



México Interdisciplinario / Interdisciplinary Mexico

ISSN 2193-9756



XVII. Transborder Matters

2020/1, año 9, n° 17, 207 pp.

Editora: **Romana Radlwimmer**

DOI: 10.23692/iMex.17

Poetry of the Space In Between

(pp. 68-83; DOI: 10.23692/iMex.17.5)

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Abstract: The discourse about borders, frontiers and all sorts of liminal phenomena, including transbordering or border-crossing, seems to be older than the current one on globalization and post-colonialism. The idea that globalization will wipe out all borders and limitations is problematic, and the strange, a result of cultural construction, will not disappear. Borders are never only *limes*, borders, fences, or walls, but at the same time they are also spaces between contact zones. Human space is always constructed by limitation; it means separation and connection at once. Drawing on Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, I will outline a poetry of a space in between, of different modes of limitations, such as the threshold, the bridge, the door, the wall, the fence, and the barrier. Starting from the "real" spatial aspect, I will differentiate between three different kinds of in-between situations that are related to practices of crossing over: phenomena of entering and initiation; transgression; and the idea of overcoming on the vertical plane. I will conclude the article with an analysis of a film about various liminal dimensions, Iñárritu's film *Babel*, which does not expose a great narrative of globalization, but it introduces the global world as an obscurely intertwined network of small narratives.

Keywords: Borders, Poetry, Space, In-Between, Liminality



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Website:

www.imex-revista.com

Editores iMex:

Vittoria Borsò, Frank Leinen, Guido Rings, Yasmin Temelli

Redacción iMex:

Hans Bouchard, Bianca Morales García, Ana Cecilia Santos, Stephen Trinder

Poetry of the Space In Between

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The new world different from the old with new jewels to be consumed,
new frontiers to be won, and much more love to be given.
(Burdon 1967)

Introduction

This article discusses visible and invisible borders and liminal phenomena in an anthropological and philosophical context. Following Bernhard Waldenfels, it makes a comment upon on the asymmetric relation between the space of one's own and the space beyond. We are used to understanding this asymmetry primarily in a post-colonial sense as a political, social and economic inequality, but it is embedded in a principal difference between inside and outside, on this side and beyond, here and there. We can never be on both sides, we look from one side to the other, which is the precondition for all forms of alterity and strangeness insofar as one can say that liminal phenomena are central to understanding culture as an entity that is structured by visible and invisible borders. This text seeks to modify our contemporary understanding of liminal phenomena as exclusively spatial. It points out that all kind of borders entail a temporal aspect or in other words: the Border is a *chronotopos* in the Bakhtinian sense.¹ Opening and closing are the two components that determine the process of drawing borders.

Alejandro González Iñárritu's film *Babel* (González Iñárritu 2006) is an excellent example for this argument. It is a film that demonstrates the functioning of borders in a global world and at the same time, the temporal and dynamic aspects come into play through the topic of travel that makes the act of crossing borders an unintentional adventure on both sides. *Babel* is interesting with regard to its narrative matrix and because of two aspects.² On the one hand, the film unfolds a butterfly effect narrative matrix. An action in one part of the planet leads to another unintended, unexpected, unpredictable consequence in another place. On the other hand, the membrane, a transparent liminal phenomenon, plays an important role in the film. The membrane discussed here regards an installation by the Austrian artist Sabine Müller-Funk

¹ Chronotopos is seen as a specific time space relation, as a space in time. See Bakhtin (1981).

² See Vossen (2008); Olivier (2009).

(Müller-Funk 2011), combines the two moments of borders – its opening and its closing – in the chronotope of defending and transgressing.

Iñárritu's masterpiece, part of a trilogy, is seen not only as an illustration of liminal theory or an example, but as medium for developing cultural analysis. As with all works of art, *Babel* does not explain or give arguments. It 'shows' the dynamic of borders and the process of bordering in a global world. It delivers illustrative material that is a challenge for theory and reflection.

