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Unfolding Borders: For a Semiotics of Essayistic Border Images

Problematic ideological strategies of in/visibility are played out today around borders by exploiting advanced image-making technologies and hegemonic media discourses that produce "thin" border images lacking in semiotic complexity. This article responds to calls to move beyond the "line in the sand" metaphor by investigating essay films that experiment with a performative relationship with the border. Their "borderwork" is self-reflexive to the point of becoming a form of theory. To elucidate this theorization of the border, I invoke Derrida's *limitrophic* method of "thickening" the limit, mediated via Deleuze's notion of the fold. By comparing three case studies—Armin Linke's *Alpi* (2011), Philip Scheffner's *Havarie* (2016), and Tadhg O'Sullivan's *The Great Wall* (2015)—I interrogate the strategies that essay films employ to operationalize borders. The article is a first attempt at a semiotic classification of film-essayistic border images, and a contribution to the understanding of essay film as *limitrophic* audiovisual thinking.

Keywords
BORDER
ESSAY FILM
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> [A] border may be read as a semiotic system, a system of images and imaginations (Sidaway 2017, 191).

Since the start of the millennium, the European Union (EU) has undergone a series of momentous changes that deeply affected its borders. The 2001 Treaty of Nice brought about the Eurozone's enlargement and its eastward expansion. The 2008 financial crisis and the "refugee crisis" resulted in a series of threats to the EU's cohesion, culminating in increasing calls for the erection of walls and the reinforcement of border controls, and, notably, Brexit, which reshaped the EU's northern boundary and raised the specter of the sensitive Irish border. When in turn Europe became the global epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the EU effectively suspended the Schengen Agreement by implementing restrictions at both its external and internal borders.[1] Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, then, the sensitivity of the EU's outer border has never been more in evidence—and its integrity under threat—since the end of the Second World War.

These epochal shifts and pressures mean that borders have become newly relevant in post-Cold War, "borderless" Europe. The idea itself of the Union is based on the border, or lack thereof; while not fully coinciding with the Schengen Area, the EU broadly identifies with it. Concomitant with the birth of Schengen, the globalizing discourses that became predominant in the 1980s and 1990s posited the dawn of a borderless world under "the onslaught of cyber and satellite technology, as well as the free unimpeded flow of global capital" (Newman 2006, 172). Instead, Europe's outer borders are strengthening and becoming "dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled" (Balibar 2002, 71). Internal borders, then, have become central to political agendas, public discourse, and electoral outcomes.[2] Borders are today sites of political struggle, warfare and identity building. While also producing potentially transformative "cultural encounters," they often are armed shields in a war waged on those who flee danger and poverty (Rovisco 2010, 1016). Although geographically and socially marginal within contemporary Europe, borders are geopolitically and ideologically central to it.

If the EU is a unique experiment, other borders are becoming newly relevant. The USA–Mexico border is the most important of these: it has become, simply, "the border," a term of comparison for all others. The renaissance of international border studies in the 21st century is a direct response to this phenomenon. Drawn from geography, sociology, anthropology, law, and politics, this interdisciplinary literature broadly concurs that the increasing desire to regain control of space and protect domestic sovereignty, in Europe and elsewhere, means that some borders have become today "more socially manifest and performatively asserted" (van Houtum et al. 2017, 2). Coming from the sociology of Erving Goffman (1959) and the philosophy of Judith Butler (1988), the concept of performance has gained prominence, for "[b]orders do not simply 'exist' as lines on maps, but are continually performed into being through rituals such as the showing of passports, the confessionary matrix at the airport, and the removal of clothing" (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012, 729)—and, we can now add, the exhibition of COVID certificates. Border performance is enforced not only by the state and supranational entities (as in Frontex's patrolling of

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the EU's outer borders[3]), but is also practiced by dwellers, migrants, refugees, NGOs, and artists, whose activities of making, marking, shifting, and dismantling are often referred to as "borderwork" (Rumford 2008). Borders are not always in sight; it is borderwork that makes them visible. A condition of in/visibility equally affects the migrant and refugee, who are simultaneously in the public eye and obliterated in their individuality by political and media discourses.

