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Ida Börjel and the Politics of Form

Over the last couple of decades, there has been a lot of 'crying wolf' going on, over crises in the arts and the humanities, as well as in culture and literature generally. Whenever dramatic changes take place on an infra-structural level, we have a tendency to see this as a crisis and, as such, a quite useful one. In this paper, I will employ the term 'crisis' quite neutrally, describing the chaotic turmoil which is more or less integral in periods of great infra-structural change – periods between an old system of order, and a new one.

The particular crisis that interests me here has to do with *poetry*, and the period of crisis has, in my understanding, been going on since the middle of the 20th century. This paper could perhaps be seen as a polemic one, struggling to establish a new infrastructure for poetry. But my claims are lower than this, I am merely suggesting (tentatively) one of many new ways of filling the container we still call 'poetry' with somewhat new content (it is after all a quite handy – not to mention well-established – container!).

The background for my idea of a crisis in poetry comes from the likes of Caroline Bayard, Steve McCaffery, and Marjorie Perloff,[1] but it also has to do with the well-known shift in artistic and scholarly focus from poetry to prose, when modernism turned into post-modernism. Though *modernist poetry* and *post-modernist prose* seem to be the two preferred combinations, *modernist prose* has admittedly had its fair share of examinations. *Post-modernist poetry*, however, is still lacking in scholarly

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[1] These three names are all loosely associated with the North American poetry which flourished mainly during the 1970's and the 1980's, under banners like 'concretism', 'constructivism', 'Toronto Research Group', and 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E', artistic movements which could all be described as responses to a mid-century crisis of poetic practice. The particular works I am referring to are Bayard's *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec*, Toronto, Buffalo & London: Univ. Of Toronto Press, 1989; McCaffery's *North of Intention. Critical Writings 1973-1986*, New York: Roof Books, 1986; and Perloff's *Radical Artifice. Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991 & *Poetry On & Off the Page. Essays for Emergent Occasions*, Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1998.

attention. I will not dwell on whether these notable facts derive from a stronger connection between prose and post-modernism, and poetry and modernism, respectively, or whether there are other reasons. I will however attempt to 'theoreticise' a little bit over contemporary poetry, from perspectives that could very well be labeled post-modernist. And I will use one recent poetic touchstone in this discourse: Swedish poet Ida Börjel's 2004 debut poetry-book *Sond* [Eng. *Probe*].

I will use three theorists (Jacques Rancière, Marjorie Perloff, and Jean-Jacques Lecercle) whose ideas are quite different from one another's, at least in their focal points. However, they all share a common post-modernist ancestry, and they share yet another common trait: all three work very well with poetic practices like Ida Börjel's:

Jacques Rancière has, in his philosophy, been linking aesthetic practice to politics, in a way which incorporates form. He is an indisputable authority in the area. In an introductory article on Rancière's literature-concept, Christina Kullberg speaks about his basic concept of "polis" in relation to "governing itself", and "politics" as a "heterogeneous force" which happens when "two or more partitions of the sensual oppose each other, when someone rebels against polis, and disturbs its temporal and spatial partition" – these concepts are the core of his theoretical philosophy. I will touch upon his more historically focused thinking later in this paper. Kullberg also speaks of Rancière's idea of how literature (in his, quite narrow, sense) has to be aware of its own *aporia* (another central aspect of his theory), and thus has to attempt to transform,

> […] into a language which does not look like a language [---]. This means to in various ways try to write literature into life by opposing its own expression [---]. The demand for representation is altered, and fiction no longer seen as telling a story, lying, or pretending. It is about inventing a narrative structure that can make dumb things talk. The words animate the objects, breathes life into them, and evokes their inherent power of

> speech. It is the sounds, the musicality, and the rhythm that make
> literature into a form of life, not the words' referential capacity.[2]

