awards.

I will now move on to the theoretical and border-related issues this paper addresses: Liminality in *Stella Polaris*. It seems appropriate to start with a clarification of what 'liminality' is. Liminality is derived from the Latin term *limen* that means 'threshold' (Saunders 2010: 55). This points to the fact that liminality has something to do with transitions, crossings, or locations in-between divided entities. Liminality refers to a 'third space' (Bhabha in Rutherford 1990). This third space not only divides, but has the inherent potential to present a productive, and inherently disruptive and subversive alternative to established frames, and the discrete entities these frames imply.

Liminality refers to a threshold that divides and at the same time interconnects. With necessity, it implies the presence of something on each side of the permeable border that has to be taken into account, and that can possibly be subverted by an alternative constituted by an in-between. In particular, I will look closer at aspects of liminality in Knut Erik Jensen's *Stella Polaris*, focusing on political, temporal, and aesthetic aspects of liminality.

Political liminalities: Finnmark as marginal location or liminal zone

The liminal is often contrasted with the marginal and it has been claimed that the liminal can even replace a concept such as the marginal.¹ I agree with the assertion that these two terms are intimately related, but intend to argue that they serve very distinct analytical purposes that carry different political implications.

Let us consider the county of Finnmark as a marginal zone, or as located on the margins of Norway. This implies that Finnmark is related to an implied centre (such as Oslo) and therefore defined in implicit relation to this centre alone. To be situated on the margins of something means to be located near a border, far away from the centre. At the same time, however, what lies beyond that border remains outside the scope of the concept.

This said, marginality has been (and in my opinion still is) an important concept for a critical analysis of our various present conditions. It allows us, for instance, to focus on whose voices are heard in public discourse, whose life experiences are considered relevant, and whose interests matter in politics. However, to treat Finnmark as a marginal zone excludes any focus on what lies beyond, and in the case of Finnmark's history and the various identities this history has shaped and continues to shape, this *beyond* acquires a high significance that is precisely addressed in the feature films by Knut Erik Jensen.² The (usually unaccounted) beyond is the former Soviet Union located on the other side of the border. To include this ultimately constitutive 'other', necessitates a different conceptual focus: Finnmark as a liminal zone of contact and negotiation in-between two entities, rather than a location on the margins of Norway.

A liminal perspective on Finnmark and its history allows for a focus on the various cross-border experiences that are constitutive of the identities of local populations. These range from trading contacts and joint hunting expeditions to a close cooperation against a common enemy during the Second World War. It allows us also to problematise the unequivocal allegiance of the Norwegian state to the USA and NATO (including West Germany) in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. This allegiance forced many inhabitants of Finnmark to suddenly perceive their former allies and indeed liberators beyond the border as sinister, threatening beings on the verge of overrunning the country. As such, this forced them to embrace their former enemies, the Germans, as close associates.

In including focus on the 'other', liminality allows us to catch sight of various forms of othering that prove constitutive of not only official Norwegian cold war discourse and identities, but indeed of any war discourse. To exclude access to the other beyond the border is a precondition for the justification of warfare and other forms of massive intergroup violence (Pötzsch 2010). As such, liminality allows us to trace individual and local ways of negotiating or avoiding such exclusive political frames. It is precisely the inclusion of a Soviet-Russian beyond in his local, historical perspective that characterises Knut Erik Jensen's films as liminal in a historical and political sense. It is also within this focus on liminality (which includes the often constitutively excluded other) that the most immediate political thrust of his work is to be found.

In Knut Erik Jensen's films, Finnmark is brought to emerge as an independent entity, a third space, an alternative in between two or more opposing structures. The subversive potential of this in-between position is enacted in and through the everyday practices and experiences of its population. *Stella Polaris* articulates these experiences and practices, and thereby questions and undermines the cold war politics of polarity and exclusion, which for a long time narrowly framed the lives of people in the North and elsewhere, and continues to do so in historical discourse.