Liminality and Space

There is a certain and central discourse about borders, frontiers and all sorts of liminal phenomena, including transbordering or border-crossing which is older than the current one on globalization and post-colonialism.³ As far as I can see, it dates back to the very beginnings of classical modernism and suggests the idea or, rather, the promise to overcome all sorts of limitations and restrictions. As is the case in Friedrich Schlegel's famous 116th Athenaeum fragment, there is a narrative behind modernism and avant-garde movements: the utopia of delimitation and unification of the heterogeneous.⁴ In these cultural and philosophical contexts, freedom and delimitation become synonyms. It may be seen as the core of the eroticism of modern aesthetics.

The postmodern virtual space constructed by the new digital media seems to be the material fulfilment of this desire. The promise of ubiquity, of living in a space as infinite and boundless as the ocean is attractive. It goes hand-in-hand with the fantasy of an unlimited subjectivity. This dream is based on the phantasm of being able to be everywhere – like God. The heroes of the old myths, but also those in modern movies can be characterised by the fact that they overcome borders, disregarding barriers and ignoring the rules of division.

At first glance, borders, barriers and limitations are suspicious, especially from a liberal political perspective. However, how could a world exist in which the territorial, social or symbolic space is, to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari, uncut and plain.⁵ Is it possible to have a world which is only a rhizome, a netting without any centerings, intersections, limits and margins and in which all and nothing is a limit?

Borders are room dividers, dividing rules and frames in at least three dimensions; space, time and symbolism. A house is an artefact that not only protects you from weather conditions, but

³ See Burdon (1967).

⁴ See Schlegel (1972: 36).

⁵ See Deleuze / Guattari (1993).

also gives you a feeling of security, moreover a certain kind of identity. If it has no openings as in the German *Schildbuenger* book, it becomes, from an internal perspective, a prison and from outside a space we cannot enter. The quality of living and dwelling in the house is real, as in its metaphorical sense it is always connected with limitation and accessibility. As the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari has pointed out, borders are never only *limes*, borders, fences, or walls, but at the same time they are also spaces between contact zones.⁶ This brings me to the following observation: that the disappearance of borders makes contact impossible. Furthermore, the dream of boundlessness proves to be ultimately totalitarian.

Human space is always constructed by limitation, which has a strong, double and irreducible function. It means separation and connection at once. What is important is to bring these two functions into an artful balance. If border is only *limes*, habitability is destroyed and abolished, because we are either imprisoned or locked out. If there are no borders, we also lose habitability, because there is no sense of security and no contact in an emphatic way.

People living at territorial, linguistic and cultural borders always perform a balancing act. They are importers and exporters from one space to the other. Because of their mobility, they achieve, at least internally, what other human beings are not able to achieve: to be inside and outside at the same time. Since they are located in a space in between, their own and the strange is connected in a remarkable way. Metaphorically speaking, there are many crossers of borders in our times: migrants, diplomats, translators, importers of the strange and exporters of the own. If there is any utopian figure in our contemporary cultural life, then it is surely the 'hybrid'. It is the man or woman who seems to ignore frontiers, especially symbolically, like Peter Handke's protagonist Kobal in the novel *Repetition (Die Wiederholung)*, who walks with one leg in one space and the other in another.⁷ He is neither in the first nor in the second space; he is, to quote a verse from a song by Mick Jagger and Keith Richard, "sittin' on a fence" (Rolling Stones 1967). Whether or not this is really a third space is an interesting question. There are some kinds of spaces in between, nowhere lands and stairwells, but they seem to be, to make use of Marc Augé's terminology, "non-lieux", non-places.⁸ The third space has a strong temporal aspect. In other words, "hybridity" is unstable. Hybridity and the idea of a third space are quite often

⁶ See Cacciari (2002: 73-84).

⁷ When crossing the border between Austria and Yugoslavia, the border patrol asks protagonist Kobal about his Slavic name which means 'a person who straddles his legs', or 'designates the room between straddled legs'. See Handke (1986: 7).

⁸ See Augé (1995: 75-115).

related to the hidden utopian desire to convert non-places into places for living – dwelling – in a space in between.⁹

In my view, the idea that globalization – which is mainly an effect of economy – new media and migration will wipe out all borders and limitations is problematic. In addition, the strange, which incidentally is also the result of cultural construction, does not disappear. It is not very probable that, for example, the European countries will lose their specific profiles and differences. It is very often the surface that becomes homogenous – this a lot, but not everything. If it is true that we need borders to cross in order to create human space, also in a temporal and semiotic sense, then we have to expect new construction of borders.