However, no matter how much of an authority Rancière is on the field of politics and literature, he has not approached contemporary poetry on a wider scale. I have however found his ideas fruitful in this field as well. And this is where Marjorie Perloff comes into the picture; a theorist who has made late 20th century poetry her turf, who can thus complement Rancière with the more media-specific perspectives. She has written a vast number of interesting books and articles, but I will first of all use her ideas of what has followed "after free verse", and how poetry has handled the insight that free verse was anything but 'free'. The third theoretical perspective I will apply is Jean-Jacques Lecercle's. He is primarily a linguist, but his ideas of e.g. what he has called "the remainder of language" prove to be a highly illustrative model for how language behaves critically, i.e. politically, in relation to its given form, to its conventions and rules. First of all his model is very illustrative, and thus easily applied. His theories also have a strong political undertone, as seen e.g. in the choice of titles for his books *The Violence of Language* and *The Force of Language*. This undertone (which definitely has a Freudian timbre) has to do with what happens when language tries to shut out constitutive parts of itself, how these parts tend to come back with a 'vengeance'.

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I have to admit that my theoretical perspective is still in the mould. I am currently trying to put together a complex of different theories that can be useful in describing how poetry has responded to the 'crisis' mentioned above. So far, the three theorists just mentioned have proven quite useful. I am, however, open for new perspectives

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[2] Christina Kullberg, "Litteraturens genealogi", *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap*, 2007: 1-2, p 81.
 My translation.

and theories that might assist me, as well as for critique of my manner of employing the three theories chosen so far.

Why Politics?

A few months ago, when I was preparing a lecture on a topic related to the one of this paper, I started writing (in Swedish) "Jämför detta med Lecercles tankar om att…". However, the last two words, "om att" (translating into something like "about the fact that…"), were *automatically* 'corrected' into "o matt".

This happened because my word processor software obviously identified my writing as 'English', though it was actually 'Swedish'. And the English version obviously did consider "o matt" to be much better English than "om att".

This example of how the medium – in this case the word processor software – corrects, censors, or governs our writing does immediately pose a number of intriguing questions: why was my Swedish identified as English; who decided that "o matt" is great English, and according to what criteria; who gave this someone carte blanche to go through with this 'auto-corrective'? In short, the incident I have just described identifies a system of conventions or rules (or even 'codes' in this particular case), that governs my writing, and others'.

However, the two words "o matt" means something in Swedish too. Translated into English, these two words mean something like "o feeble", a phrase which (esp. in capital letters: "O Feeble") could very well be the opening of any poem, written between late in the 18th and the middle of the 20th century. So, what basically happened was that a quite neutral phrase within a lecture on, amongst other things, *the oppressing conventions of a romanticist/modernist poetics* was altered by my word processor software into a phrase which is *typical for that particular oppressing poetics*.

Introducing Lecercle: The Remainder

When considering the topic of my lecture, I thought this almost too good, and too ironic, to be true. But then my thoughts immediately turned to Jean-Jacques Lecercle, who was mentioned in the very sentence in which my word processor assaulted me. The major concept of his 1990 book *The Violence of Language* is something which he labels "the remainder of language".

> The main interest of my concept of the remainder is that it stresses the fact that, when a rule of syntax is broken, the result is still linguistically coherent, i.e. intelligible, and that, therefore, the sentence is a locus of the subject's expressive freedom.[3]

Lecercle's ideas on the left out parts of language (or at least, potential language) which he calls "the remainder" situates itself within a tradition of the Heideggerian "language speaks", or, as Lecercle has said himself: "[i]t sought to name the return, within language, of the repressed social body that shatters the self-centred ideality of the linguistic 'system'".[4] These ideas of Lecercle's have proven effective when applied not specifically as linguistic tools primarily, but also as tools for literary analysis, as attempted by e.g. Fredrik Hertzberg and myself.[5]

Introducing Börjel: *Sond*

Ida Börjel's debut book *Sond* was released in 2004. It consists of 96 pages, divided into seven main suites, and an appended epilogue written by fellow poet Ulf Karl Olov Nilsson. This epilogue is kept separate from the main part of the book by a

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[3] Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, London & N.Y.: Routledge, 1990, p 30.

[4] Jean-Jacques Lecercle & Denise Riley, *The Force of Language*, Basingstoke & N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p 158.

