
The Janus-face. *On the ontology of borders and b/ordering*

Henk van Houtum

What is a border? How can we make sense of the ontology of the border? In this short essay I argue that a border, or rather the act of bordering, is primarily a mask, a Janus-face, that expresses the desire for as well as the fear of the border.

A border is a verb

The geopolitical map of today is not the map of yesterday anymore. In itself this is nothing less than a tautology. At the same time, the realisation that today's map is different from tomorrow's is crucial in understanding the importance of human territoriality – of borders thus. It makes clear that not the fixation of borders and identities is the constant factor in geopolitical history, but the changing of these. The map of the world is as dynamic as society is. Needless to say then, that the political grid of the world has been moving over time.

So how can we speak of order overall if the constancy in history is not the fixation but its dynamic? It makes more sense to turn the tables then. Instead of focusing on the fiction of the static and permanent unity of territory, citizenship and identity as the end of history and political starting point, it makes more sense to aim to understand the dynamics of borders and identities. Change is the constancy, not fixity. A border is therefore a verb.

Despite the constant changes in the map, despite decades of globalisation and transnational networking, and hence despite only a speeding up of changing borders, today, still, when people talk about borders they implicitly refer to the static national lines, the border of the state-container. The nineteenth century ideal of the nation-state has become rooted very firmly in our idea and visualisation

of borders. But a border has no original model: it is only a simulation of a model. The reality of the border is created by the meaning attached to it. For some a wall is a defence, for others an insult, and for others a means to spray graffiti on. And a line in the sand is not always a limit, as well as a border is not always a line in the sand. A line is geometry, a border is a power interpretation. What is important to the study of the ontology of borders on our world is not the item of the border per se, but the dynamic objectification process of the border; the power practices attached to a border that construct a spatial effect and which give a demarcation in space its meaning and influence. The border makes and is made. Hence, also in this respect indeed, a border is a verb. So, rather than a border we should speak of *bordering*.

the border makes and is made

A border is a mask

In creating and maintaining a border, a frame, a window on the world is represented: an invented reality, an appealing truth. For many, what they see as their border, however defined and wherever drawn, is the start as well as a consequential culmination of the image we have of the world. It frames our minds and thereby our world.

So rather than a process of discovering truth, a border – as well as the map that represents it – is making Truth. The consequence is that a border

just like the map of it, is inescapably a lie. The state on the map colonises the free ontological space that truth necessarily is. A map often represents itself as a socially-empty-commodity, a geometric neutral landscape without any distortions of human emotions and feelings. The border demarcates, represents and communicates truth, but it is thereby not truth itself. The signifier of the map is not the world as we know it – the signified – as philosopher Michel Foucault already argued discussing the work of the surrealist painter René Magritte (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*). The map of a city, state or world is sur-real. The image is not the world, nor are the words "this is not a world", a world. What a map of a world creates is a gap, a difference. Representing is thus making a difference. It is an image of reality, a truth outside truth itself.

A border and the map that represents it, is thus a longing for truth. A border is a longing to be, a belonging. And this longing is essentially the longing for the making of a favourable, and narcissistic mirror image. To create a border is essentially then the creation of an Innerspace of reflection, a narcissian centripetal orientation, a truth in which one can find pleasure and ease. Drawing borders, the making of a nation, is, as philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has recently argued in his book *Spheres*, the making of a national self-portrait.

This act of mirroring is a continual space-fixing process that, according to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, gives the *impression* of being a physically identifiable entity with objective and unchangeable borders. A border is therefore not a military defence alone: it is also a sacred desire for eternal truth. No border is built for a short term: it is built for eternity. Knowing at the same time that there is no border in history that has not disappeared, the creation of a border is hence, as Sloterdijk argues, precisely this, a big NO against the death of the nation. It is a testament of the desired eternal life. And the border gate therefore is like a gate to heaven on earth. This makes the Law of the territorial border a faith, a belief. In short, a border is an ideology that is believed in, with the walls acting as the fundament of the own temple.