The adventure of modern times is not that our world becomes borderless, but that borders have become more mobile and invisible like the wall in Marlen Haushofer's novel *Die Wand* ("The wall").¹⁰ Many limitations are not to be seen as objective, evident and irrefutable. We begin to understand that we are the creators of all those spaces, because we draw borders and barriers. From this perspective, we can define culture as a human capability and necessity of erecting borders and developing techniques and concepts to make use of them. It could be true that Musil's *Möglichkeitssinn*, which is more a sense for the impossible than for the possible, converts into *Realitätssinn*, the sense for the real.¹¹ Transgressing, moving and changing borders may sometimes be dangerous, but at the same time, as the text of the Eric Burdon LP *Winds of Change* of 1967 suggests, it can be stimulating. In contrast to fashionable fantasies of dissolving, it might be necessary to rehabilitate physical and non-physical phenomena as limits, thresholds and borders. We also can raise the question as to which configuration limits can have.¹²

There is strong support from two sides, firstly from philosophy, especially from phenomenology, and secondly, from Freud's psychoanalysis. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud argues against Roman Rolland's idea of an oceanic feeling (which is close to Friedrich Schleiermacher's). The author sees this kind of oceanic feeling as a form of infantile borderless existence. Freud's scepticism goes hand-in-hand with the argument that there is a need for human beings to develop certain forms of internal barriers to create an individual identity separate from mother and father.¹³

⁹ For a discussion of hybridity and third space see Bhabha (2012).

¹⁰ See Haushofer (1968).

¹¹ See Musil (1978: 16-19).

¹² See Waldenfels (1990: 28-40).

¹³ See Freud (2016: 51f.).

Poetry of the space beyond

Modifying the famous title of a famous book, Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*,¹⁴ I will outline a poetry of a space in between, of different modes of limitations, such as the threshold, the bridge, the door, the wall, the fence, and the barrier. It seems obvious that they differ in their functional logic, but they also contrast in the temporal, that is, in the dialectical relation between opening and closing. Quite clearly, a bridge has a strong accent on connecting separated spaces on all levels, but bridges are used for controlling access to the 'other' space beyond. A threshold is an 'in between' that is associated with danger. Therefore, it is a metaphor for a central aspect of liminality, that is, for all rites of initiation.

Briefly speaking, and starting from the 'real' spatial aspect, we can roughly differentiate between three kinds of in-between situations. The 'inside-outside' contrast can be related to the phenomenon of entering and initiation, the 'here' (on this side) and the 'there' on the other side ('beyond') may refer to transgression, and 'up' and 'down' fits the idea of overcoming on the vertical plane. It is a ladder that takes Jacob up into another, divine world.

The door, the bridge and the staircase are the classical representative elements of these three types. With regard to Waldenfels, we can say that they have something in common: the asymmetrical situation, since as human beings we are always only on one side (bridge, door), mainly outside (door), here on this side (bridge, door) or downstairs (staircase). Waldenfels has namely called our attention to an interesting asymmetry, which is decisive for thresholds, but also for all kinds of space marking. We can never be inside and outside at the same time. With regard to the famous scene between Oedipus and the Sphinx, this is very important. He is the man standing outside and she is the female monster that is positioned at the threshold, which separates inside from outside, man from woman. The Sphinx is also the imaginary product of the male eye. The female space behind the threshold is dark and invisible. This story can hardly be inverted. From the perspective of the Sphinx, she herself would disappear, including the uncanny that is part of her monstrosity. The Sphinx is the threshold of the man, Oedipus. Like all threshold keepers, be they male or female, human or animal, the Sphinx is dumb, and she gives no answer. In the standard story, she poses only one single riddle. Drawing on Waldenfels, but also on psychoanalysis, I would like to discuss this famous figure as a monstrous being in a space in between, a figure on the threshold as a gatekeeper, which controls and polices the access to another space. From the male perspective, this other space has a double code. It is the space of the other sex, the female one, but it is also the space of another state, of the

¹⁴ See Bachelard (1964).

unconscious. Thus, the Sphinx sits on a sexual border, in between the male and the female, between the conscious and the unconscious. It is this kind of principal limit – *eros* and *thanatos* – that creates metaphors and symbols.¹⁵ I also want to mention the idea of understanding female genitalia as a body space for the sexual other: it has aspects of a threshold and, from the perspective of the man, is a strange place. By the way, heterosexual coitus is a good example of Waldenfels' idea of the inside-outside asymmetry that is so central for all spatial phenomena.¹⁶ We can argue that the Greek version of the story has substituted the original Egyptian version, in which the Sphinx is male, protecting a space of power that is guaranteed and legitimated by religion.