[5] Fredrik Hertzberg, *Moving Materialities. On Poetic Materiality and Translation, with Special Reference to Gunnar Björling's Poetry*, Åbo: Åbo Akademi Univ. Press, 2002, pp 46-49; Johan Alfredsson, *"Tro mig på min ort" – oöversättligheten som tematiskt komplex i Bengt Emil Johnsons poesi 1973-1982*, Hägersten: Förlaget Holzweg, 2010, pp 109-111.

couple of pages with pictures of cylinders, pipes, or possibly probes (these pictures are also on the cover of the book, somewhat modified. In my analysis I will focus on the first two suites of the book, entitled "Moderkarta" [Eng. "Mother Map"] and "Varför vi går i cirkel när vi är vilse" [Eng. "Why we go in circles when we are lost"].

Two things which could immediately be connected to Lecercle's remainder-concept are the map- and the lost-aspects of the two suites. Lecercle claims that his theory of the remainder is more chaotic than orderly, but he still does identify six traits which describes the remainder. I will quote them here, as a general background for the more specific discussions which will follow:

> [1] First, rules of grammar are comparable not to the laws of physics, but rather to frontiers. [2] Second, what lies on the other side of the frontier is not beyond the pale. There is no chaos out there, only parts of language that are no longer or not yet acceptable – but are potentially acceptable. [3] Third, frontiers, although they are perceived by the speaker as forming a system, are in fact arbitrary and changeable [---]. [4] Fourth, the paradox of metalanguage indicates that a remainder is not a sign of temporary shortcomings in the theory, but a constitutive part of language. [5] Fifth, learning a language is not a Platonist, cum Cartesian recalling and activating of innate ideas; rather, it is like exploring a territory. [6] Sixth, the remainder is as constitutive as the Freudian unconscious; like it, it is always threatening to return in various guises. (Lecercle 1990: 25)

Lecercle also employs the 'map' as a metaphor for how language must always be seen as a simplified representation of reality ("the only truly exact map would be on a scale of 1:1" (Lecercle 1990: 18)). Though something of a semiotic commonplace, this is interesting in relation to how Börjel uses the map in analogy with language, as well as with the human body. She further raises a number of epistemological issues from this representational aspect of the map, by stating how the two-dimensional nature of a map can never be even close to equivalent to the three-dimensional nature of the earth.

> […] Kartan innesluter alltid en bristande sanning, sträckt eller skrynklig mellan händerna. Den geometriska lögnen föregås av valet var det skall komma att brista. […].

> [[…] The map always contains a insufficient truth, stretched or wrinkled between the hands. The geometrical lie is preceded by the choice of where it will break […]] [6]

I would, however, say that Börjel's creation of analogies between language/reality and map/earth never really becomes metaphorical, since the hierarchical relationship between tenor and vehicle is hardly ever there in her writing. And this is an vital change in respect to the e.g. modernist poetics of imagery. Another example to prove this point is the title of the first suite: "Mother Map". The two parts of this title, "mother" and "map", are later in the suite used both as tenors and as vehicles. A double-bind is established between the two. And the very refusal itself to establish hierarchies between them creates a balanced relation, shedding light upon certain analogies between them:

> En karta visar, liksom den nedstigande moder vi
> betraktar, följande: form, omfattning, avstånd och
> riktning.

> [A map shows, as does the descendent mother we
> are studying, the following: form, extent, distance, and
> direction] [7]

Another aspect which indicates an analogy between the two is the almost orthographical aspect of the title "Mother Map", since the Swedish original is a neologism, "Moderkarta", a word which sounds quite like "Moderkaka" [Eng. "Placenta"]. What almost looks like a misspelling creates a relationship between the mother's body as nurturer, and the space represented by a map, i.e. physical space, e.g. the earth itself. By use of what could be labelled as "the remainder of language" – in this case the phonetic relationship between the semantically non-related words "kaka" [cake] and "karta" [map] – an analogy is formed between the maternal body and the