Temporal liminalities: The pasts and their presences

I have argued that Knut Erik Jensen's films present Finnmark as a liminal zone of contact and negotiation – a third space, rather than a neatly bounded location at the margins of Norway. However, his film *Stella Polaris* does not simply line up a series of allegedly objective historical 'facts' and dramatise these in a linear narrative in order to get his message across. Rather, the director presents contingent reconstructions that are based on fleeting, changing, and inherently erratic individual memories and dreams, rather than so-called historical facts. As a consequence, the past can never be ultimately grasped and this is particularly well executed in *Stella Polaris*. The film does not present the successful unearthing of a particular historical event that can then be objectified as History with a capital 'H', nor can it be seen to authoritatively assert a subversive counter-History.

One of the initial sequences of Jensen's film attests to this particular practice of historiography. The camera follows a young woman dressed in white who walks barefoot through the relicts of a northern Norwegian coastal fishing village. The woman moves slowly and seems startled as if not quite sure where she is or how she got there. The

camera repeatedly follows her gaze through windows without glass into spaces that apparently have been abandoned for years. These shots are intercut with short sequences showing past active life in the same buildings. As the woman approaches a derelict house and looks inside, the camera suddenly captures couples dancing inside. The lens moves into the room and focuses on a woman that resembles the implied onlooker outside. The reverse shot indicating the gaze of the woman inside then reveals the onlooker to be a little girl – the same girl that briefly told the ‘sleepwalking’ woman to wake up in an earlier scene that initiated the whole sequence. The woman, who constitutes the narrative’s main protagonist, appears like a ghostly apparition, rather than a realistic character in a historical reenactment. This way Jensen directs attention to the fleeting nature of the past, the recurrence of which is dependent on the often erratic and contradictory memories and dreamlike recollections of individuals.

Stella Polaris enables a view of the present as being an ultimately liminal zone in-between an elusive past and an ever-changing, contingent future. What we at any point in time believe to be our collective or individual past can and always will be, challenged by new voices and perspectives, emanating from an endless source of past experiences. As such, also our historically constituted identities appear as inherently context-dependent and negotiable. They are constituted in a liminal sphere that is situated in-between past and future. This way these identities acquire an indistinct and almost spectral nature.

Does this imply that everything goes? Can we simply construct the history we want? I would argue against this. Identity constructs are contingent, not arbitrary. This means they can never be ultimately fixed in an objective and true form, but always remain fleeting and constantly changing. At the same time, however, all these collective and individual histories and stories are dependent upon past events, on something that actually happened in one way or another. This ‘something’ frames what we remember through traces in the landscape, such as ruins, abandoned villages, empty storage buildings, overgrown roads, and traces on human bodies and minds such as scars, memories, or recurrent traumatic flashbacks. These serve as testimonies of a past that ultimately recedes, but also remains present as a frame for articulations concerning it. *Stella Polaris* does not tell us that ‘this or that actually happened in precisely that way’. The film shows traces of a past that we have to bring together ourselves. Instead of imaging the past, we are forced to constantly and creatively reimagine it. Therefore the audience becomes an active constituent of the film’s meaning rather than a passive consumer. This focus on the constant negotiation of traces of a past in the present makes *Stella Polaris* a liminal film both conceptually and in a temporal sense.

Aesthetic liminalities: The zone between shots and between image and sound

In his films, Knut Erik Jensen develops a peculiar aesthetic that highly values transitions between shots and that actively juxtaposes the visual with the audible – image and sound. It can be argued that this peculiar aesthetic values an in-between and can therefore be termed as a liminal aesthetic.³

Those who have seen *Stella Polaris* might have noticed that when watching the film, that sound, music, and image do not always correspond. Often we hear what we have not yet seen, or we see something that does not fit with what we hear. At other occasions, audience expectations regarding transitions between shots are frustrated as, for example, in an early scene of *Stella Polaris* where a long tracking shot follows the walk of a woman through a derelict urban environment. Suddenly, the protagonist turns to the right and disappears from view while the camera continues straight ahead with exactly the same speed and trajectory. This defamiliarisation startles the viewer and demands an active engagement with the textual cues delivered by the film.