On the one hand, limits are made and established by human beings and are part of human existence, but on the other hand, there is an irreducible moment in all these limitary phenomena. Philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and Waldenfels, who are highly interested in body phenomena, have focused their thinking on those paradoxes. Their cautious approach to limits, borders and thresholds stands in a certain contrast to the basic figure of deconstruction, which suggests a transgression of binary oppositions that are the result of clear limits. Overcoming this binary structure not only in thinking, but also in cultural reality, has become a Sisyphean task. Dissolving frontiers has become an influential slogan in postmodern cultural life. The contemporary debate about limits, borders, and frontiers are to be characterized by this dichotomy: either to acknowledge or to overcome limitations and limits. We can see the threshold as that element which is in the impossible middle.

Limits seem to be timeless. In contrast to all these fixations, thresholds entail a temporal dynamic from the very beginning. Standing in front of the controlled entrance, we have the choice: we may cross over the dangerous threshold, but we can also move back because of fear. Or – and that might be the worst case scenario – we are fixed, we are not able to move, as is the case in Kafka's famous parable about the door keeper and the poor chap from the countryside, who spends all his time waiting in front of the door.¹⁷ This implies an absolute standstill. Maybe there is still a fourth possibility: the human being in front of a threshold can also move in a circle around the barrier. Maybe he or she becomes a writer.

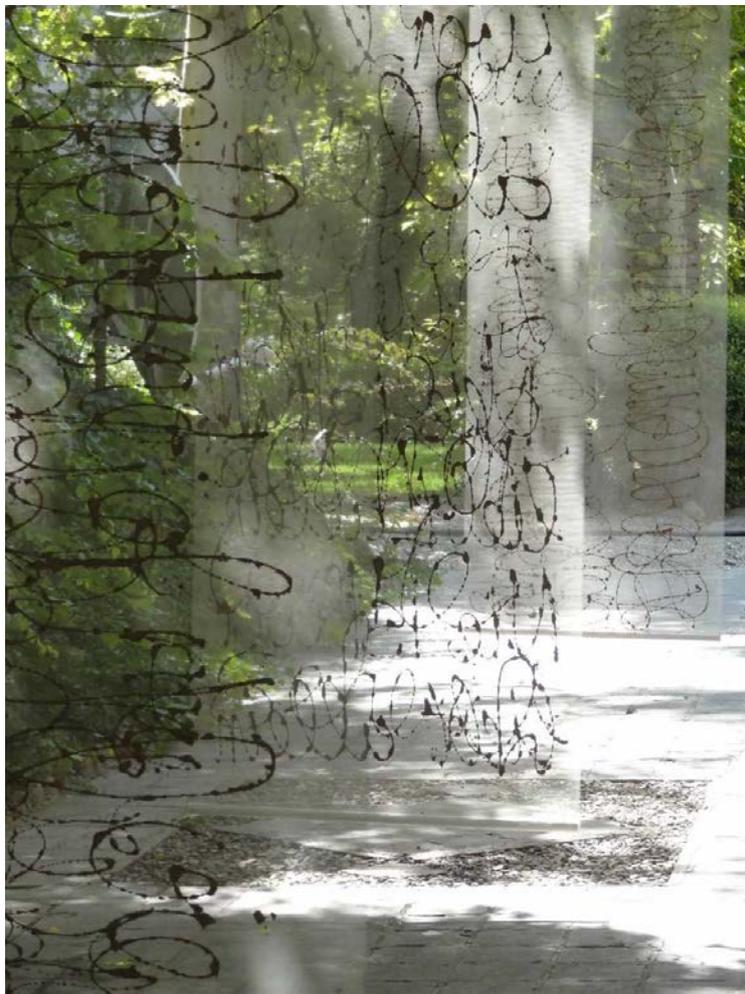
¹⁵ See Macho (1987: 172-194); Müller-Funk (2014).