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[6] Ida Börjel, *Sond*, Göteborg: OEI Editör, 2001, p 9. *Translation mine.*
[7] Ida Börjel, *Sond*, p 9. *Translation mine.*

earth. This analogy is anything but new (Cf. Gaia/Mother Earth etc.), but it is *established anew*, this time from a different angle. An angle which also says something new about this ancient mythological relationship. Perhaps something new, for a new time? And, not least, it brings language into the relationship, as a third part. One of the things that happens in this suite is thus that body/earth/language are all brought together, as if to see what they can say about each other. What happens if you say that both language, mother and map are characterised (phenomenologically) by "form, extent, distance and direction"?

And finally, I mentioned the move away from the metaphor's hierarchy between tenor and vehicle; the transformation from the conventional (even 'dead') metaphor "moderkaka" to the much more blurred "moderkarta" is yet another example of this shift, not only from metaphor to analogy, but also from representation to experience, a shift which I will return to shortly, in relation to Perloff's theories.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

I will not go headlong into Perloff's and Rancière's theories; there is no time for that. But I will use certain terms and contexts in order to make better use of Lecercle's linguistically based ideas within the realm of literature.

Their ideas are in many ways compatible, not least (as mentioned above) in relation to the kind of political post-modernist meta-poetry with which Ida Börjel is associated. There is a loosely connected group of Swedish poets sometimes called "language materialists", whose poetry has been linked to certain political aspects of language (Ida Börjel could be seen as *more or less* associated with this group). One of these poets, Lars-Mikael Raattamaa, has frequently compared today's language conventions to e.g. the racist values which were so dominant in Swedish culture during the 19th and the early 20th century; Raattamaa is also an architect, and has

frequently spoken in favour of the city planning concept of 'sprawl', a specific kind of de-centralisation, which according to him would result in a democratisation of the city. So, the creation of analogies between different kinds of cultural and natural activities is something that not only Börjel is occupied with, within this 'group'. Raattamaa's poetry, and that of his fellow 'language materialists', can in many respects be seen as an assault upon values imbedded in the conventions of language, and literature (Cf. Rancière's ideas of 'polis' as 'governing', and 'the political' as 'heterogeneous').

Introducing Perloff: After Free Verse

Marjorie Perloff is one of few scholars who has attempted to create theory within the force-field between poetry and post-modernism.[8] I will refer mainly to ideas that she developed in the 1980's, in the two essays "After Free Verse: the New Non-Linear Poetries" and "Lucent and Inescapable Rhythms: Metrical Choice and Historical Formation", where she argues that 'free' verse was never free, and further develops a number of ideas on how poets have responded to this insight. When Perloff thus talks about what has come "after free verse" she claims that the poetry which has superseded free verse aesthetics is coloured by the insight that "[…] every image, event, speech, or citation can be construed as an 'afterthought' or 'aftershock' of something that has always already occurred" (Perloff 1998: 165). This new "poetics of non-linearity or post-linearity" becomes (with a term that Perloff borrows from Steve McCaffery) "'an experience in language rather than a representation by it'" (Perloff 1998: 166 & McCaffery 1986: 24).

This *experiential* aspect of language is something which is characteristic for Börjel's writing, especially when contrasted against *representation* (as my earlier analysis

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[8] A couple of other notable examples are Joseph M. Conte's *Unending Design: The Forms of Post-Modern Poetry*, Ithaca & London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991 & Brian McHale's *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole. Postmodernist Long Poems*, Tuscaloosa & London: The Univ. Of Alabama Press, 2004.

showed). The second suite of *Sond* is another good example of this. This suite consists of a number of seemingly transcribed phone calls, where various authorities are called upon for expertise when it comes to why we tend to go in circles when we are lost.[9] The responses of these authoritaties are seemingly transcribed directly onto the page, juxtaposed paratactically without any given hierarchy.

