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Road aesthetics as practice and discourse in the Norwegian Public Roads Administration

The Norwegian Public Roads Administration (NPRA) is responsible for developing infrastructures in accordance with the European Convention for Landscapes, which aims to "promote landscape protection, management and planning."¹ The Convention's environmental vision states that "Transport shall not cause serious damage to man or environment." More specifically, the issue of road aesthetics is presented as a choice between two possible strategies: "*Roads are aligned and designed in accordance with two main principles: either as a positive contrast to the environment, or adapted to and anchored in it. For most roads the principle of adaptation will be the natural choice*"². Road aesthetics, then, is presented relative to a conception of nature or environment; the aesthetic quality of the roads will be a function of their interplay with pre-given structures, and the constructed roads are seen to have the potential to protect/respect or add to existing environments, but not, it seems, to re-define or transform them. For any given road construction, however, the NPRA needs to attend to a number of concerns, and will have to negotiate the sometimes conflicting requirements for mobility, safety, residential environments, cultural heritage, and "aesthetic values". It is obvious that the interests of mobility will frequently be at odds with an idea of "protecting" landscapes, and road safety regimes will frequently have important repercussions for the spatial organisation transport.³

Contemporary societies have been described as societies of automobility,⁴ indicating that all aspects of society are transformed by current modes of transport and travel, and that experiences as well as our environments and practices are being shaped by the car-system. From this kind of perspective, the landscapes can be seen as being framed by the vision of a being that is simultaneously encapsulated and mobile⁵, which raises questions of whom the beautiful roads are meant to appeal to: who is the inscribed spectator? Local residents, tourists, drivers, pedestrians, adults, children?

This project will study how the NPRA deals with the requirements for aesthetic roads, how landscapes are conceptualised and integrated in road design processes, and what aesthetic ideas are used as basis for current infrastructural developments. This includes an investigation into how concepts such as "adaptation", "landscape" and "environment" are defined or reflected in the context of the work of the NPRA, and the practical consequences that these definitions have for road construction projects.

The study uses interviews, document studies, discourse analysis, and literature reviews.

¹ *European Landscape Convention*, Florence, 20.X. 2000. <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/176.htm>

² <http://www.vegvesen.no/cs/Satellite?c=Page&cid=1162372673190&pagename=vegvesen%2FPage%2FSVVsubSidelnnholdMal>

³ Elvebakk, B: "Vision Zero: Reshaping Road Safety". *Mobilities*, no 3, 2007.

⁴ Urry, J: *Sociology beyond societies. Mobilities for the twenty-first century*. Routledge, London, 2000.

⁵ Sheller, M. & Urry, J: "The City and the Car". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. No 4, vol 24, 2000.