By such means as those described above, Jensen achieves an effect of estrangement. The transparency of the cinematic image is successfully challenged and spectators are constantly asked to actively negotiate what may appear to them as contradictory, strange, or illogical. As a result, active searches for meaning are facilitated and a consumerist engagement is prevented. Knut Erik Jensen's spectator does not enter the cinema to relax or forget, but to engage what the director refers to as "audio-visual riddles" that create a form of "fertile confusion" (Pöttsch 2012: 158–159). The spectator is not invited to relax and enjoy spectacular cinematic illusion-making, but is challenged to engage in active and contingent reconstructions on the basis of the cues and indices provided by Jensen's peculiar style. *Stella Polaris* exhibits a liminal aesthetic that treasures the indistinct transitional spaces between shots and between image and sound, and this way invites a reception that corresponds with the political and temporal liminalities characteristic of Jensen's films.

Conclusion

Jensen's first feature film *Stella Polaris* provides a new perspective on Norway's northernmost county Finnmark, its inhabitants, and recent history. In applying a peculiar aesthetic that constantly dislodges dominant ideas or frames for reception with reference to an inherently subversive in-between, his film not only challenges received political understandings and historical imageries, but also the engrained traditions and spectatorial positions conveniently fed and reinforced in and through mainstream filmmaking. As such, *Stella Polaris* questions, challenges, and potentially subverts borders and barriers in political, historical, and aesthetic registers.

Holger Pöttsch

Notes

¹ For a discussion regarding the relationship between 'the marginal' and 'the liminal' see, for instance, Aguirre & Quance & Sutton 2000.

² Knut Erik Jensen had worked on similar issues before. In his documentary series *Finnmark mellom øst og vest* [Finnmark between East and West] that aired on Norwegian television in 1986, Jensen presented Norwegian war and post-war history from a distinctly northern point of view. Iversen (2001) writes that in this series Jensen

adopts a “perspective from the margins” (209) and engages in “identity work” that articulates the historical experiences and memories of local inhabitants (208; author’s translations). Iversen, however, does not explore possible liminal aspects of Jensen’s documentaries. Norwegian original reads “identitetsarbeid” and “utkantperspektiv”.

- ³ For a different approach to the aesthetics of *Stella Polaris* see Bruun Vaage (2004), who terms the film “a cinematic poem that has been written with sensual means” (8; author’s translation). According to her, Jensen’s style is particularly well suited to elicit an embodied experience that remains independent of traditional narrative structure, and that therefore invites for an associative production of meaning. Norwegian original reads: “*Stella Polaris* er et filmdikt som er skrevet med sanselige virkemidler”.

References

- Aguirre, Manuel & Quance, Roberta & Sutton, Phillip C. 2000. *Margins and Thresholds. An Enquiry into the Concept of Liminality in Text Studies*. Madrid: The Gateway Press.
- Bruun Vaage, Margrethe 2004. Sansning, tenkning, teknologi: Hvordan fungerer ‘Stella Polaris’? [Sensing, Thinking, Technology: How does ‘Stella Polaris’ Work?] *Norsk Medietidsskrift*, Vol. 11(1), pp. 6–23.
- Iversen, Gunnar 2001. “Folkets erfaring: Om Knut Erik Jensens fjernsynserie ‘Finnmark mellom øst og vest’.” [Experiences of the People: On Knut Erik Jensen’s Television Series ‘Finnmark between East and West’.] In: Sara Brinch & Gunnar Iversen (eds.) *Virkelighetsbilder: Norsk dokumentarfilm gjennom hundre år*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 203–218.
- Pöttsch, Holger 2010. Challenging the Border as Barrier: Liminality in Terrence Malick’s ‘The Thin Red Line’. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 25(1), pp. 67–80.
- Pöttsch, Holger 2012. Film som uløst gate: En samtale med Knut Erik Jensen. [Film as Unresolved Riddle: A Conversation with Knut Erik Jensen.] In: Ingeborg Breines & Viggo Rossvær & Audun Øfsti (eds.) *Virkeligheten sett gjennom kunstnerøyne*. Stamsund: Orkana Akademisk, pp. 144–161.
- Rutherford, Jonathan 1990. The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha. In: Jonathan Rutherford (ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 207–221.
- Saunders, Timothy 2010. Roman Borders and Contemporary Cultural Criticism. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 25(1), pp. 51–58, doi:10.1080/08865655.2010.9695750.