¹⁶ See Müller-Funk (2016: 253-265).

¹⁷ See Kafka (1996).

The membrane: Sabine Müller-Funk

Let's have a very short glance at a further fascinating liminal phenomenon which has a strong organic connotation. It is a singular *limen-limes*, because the membrane is absolutely permeable, but it need not be symmetric. Skin has similar qualities, too. The membrane is the limitation in which *limes* equals *limen*. Here, the border is an obstacle and transition at the same time. I would like to continue this article with a quotation from the artist Sabine Müller-Funk. With regard to her installation *Teheran-Membranes* 2011, she writes about her stay as an artist in Iran: "Through the membrane of your words I am looking at you – through the membrane of my view, I am walking into the world" (Müller-Funk 2011).



Img. 1: Installation "Teheran-Membranen" by Sabine Müller-Funk (Müller-Funk 2011)¹⁸

The artist makes metaphorical use of the term 'membrane' which is connected with the phenomenon of the skin.¹⁹ Skin is a phenomenon that protects our body from the external world,

¹⁸ "Installation, 4 membranes (each 220 x 90 cm, with text made of garden soil) and video projections: moving mouth talking the written words and moving eye looking" (Müller-Funk 2011).

¹⁹ See Nancy (2008); Anzieu (1991).

but at the same time it is a medium that is permeable. So the skin represents our statue in natural surroundings. At the same time, it entails a moment of closure and opening that is central for our existence. The membrane is in permanent contact with the external world – that is also true for the membranes of our cells.

Skin is something that is visible without which the beauty of human body would not exist. But as a membrane it is connected with other senses, especially with tactility or with breathing. Skin is a membrane that is not visible. Sabine Müller-Funk writes on an installation of wired meshes and projects digital images onto it. The artist understands her installations as membranes because of an analogy. The mesh or the glass, another material in her oeuvre,²⁰ is seen as a visible membrane. As all walls it separates, but because it is made from a transparent material, it connects us with the other. So for example the face of the other in the space beyond becomes visible. Here, the mesh works like a window and has the quality of a medium. This corresponds with the words in her commentary "I look at you". The membrane in this metaphorical sense generates the possibility of a (transcultural) communication, in which communication can take place in a state of recognition of the other. At the same time, the position of another who gets respect from the glance beyond the membrane can be recognized. In this situation, asymmetry has not disappeared, but is converted in a productive, maybe utopian way. The asymmetry between the own (space) and the other (from the space beyond) survives in and because of the relation that is illustrated by the figure of the membrane. Such an understanding of liminality might be key to understanding a film like *Babel*.

Globalization and New Borders

Before *Babel* (2006), Mexican director González Iñárritu already dealt with the subject of (border) narratives in two of his previous films (*Amores Perros* 2000, and *21 Grams* 2003) by multiplying a story in several variants. Thus he directs our attention to the narrative construction of 'reality'. In his third film *Babel*, Iñárritu projected this process on a global space represented by events in Japan, Mexico and Morocco. The multicultural group of actors – Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, Said Tarchani, Gael García Bernal, Adriana Barraza, and Rinko Kikuchi – corresponds to the director's ambition to symbolize the entanglement of people from different local and cultural traditions into a global context.

But Iñárritu's film is also one about various liminal dimensions. Borders appear in the three different geographical places: Mexico and the US, a mountain region in Morocco and the urban

²⁰ See Höller / Holter / Müller-Funk (2018).

space of Tokyo. At the same time, the film connects these spaces by a globalizing plot which transcends the traditional system of liminality. I will try to sum up the phenomena of borders in the film:

1. The visible border between the United States and Mexico.
2. The visible and invisible border between the world of the nomadic people in Morocco and the Western tourists.
3. The border between the young people and the adults in the Japanese narrative.