Typographically these transcriptions are combined on the page with lexicographical entries of words that have various kinds of connections (not only semantically and etymologically) to the words "vilse" ["lost"] or "var" ["where"]. After a few pages it becomes obvious how these entries tend to refer more and more to each other, how the lines of argument slowly turn circular, in a manner which implicitly suggests language as a secluded vessel – as a self-referential, closed system. This way of assembling what could be referred to as "found objects" is a common feature in Börjel's work.[10] What happens in this particular case, though, is that the circular argumentation of the secluded language becomes analogous to the question about why people who have gone astray tend to go in circles. Once again, two different parameters of Börjel's poetry highlight each other, creating similarities between, in this case, epistemological issues of language, and more ontologically related issues of how someone orientates herself in nature.

All these aspects could very well be described, in Perloff's words, as "an 'after-thought' or 'aftershock' of something that has always already occurred". Perloff's discussions on how poetry has moved away from "linearity" as its main trait, into a

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[9] These authorities are the following: the military, a hospital, an ethnologist, a neurologist, an orienteer, a compass manufacturer, someone called Johnny Nilsson (probably the well-known sports physiologist – though, ironically, there is also a legendary Swedish speed skater who goes by the same name – à propos going in circles…).

[10] Her second and third books consist to an even larger extent of this kind of 'found objects'. The second one, *Skåneradio*, from 2006, is made up of transcriptions from a local, right wing, radio station, where the listeners phone in to speak their minds. Her third book, *Konsumentköplagen: juris lyrik*, from 2008, contains large quotations from a particular Swedish law – "Konsumentköpslagen" – the law which governs the rights and obligations of the Swedish consumers.

place where the "experiential" is stressed as vital are certainly relevant in the case of Ida Börjel.

Another moment where Börjel's writing comes close to Perloff's ideas, is in the first suite, where she describes how a map, as well as a "descending mother" shows the following four traits: "form, extent, distance, and direction". Straight after this follows four texts bearing these four traits as their titles, four texts where the analogies between earth and mother are examined. The fourth one, "riktning" ["direction"], does stand out from the others in that it seems to go "against" the concept of "direction" (which is of course a bit self-ironic, since "against" is in itself a direction). It seems to suggest (this is a bit vague, however) that a circle is a much more adequate way of describing direction than an arrow is. This idiomatic way of employing language could also very well be described as *experiential*, rather than *representational*.

Introducing Rancière: Metapolitics

The background for Perloff's ideas in the two essays at hand has explicitly to do with the fall of free verse, and its simultaneity with the death of modernism. I would, once again, state that poetry has been looking for a new content ever since the mid 20th century, when the aristocratic aspects of modernism became an impossibility.

Whereas scholars like John Carey has suggested that modernism was a desperate attempt to cling to an aristocratic world-view (in a time when the "masses" became more and more learned) by creating hermetic and elitist art and literature, Jacques Rancière presents a more complex view on things.[11] His thoughts on the seemingly binary opposition between aristocratic-democratic in relation to the rise of modernism is intriguing, since he speaks somewhat paradoxically of e.g. Flaubert (seen as a

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[11] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia*, London: Faber, 1992.

representative for the new modernism or, more correctly, what Rancière calls the "aesthetic regime") as both aristocratic and democratic.[12] He says the following:

> […] there is no *one* politics of literature. Such a politics is at least double. The 'petrification' that the reactionary critics of the nineteenth century and the progressive critics of the twentieth together attacked the new literature for is, in reality, an interweaving of two logics. On the one hand, it marks the collapse of the system of differences that allowed the social hierarchies to be represented. It achieves the democratic logic of writing without a master and without a purpose, the great law of the equality of all subjects and of the availability of all expressions, that marks the complicity of absolutized style with the capacity of anyone at all to grab any words, phrases or stories at all. But, on the other hand, it opposes the democracy of writing with a new poetics that invents other rules of appropriateness between the significance of words and the visibility of things. It identifies this poetics with a politics or, rather, a metapolitics, if metapolitics is the right word to describe the attempt to substitute, for the stages and utterances of politics, the laws of the 'true stage' that would serve them as foundation. This is indeed what literature does by leaving the great racket of the democratic stage to the orators in order to tunnel into the depths of society; by inventing this hermeneutics of the social body, this reading of the laws of a world on the body of mundane things and in words of no importance whose history and sociology will be shared as a legacy by Marxist science and Freudian science.
> (Rancière 2011: 21)