So it takes believers for a border to become real. For borders are the construction of a reality and truth in a certain context, in a certain time. What is seen as truth in one domain can be a lie in the space

and/or eyes of an Other, and what conventional reality is in the own domain can be a doomed image or fantasy in the domains and/or eyes of the Other. The question that becomes pertinent then is the following. If the national border is intrinsically and inescapably an imagined truth, in other words a lie, why do we believe in this lie? I am not talking about repressive regimes here. But why would people who live in a certain land on the globe, where the political borders of that land are neither natural nor self-evident, and are historically highly coincidental, believe in the self-evident truth of these borders? Why do people who live in freedom tend to be self-repressive?

a border is at the same time false and unavoidable

To begin with, identification with a social environment and a community, and to call that our own, gives an important sense of value to oneself. Even though it is often realized that the nation is an imagined community, a fantasy of the collective, it is still seen as a necessary one. The self gains a collective value and the personal identity becomes part of a national identity. One becomes part of a powerful and meaningful national narrative; one gains a national belonging, a membership in a meaningful *socios*. The belief in a fantasy of a true life produces the necessary illusion that what is lacking in one's identity is filled, that one's (personal) order is unified and coherent. The border, the container that is created of a national territory, citizenship and identity thus masks a void.

The constructing and demarcating of a spatial unity also feeds the desire to have spatial beacons and priorities in daily life. To demarcate a border is in fact saying: keep your distance. To take refuge, to take shelter behind a collectively constructed window on the world that produces a collective view on the world, a distance is created to what is outside the shelter, that which is exterior, foreign. This b/ordering of worldview and identity potentially gives one ease, comfort and security.

For many, the ordering and purification of the

own space and own identity works like a drug. The constitution of a shared space, with a shared narrative and fantasy, and a shared truth creates an immediate satisfaction. It fills the void – the emptiness in us – for a short time, but the consequence is a long-term desire for new appropriation and control of the own truth when this truth is perceived to be threatened. The desire, the wish for the perfect (comm)unity, the dream of the national utopia is never-ending. The perfect border, the perfect identity is always tomorrow. One is never fully satisfied. There is no final truth, no final homecoming. We know a border is fantasy, an in-the-meantime-home, a simulacrum-home. Yet at the same time we deny it is merely a fantasy. And so it is in this in-the-meantime-home that we live and continuously invest. In short, a border is a mask that is at the same false as well as unavoidable.

the border expresses a permanent longing to also be somewhere else

A border is a Janus-face

Borders are a result of desire, but a border is at the same time the result of the reverse of desire, namely of fear. The fear is addressed by what is not included in the border. Making a domain exclusive, brilliant, a brandable shining precious diamond for the included, also implies an exclusion of those who are believed or narrated to make the own order dirty, filthy or less valuable. A border, the desire to select and include, creates at the same time its own fear therefore, namely for what is excluded. And then it can be ascertained that every society and every generation creates its own excluded people, its own barbarians.

What is this fear precisely? It is when self-defined others are imagined to overwhelm us that many feel a Freudian *Unheimlichkeit*, a fear to lose the own identity, and to lose the control over the own space and undividedness. This is a fear that touches upon the existence itself, a fear for the void in oneself, for the missing of the difference, a fear for open space, a space without refuge, a borderless world. It clouds and troubles the comfortable

mental b/ordering of the world and the imagined purity of the own (comm)unity. But borders are not like eyes that can be shut. The Other, however defined and targeted, is necessary for the constitution of the own order and identity. The reflection in the eyes of the Other through which one can identify oneself can only be done with open eyes. By closing the borders and closing the eyes, the fear for the Other will not be shut off. The uncertainty will only be greater. With eyes closed, the Other will become a fantasy, a barbarian, a ghost, a monster, an invader, a distrust.

Hence, a border may be a necessary distance, but to distance the world outside does not only produce comfort and ease. The stronger the border is closed, the more imaginary and whimsical the stories and the larger the unease and uncertainty. This implies that as long as there will be borders and border guards there will be barbarians. A closed community with completely closed borders becomes paranoid in the end and does not trust a single strange element anymore. Open spaces and no man's lands then are taboo. It is this dimension of the border that we have seen developing into a dominant paradigm over the last decade or so. Increasingly, our desire to globalise as well as the fear for the mobility of others has led to a radical diffusion of border control. The border, once a territory's beginning and end, has crawled and crept into many spaces and has taken many forms, as can be seen in airports, detention centres, camps, and biometrics. Our eyes and fingerprints are scanned and our bodily movements in public space are increasingly traced and tracked. Increasingly, we have become the borders ourselves. Our bodies have become the passports and maps that we carry. So, as Freud already had argued, paradoxically, a severe border control and self-repression in order to sustain freedom goes together with heavy sacrifices in terms of personal freedom. Hence, the result is that the border believers have become trapped in a digital code of their own desire-machine: they have become prisoners in their own spatial matrix of *imagined* freedom.