The action begins with the purchase of a much-admired Winchester rifle, a wonder from another world, a violent instrument, which connects the stories. We then walk with the rifle and the two brothers through the Moroccan mountains, the first symbolic space. The two shoot with the gun until a bus on a street becomes visible. When the shot hits the bus, the invisible camera changes. Moreover, we enter the second symbolic space, into the world of the American tourist couple embodied by Cate Blanchett and Brad Pitt. The bus is a strange place; to a certain extent, it contains the chronotope itself. It forms a mobile space *sui generis*; it is a dynamic and temporary Western diaspora in another, non-European culture. The bus is not only a means of transport, but also a social and symbolic shelter. It contains a clear liminal aspect, but also two openings, real (doors) and visual (windows), which are rather risky with regard to safety. The purpose of a tourist trip is not primarily to make contact with another symbolic world, but to remain separate from it, not to encounter people from the other side. However, the actual telos of the couple's trip has nothing whatever to do with the foreign symbolic space, since it is about overcoming a marriage crisis and the family's leave, more precisely of the children, who are supposed to be sheltered at home. The woman's annoyance indicates how superfluous she finds this excursion, not only because she is more eccentric than the man is, but also because she is thoroughly distrustful of the strategy of a long-distance journey as a means of re-establishing a relationship. She shows how much she finds the hardships of this long-haul trip frustrating.

The tourist is a cultural voyeur who, through the glass pane, looks at the strange landscape and briefly descends to take a so-called sightseeing tour. The bus as a divider of space and time is a separate symbolic cosmos, a safety device that prevents the encounter of cultures, and does not, at least at the beginning of the story, create a third space. Thus, the technically hypermodern bus, a kind of chronotope, a space-time approach to a modern, possibly futile journey, establishes a border that is as relevant to globalization as the fortified boundaries of prosperity in the south of the United States and in the east and south of the European semi-continent.

The shot from a western gun (imported from Japan) in the hands of an innocent Arab boy immediately sets the terrorist narrative in motion, but proves to be a statistically unlikely coincidence which transforms the trivial holiday into the adventure of a cultural encounter, a third space of negotiation. As a result, the husband takes over the leading role, he has to negotiate with the bus driver as well as with the village doctor who turns out to be a veterinarian. The husband also has to deal with the unwilling fellow travellers who feel the interruption of the journey as threatening for their safety and wellbeing and want to keep up with the logic of tourist apartheid. It is an accident that, in an involuntary and tragic-ironic way, overrides the separation of cultures and overrides the logic of symbolic separation on which modern tourism is based. By the way, the husband reaches the end, the goal, which the usual and planned package trip would never have had: the reconciliation with his wife, to whom he would never have been able to prove his love in the planned package holiday.

The involuntary adventure, the violation of the borders, provokes the power of evidence. For not only is the life-threatening injury a cathartic act in the sense of the Aristotelian narrative theory. Through his courageous commitment, the risk of dialogue with the other culture as well as the confrontation with the other fellow travellers, the man proves that he is the right husband for his wife, a man who is helping and lovingly present.

The 'utopian' side of the film shows the encounter between the American husband and the doctor, and their helplessly touching attempt to get in contact with each other. They cross all cultural barriers, as well as the silent exchange of views between the injured wife and an old, monstrous looking village-dweller, who plays the role of the pre-modern miracle hero and exotic witch. At first, the American gaze falls horrified at the ugly countenance of the woman who stands for the monstrosity of the stranger in the sense of Kristeva.²¹ Nevertheless, the possibility of seeing through the distortions of the stranger, the face of the other, and recognizing the stranger as an alter ego, gives a sudden perception that the intention is help and not threat. The film, however, is neither illusory nor idyllic. It leaves no room for doubt about the post-colonial dilemma of the two symbolic spaces. The imperious manners of the husband who commands and threatens the native man corresponds with the circumstance that the life of an American woman is much more worthy than that of the natives, who are oppressed and humiliated by a statehood which is submissive to the culture the temporary migrants come from. Meanwhile, an audience watches an American television report in the symbolic space of Japan. Telephones, televisions, helicopters and buses are just like the media that connect the

²¹ See Kristeva (1988: 202f.).

heterogeneous cultures of the globe in a surprising, but uneven way. With regard to liminality, they all seemingly transcend traditional borders, yet confirm them in a second step.