This is, as I said, an intriguing perspective, and one which corresponds very well to the crisis-concept, discussed in the beginning of my paper. It is my general idea that the second half of the 20th century has seen in poetry an equivalent to what was seen in prose a century earlier. And once again, it is a good idea to discuss these changes in terms of politics, or perhaps even what Rancière calls "metapolitics". And it is symptomatic to see how the paratactical aspects, and what Rancière has called the "second sense of literary 'petrification'" of writers like Flaubert and Balzac, come back in new – radicalised – guises. Rancière speaks of how the sentences of these writers were "mute stones": "They don't have voices like princes, generals or orators.

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[12] Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, transl. Julie Rose, Cambridge & Malden (MA): Polity Press, 2011 [2006], pp 3-30.

But they speak all the better as a result. They bear on their bodies the testimony of their history" (Rancière 2011: 14).

These words echo in the medium-critical, politicized poetry for which e.g. the Swedish "language materialists" could be seen as representatives. But where these ideas of Flaubert and Balzac sprung from archaeology, geology and palaeontology, the ideas of the new Swedish generation spring from post-modernist, or post-structuralist thinking, its ancestors being the likes of Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, Sontag, Cage etc.

Conclusion

Lecercle's theory of "the remainder of language", a concept which "sought to name the return, within language, of the repressed social body that shatters the self-centred ideality of the linguistic 'system'" (Lecercle/Riley 2004: 158) is indeed intriguing. Alongside Lecercle's remainder-concept, Perloff's ideas on poetry can combine into an analytical complex for a poetry which has seen that what is being kept *outside* of linguistic (and literary) conventions says a number of things about 1) the keeping outside itself, of the values and structures governing it; 2) what is kept on the inside; and possibly 3) why certain things are kept on the outside and others are let in. These ideas combine surprisingly well with e.g. what Rancière calls the "hermeneutics of *the social body*" (Rancière 2011: 21. *Italics mine*). I would state that the *social* aspects of the "social body" which find room in Lecercle's as well as Rancière's theories, are to a large extent also related to Perloff's idea of an "experience in language"; they all stress how the ways in which language and literature do represent are too limited, and need to be expanded. These theories shed light upon not only Börjel's poetry, but also each other. I would, for instance, say that Lecercle and Rancière creates a shift in a key-phrase in the theory of Perloff, i.e. the one she borrows from Steve McCaffery. It is not a question of whether poetry should be seen as an "experience" or a

"representation"; I would rather say that *experience could be seen as a kind of representation*, alongside many others.

And Ida Börjel's poetry in *Sond* seems to have a method which could definitely be described as experientially representative. The title itself, "*Probe*" in English, does indicate this. In an interview published in 2006, when Börjel was awarded a cultural prize of the Swedish region of Skåne, she describes her poetry as "a form of poetic field surveys" (Cf. Lecercle's idea of how learning a language is like "exploring a territory"):

> If I had known exactly what I was going to do, and why, there would have been no text. Writing is a constant trying out of the possibilities of language, and something has to happen for me to get started.[13]

When taken into joint account, Börjel's poetry and the three theories discussed in this paper, render interesting thoughts on the task of today's poetry. They all speak of how literature needs to establish new ways of representation, which are less hierarchical, and less normative. And they all, more or less, stress the political dimensions involved. These dimensions could also be described from a culture-semiotic perspective, opening them up for a more common understanding of the concept of *politics*: What ideologies come with a certain semiotic understanding, with certain linguistic conventions? And what ideologies surface when these conventions, this understanding, is questioned in one way or the other?

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[13] http://www.skane.se/sv/Webbplatser/Kultur-Skane-samlingsnod/Kultur_Skane/Bidrag/ Kulturpris__stipendier/Stipendiater-2006/Kulturstipendiat-Ida-Borjel/ (04/07/2011 *Translation mine*).