In 2012, Parker and Vaughan-Williams remarked on the need to overcome the metaphor of the border as a "line in the sand," as a thin, razor-sharp edge, and to start looking at it as an area. The border is indeed widening today, both "internally, as the border creeps inward, and externally, as the border becomes a cross-border zone of dual management" (Longo 2018, 13). The rise of international securitization projects, where the state relies on other states and private companies for border management and intelligence, is producing a neo-imperialist phase, with more powerful nations offloading securitization onto less powerful ones. The result is that, "[a]s borders move away from thin jurisdictional lines, they also stop acting like borders; instead they start to resemble *frontiers*, thereby rendering states more akin to empires" (Longo 2018, 25). Thinking of the border as a place, then, "highlights how the performance of the border also implies relations and extensions across the differences that border performs" (Green 2010, 271). The emphasis has accordingly shifted from binary constructions to "bordering" lives and activities, with the result that, "[r]ather than fixed lines, borders [are] now seen as processes, practices, discourses, symbols, institutions or networks through which power works" (Johnson et al. 2011, 62).[4] A performative understanding of the border, then, has important implications for its temporality. If borders are produced, they "are in a constant state of coming into being" (Strüver 2018, 4); they "are contingent objects – subjected to constant negotiation and change" (Brambilla and Potzsch 2019, 84). The material experience of the border, indeed, is mainly temporal. Borders are about waiting; transit zones and detention centers are meant not so much to exclude migrants but to "decelerate the project of migration" (Ellebrecht 2013, 49).

Despite these important critical shifts, not a lot has changed in the public perception of borders and in their description by political discourse and the mainstream media. As recently as 2018, Longo remarked:

> Borders sit at the center of contemporary politics, but remain poorly understood, usually reduced to legal-topographical instantiations of sovereignty and placed as representative markers on the classic nation-state grid. They are jurisdictions without institutional existence – without "horizontal extent." Like lines in the sand, they are thin and vertical as they appear on maps. This portrayal is misleading and problematic, as such two-dimensional entities can only vary along one axis – permeability – vastly delimiting the scope of debate. (2018, 2)

Thickening borders

This article responds to Parker and Vaughan-Williams's and Longo's calls to move beyond the "thinness" of the "line in the sand" metaphor by reflecting on the border through film. The question will arise in particular of how film can today contribute to a "thick," and so counter-hegemonic, understanding of borders that gives account of their strengthening/widening and performative nature.

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The choice of considering the border through film is valid, not least because the functions of the moving image have shifted in parallel. Problematic ideological strategies of in/visibility are played out today around borders by exploiting advanced image-making technologies and hegemonic media discourses. In this sense, the "thinness" of the border coincides with an image that, in the face of its overwhelming evidential qualities, obfuscates and "thins out," in so far as it lacks historicity, spatiality and temporality—as in the hegemonic images of surveillance cameras and drone warfare, with their "interplay between military technologies of visualization and discursive techniques of othering" (Brambilla and Potzsch 2019, 77), or in the "emergency imaginary" (Calhoun 2010) of humanitarian securitization and its remediation into mainstream media, which "ultimately reinforces the power relationships of global mobility" (Chouliaraki and Musarò 2017, 546).

With its capacity to record living space and the evolution of our relationship with it in time, however, the moving image also holds a remarkable potential for representing and interrogating the border in its substantive historicity, spatiality, and temporality. Acknowledging the role of the media in the constitution of borders, Brambilla and Potzsch (2019) propose the idea of an "audio-visual borderscape," which can be alternatively hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, and which creates and recreates forms of in/visibility.[5] The moving image's importance in the constitution and understanding of borders cannot be underestimated, given that the public realm is the space of appearance, and that, in the words of Hannah Arendt, "appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality" (1998, 50). If a close connection with the actual events that inspired them allows some fiction films to participate in public discourse, documentaries, Jan Kühnemund (2018) remarks, have an even more straightforward association with the reality they depict, hence the significance of their role vis-à-vis the in/visibility of the migrant. T. J. Demos emphasizes in/visibility too, and discusses the role of experimental forms of non-fiction film in investigating "what political value accrues from those innovative strategies that negotiate the limits of representation yet nevertheless bring visibility to those who exist in globalization's shadow" (2013, xix).

The films I will investigate in this article are among such forms of non-fiction filmmaking which experiment with innovative strategies; they are essayistic works that do not represent the border, in the sense of using it as a narrative device or topos, nor document it, in the sense of bearing witness to it or explaining it with perhaps a didactic purpose. These films' relationship with the border is performative. Through filmic borderwork, they aim to counteract the thinness of a border image that lacks semiotic complexity. By reintroducing historicity, spatiality, and temporality, these films may be said to produce a "thick description" of borders, to borrow the expression used by Clifford Geertz, who espoused a semiotic concept of culture, to describe the work of the ethnographer vis-à-vis culture's "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures" ([1973] 2000, 10). However, these films do not stop at exposing the in/visibility of the border through the performance of its semiotics; what's more—and distinctive—their performance is self-reflexive to the point of becoming a theory of the border. It is precisely because they do not aim to represent but to theorize that these films may

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be discussed as essays. I here use the term to refer to a moving image that is a form of "counterhegemonic philosophy" (Rascaroli 2017, 16). Itself an audiovisual margin and a border-crossing genre, the essay film is eminently suitable to conceptualize the "thickness" of borders as cultural sites of extreme semiotic complexity; as Ursula Biemann writes: "Essayist practice is highly self-reflexive in that it constantly reconsiders the act of image-making and the desire to produce meaning. [...] These characteristics make the genre particularly suited to study complex relations" (2003, 10).