The second line of action also contains a split symbolic space. Firstly, it is the home of Susan and Richard, which the couple has left temporarily to find again their marital love in romanticism. However, this space contains a foreign element in the form of the Mexican nanny, illegally working in the US. Symbolically, she lives in an ethnoscape in the sense of Appadurai.²² When a relative appears to take her to a wedding in Mexico, she agrees after some hesitation and takes the children of the American couple with her. Unlike the long-distance travel of the American tourists, this trip has a clear telos: home, territorial homecoming on time. In contrast to the Western tourists, however, there is no air-conditioned bus that protects the travellers from the dangers of the other culture. On the contrary, the two American children come into touch with the relatively unknown world of Mexican culture; disturbing experiences with disturbing violence (cockfights), and sexual and ecstatic moments take place, aspects of life the well-ordered American middle-class world has so far withheld from the children – this is the very borderline in the film.

The strongly stereotyped symbolic space of Mexico forms a postcolonial counter-world to the West. Exuberance, ecstasy, physicality, and direct corporeal contact with each other to form the elements that mark the boundaries which, from the child's eye, at least seem to be ambivalent, if not attractive. In a reversal of the first narrative, the accident (in this case a traffic accident), only occurs at the end of the partial narrative. It has to do with the inequality of the same limit. It is easy to pass the boundaries from north to south, from the US to Mexico; it can be a huge obstacle to pass the border in the other direction, especially if you do not have the right papers and two 'white' American children in the car. For Amelia, the housekeeper, there is no successful conclusion in the film; the American border police ultimately deport her from the privileged symbolic space of the Jones' family home. In this narrative segment, the film undermines its self-image of a global world without borders. In view of a culturally multi-fragmented world, the visible and invisible boundaries the symbolic pavilions, and the exclusions and inclusions, the self-image of globalization as a cheerful, colourful mixture in the sense of a Benetton advertising turns out to be a false romance that hides the power asymmetries and the structural violence of this global world.

The third narrative, in turn, is assigned to a specific symbolic space, the urban space of modern Japan. Interiors like a sports hall correspond with the megalomaniac architecture and

²² See Appadurai (1996).

the street noise of Tokyo. The fact that the main character, Chieko, is deaf can be understood as a secondary metaphorical meaning, a "thick description" (Geertz 1973). Chieko's inability to hear can be read as a criticism of a society that lives from the contradiction of being more Western and global than the Western world, and at the same time carrying the structures of a traditional Japanese social order. The father who makes his daughter 'deaf' in a paternal act of protecting and controlling represents this world; the daughter is superficially on her first sexual adventure, but in reality, she seeks love and security that she does not find. The third segment of action reports the disturbances of such globalization in an outwardly perfectly modern epicentre, one that is much more perfect than the Western 'original'. The confinement of this sequence of action results from the focalization, which is mostly that of the deaf-mute girl, from whose disturbed perspective the cold glittering world of modern Japan becomes visible. Here, we can criticize the stereotyping, too, but the film leaves no doubt that it is transporting images of globalization and is not a film about real globalization. It is rather a picture of Japan in a global panorama, which, in contrast to Morocco and Mexico, acquires its visual power first. The technique of montage takes the relations between the symbolic contrasts to a further semiotic level.

Only very late in the narrative does it become evident that the rich father, a global tycoon, is the original owner of the rifle which reaches the hands of the two Moroccan shepherds (at the level of the narrated time, this happens later, but at the level of the narrative discourse, it occurs earlier). He gave it to their father during a big-game hunt. The death of Japanese tycoon's wife, a suicide, is clearly the cause for the life crisis of the adolescent girl. At this point, another globalizing medium reveals the context of crossing over. In Japanese television, the dramatic event in Morocco is a topic in the news, and the fact that the weapon is Japanese comes into play.

Iñárritu's film does not expose a great narrative of globalization; it introduces the global world as an obscurely intertwined network of small narratives. It is in its ambivalence that the film is postmodern. It does not contain any analysis of globalization by cinematic means; the political dimension of the global world becomes visible as a framework, and the economy manifests in the metropolis of Tokyo as well as, in its own way, in the global periphery of Mexico and Morocco. The film provides picture material of the hypermodern world whose heterogeneous fragmentation contrasts with homogenizing tendencies of a space interconnected through various media. In addition, it lends a voice to those who are otherwise silent, as in the case of the girl Chieko.