Yet, a border is much more than a protection wall behind which one desires for comfort and hides or takes refuge for the imagined barbarians. It is at the same time also a threshold to an Other world, since there is also a *desire* for the other. The border

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is a Janus face, named after the Roman God Janus of the end and the beginning, of the passage, and the guard between upperworld and underworld. Janus has two faces, the centripetal, inward oriented and the centrifugal, the outward oriented face. This latter face, the desire to escape from one's home, one's self, to de-appropriate one's home and one's self, is of course of all ages and has many shapes. It expresses the fear to be caged.

b/ordering ourselves and Othering the excluded is something we do ourselves

And hence there is a permanent longing to also be somewhere else. The unknown, the stories about the exotic and the mythical, the adventure, the wild or the culturally different, can work like the Siren's song on our ears. A border therefore also reflects liberty, the desire to de-border oneself, to become a stranger oneself. The most well known is of course the holiday, that expresses a desire to stay away from home in the land of the Other for a few weeks, to be a stranger oneself for a few weeks. Some people wish to be a stranger for a longer time and buy a second home in the country of the Other. Others decide to migrate forever and to exchange one's own house and home for the new house and home in the land of the Other. Whether the desire to be a stranger sometimes will stop by doing so, remains dubious.

Whether there will ever be an end to the bordering of ourselves is highly questionable. Our desire to be ordered and to construct others is very persistent. Yet, this does not mean that we unwillingly and uncritically need to reproduce our own borders or

that we are forced to close our eyes obediently. B/ordering ourselves and Othering the excluded is something we do ourselves. De-bordering, searching for ways for a cross-border dialogue and using the in-between-spaces is therefore also in our own hands. We are not only victims of representation, but also the producers of it. It is we who make the states, not the lines and dots drawn on maps. Demarcating a borderline in space is therefore a collaborative act. And so is the interpretation of it. A new challenge is called upon cartographers, political geographers and political scientists to embark on a challenging travel, namely to link up with film-makers, map-artists and other image-artists to have an open eye, to visualize borders and border crossings that are generally not mapped and not re-presented; that is, the human *becomings*, zigzag connections, traces, tracks and linkages across borders, and other motions and emotions that cannot be universally rationalized, standardized and measured, and yet are felt, sensed and believed. The representation of a border should be as dynamic and human as the border is.

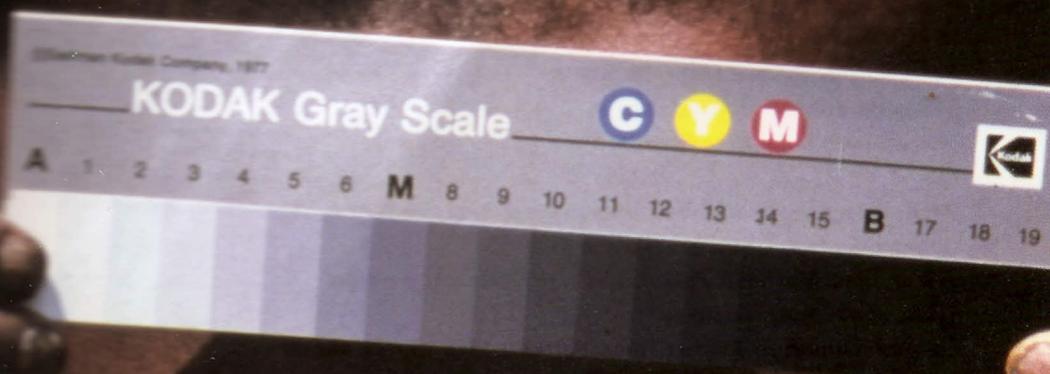
Because a border is and can never be an answer, it is a constant question that hunts the making of borders and orders, and that is the question of how much constructed truth of the border can we bear and how much do we need? Or in other words, tagging along the work of Deleuze and Guattari, who compellingly wrote about the need to constantly reflect on and escape from all too pressing orders: Which border are we? What mask are we? What side of the Janus-face of the desire for and fear of the border dominates, and at what price for ourselves and thereby others? [S]

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Simulacrum

Tijdschrift voor kunst en cultuur

Beyond the Horizon



Simulacrum

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April 2010 jaargang 18, #2/3

April 2010 jaargang 18, #2/3 € 8,95