In his critique of the concept of globalization as developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Philip Rosen remarks on the central role the two authors assign to the media as "determinants of the irrelevance of borders in the newly de-centered socio-political universe they describe" (2006, 11). The three forces that, for Hardt and Negri (2000), militate to break down boundaries in globalization are capitalism's expansionist force, the flows of migration, and the media, which they describe as convergent, integrated, and diffuse. As Rosen shows, however, Hardt and Negri's theory of globalization's porousness depends on a notion of the media that is itself dematerialized, dehistoricized, and delocalized. It is significant that, in his article, Rosen analyses precisely an essay film as a filmic counter-example of these processes: Chantal Akerman's *On the Other Side* (*De l'autre côté*, 2002), on the USA–Mexico border. Noting the heavily temporalized processes of the film, Rosen writes that, "in its bounding of space, in a temporalization which presents a border space, we might say the frame is likened to a border. This temporalization restores the difficulty of borders, the physicality of borders, the facticity of borders" (2006, 16). I will argue below that essay film's temporalization does more than restore the border's materiality. The essay film creates spaces of in-betweenness, in which a temporalized, "slow" thought may take place (Rascaroli 2017, 5–6). This slowness is a form of theory as well as a performative semiotics; as Michelle Boulous Walker has remarked, "the essay offers us a future philosophy – one that holds out the hope for a slow engagement with the complexity and ambiguity of the world" (2016, 65).

By slowly engaging with the complexity and ambiguity of the border, and by performing it, the essay films I will discuss may be said to effect a *limitrophy*, to use the term by Jacques Derrida (2002); in other words, they cultivate a "*transgressal*" experience of the limit—which for Derrida means concerning oneself not only with the limit per se, but also with its complexity, with "what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it, and complicates it" (2002, 397). I introduce Derrida here because of the relevance to my argument and approach of the method he champions, which is "designed, certainly not to efface the limit, but to multiply its figures, to complicate, thicken, delinearize, fold, and divide the line precisely by making it increase and multiply" (2002, 398). Some help in thinking through this "thickening," delinearizing, and folding of the limit—and I add, adapting Derrida, of the border as limit—comes via Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze uses the term "fold" to think of all form in the universe as folded, and of the universe itself as compressed by an active force dividing matter into smaller and smaller folds. The fold differentiates and self-differentiates; it reverberates on both sides, ceaselessly folding and unfolding. The two sides of the fold are in an intimate reciprocal relation. As Deleuze writes:

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> The "duplicity" of the fold is necessarily reproduced on both of the sides which it distinguishes and which it sets into a mutual relation by distinguishing them: a scission in which each term sets off the other, a tension in which each fold is extended into the other. (1991, 236)

While his notion of "assemblage" has been used before in border studies,[6] Deleuze's concept of the fold has not been often or clearly invoked. Thomas Nail mentions the fold to describe the flows of circulation, "a multi-folded structure creating a complex system of relative insides and outsides without absolute inclusions and exclusions, but the insides and outsides are all folds of the same continuous process of flows" (2016, 29). The fold can indeed be useful to overcome the "line in the sand" metaphor and the razor-sharp edge-like image of the "thin" border. It can help us think of borders as a scission generated by a force—a political/military force—that produces two terms which are not independent of each other but each of which extends into the other, in a process of unfolding, which, qua process, has a temporal dimension, and is a complication and a "thickening." To put it in Heidegger's words, "[a] boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its essential unfolding*" ([1951] 1993, 356). The term "unfolding" is not intended as the opposite of the fold, or its unmaking. As Deleuze writes, the unfold is "certainly not an undoing of the fold, nor its effacement, but the continuation or the extension of its act, the condition of its manifestation. When the fold ceases to be represented and becomes a 'method', an operation, an act, the unfold becomes the result of the act which is expressed in precisely that way" (1991, 243). Accordingly, in the films under scrutiny here, the fold/border is not represented; rather, it is operationalized.