By the way, it is not at all easy to say who the implicit audience is and where the symbolic space of its narrative community is located. The film is a virtual alternative of a Bachtinian chronotope to that of the motorized vehicle, to the seemingly safe tourist bus. We can understand the journey which the film undertakes by cinematic means as a counterpart to the conventional long-distance journey of the Western tourist. However, the stereotypes presented by the film can be attributed to those images from catalogues of package travels which tourists take to be able to feel good and whole again in the strange land. The film introduces these images without supporting them particularly, because it contains precisely what I have described as a second reflection, a post-Kantian form of self-reference which goes hand-in-hand with advanced, modern and postmodern aesthetics.

Perhaps the thesis that the film does not contain a great narrative of globalization has to be revised at the end; at least, it has to be limited. The title, *Babel*, comes with a mythical narrative from the Old Testament which is effective as a matrix of today's globalization. It is a narrative about the creation of dimension and difference, heterogeneity and confusion, which plays a decisive role in today's discourse on translation, from Jorge Luis Borges over George Steiner to Jacques Derrida. The people of the city of Babel wanted to build a tower up to heaven. As God disliked this megalomania, he dispelled them by creating many languages instead of one. This story is the biblical explanation of why there are so many different languages in our world. The title, a *peritext* (Genette), brings this meaning into play as a suggestion for self-interpretation, subverting the original story as a revisionary act.

The film establishes a new level of sense, generated by the implicit relationships of the different spaces: a transition and an in-between, which sometimes opens up, but is often closed. At the same time, the film forms a virtual space, a 'globe' – in contrast to the closed space of the tourist bus, which is a symbolic enclave on foreign territory, enclosed by glass and air-conditioning.

The only God who is at work in the film is a cinematic narrator, an arranger, who, thanks to the most modern media techniques and semiotic mixtures, creates a global world that is and will remain Babylonian from the very beginning. The connections between them remain hidden from the individual actors in contrast to the spectator of the film.

Coming back to the differentiation between *limen* and *limes*, we could say that this double aspect of liminality is based on hypermodern globalization in an unbalanced way. Whereas media – understood as all phenomena mediating between different entities – suggests a possibility to overcome borders at least virtually ('window'), there is, on the contrary, a renaissance of the building of borders. The idea behind means a permanent, and not a temporary

closure ('door').²³ In this regard, the membrane represents a positive, maybe utopian model of another globalization in which reciprocal acknowledgement is inscribed.

Globalization means, to vary Eric Burdon's statement from 1967, not the disappearing, but the rising of new borders. Whether this is a win or a loss is the prominent question. The membrane is not a plea for a borderless world, but for a world with another use of borders.

Conclusions

Babel shows liminality in action and the border as a chronotope. It is a film on crossing borders. It presents a globalised world with new boundaries and borders. At the very beginning, the Western people in the bus are totally divided from the native and semi-nomadic people in the North-African Mountains. In the film, the bus is the central medium of traffic in the space beyond. Quite obviously, the passengers do not need to leave the bus with the large windows which works as a membrane with a minimal standard. They can have a look into the fascinating and strange landscape without physically leaving the safe moving space of the chronotopian bus. The unintentional attack on one American tourist changes the situation completely. Because they need help, the rich Western tourists, especially the US-American couple, come into contact with the native people, with the local doctor and the elderly woman in the village.

But strangeness in the film is not only a transcultural issue, as it is the case with the American and Western tourists in Morocco or with the experiences of the US-American youngsters at a Mexican fiesta beyond the familiar space. The Japanese girl Chieko is a stranger in her own world. Her muteness symbolizes the lack of communication and shows that strangeness is never only a transcultural phenomenon. Moreso it is a social relation. Being a stranger means living beyond a communication which is concrete, for example in the figure of a membrane. There is nobody who really looks at her.

In *Babel*, the real 'membrane' is sometimes substituted by an invisible one. The difference between the cultures survives just as the asymmetric situation in which the postcolonial aspect overlaps a general one. There are situations in the transcultural dialogues, especially in the scenes in Morocco where it seems to be possible that each one 'looks' at the other. There are moments where borders come into e/motion, but at the end the global order that needs means of transportation– as the bus – is reinstalled again. Maybe there will remain some dark reminding. Or in other words: *Bable* is a sceptical film, eventually a membrane itself, a transparent liminal phenomenon.

²³ See Simmel (2001: 55).

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