Three case studies will be compared below, each of which will allow me to study some of the strategies used by essay films to unfold and "thicken" borders. Through Armin Linke's *Alpi* (2011), I will begin to reflect on folding as a process in which each of two terms extends into the other. Temporalization will come more strongly into play with my second case study, Philip Scheffner's *Havarie* (2016), in which, "[w]hile time is unfolded, life stories are folded into each other and are at the same time folded back into the space that is the sea" (Wolf 2016, 8). Finally, an analysis of Tadhg O'Sullivan's *The Great Wall* (2015) will demonstrate how the EU's outer border is an "operative function [that] endlessly creates folds," as Deleuze (1991, 227) would put it. Albeit necessarily brief, together my three analyses will constitute a study of film-essayistic borders—with a particular focus on Europe and the EU. This study is also a semiotics of the filmic border, a first attempt at the classification of essayistic border images. Finally, this contribution extends my previous analysis of how the essay film thinks (Rascaroli 2017) by combining the Deleuzian interstice and method of in-betweenness with a consideration of the essay's slow performativity as a form of filmic borderwork.[7]

Extension and parallax: Armin Linke's *Alpi*

Alpi is the outcome of a "slow" project by photographer/filmmaker Armin Linke based on his seven-year research with Piero Zanini and Renato Rinaldi "on contemporary perceptions of the landscape of the Alps, juxtaposing places and situations across all eight bordering

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nations (from France to Slovenia) and spanning the territories of four languages" (Linke 2010). Initially a multi-screen installation, it became a 60-minute single-channel film that was screened in many festivals (starting with Visions du Réel 2011), exhibitions, museums and art galleries (including Centre Pompidou, Paris, the 14th Architecture Biennale, Venice, and manifesta 11, Zurich). Filmed in forty different locations over seven years, *Alpi* is a *limitrophic* concentrate of border complexity.

The film contains no verbal commentary, but visually splices together a set of radically different episodes, ostensibly in the tradition of observational cinema, with a predominance of long, fixed shots. *Alpi* is a work that places the "in/out" dualism of the border at the center of its conception. The choice of setting is significant, for mountains are a natural frontier, often coinciding with national borders. They symbolize the imperviousness of the limit but are also traditionally a place of passage and transit. The Alps are the most important mountain range in Europe, and a crucial internal border; they are crossed by the national borders of Italy, France, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Germany, Austria, Slovenia and Hungary, and separate central/northern and southern Europe. Their relevance as a border has come in great evidence during the refugee crisis that spiked in 2015 and 2016, particularly with the tensions at frontiers between Italy and France and Austria and Italy, respectively.[8]

Mountains, like borders, are important sites of identification, often becoming a symbol for whole national territories; James Sidaway lists mountains along with borders, monuments, tombs, and museums as "concentrated sites of mythical-magical performance" (2017, 193) embodying the characteristics of nation-statehood. However, Linke's Alps challenge narrow views of "banal nationalism, a (form of) national identity that is taken for granted" (Strüver 2017, 212), for they are a radical hybrid of local, national, and global features. The Alps, in Linke's film, are all at once Europe and world, reality and discourse, life and marketing, archaism and modernity, in a way that supersedes nationalist and European identitarian discourses on landscape and promotes a complex understanding of territory as shaped by a diverse set of uses, practices and forces. Cultural encodings of landscape, and of the Alps as one of the most sublime European landscapes, are foregrounded throughout the film via an emphasis on paintings, maps, models, and panoramas. The film's episodes pertain to a diverse range of people and practices, from shepherds still living in archaic ways to ultramodern labs, from age-old procedures for extracting stone from quarries to their refashioning as tourist sites. We encounter technicians, scientists, farmers, artisans; people who were born and raised on the mountains; Japanese tourists visiting the "highest point in Europe" (which, ironically, is shrouded in fog, thus interrogating ideas of visibility, landscape, and panorama); a crew making a Bollywood film; a demonstration against the building of a high-speed railway. Episodes pertaining peoples of different nationalities and languages are placed side by side, without indication that a border has been crossed. This is not to say that borders are not in sight. The film, indeed, foregrounds the border as pervasive, both in its porosity and its insurmountability, through images of barriers checked by guards and soldiers and ubiquitous acts of surveillance, security and law enforcement. The episode on

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the temporary border erected in defense of the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland—which is attended yearly by some 2,500 international leaders from business, politics, economy and journalism—is significantly placed in the middle of the screen time, suggesting that borders emanate from the will to protect the affluent, global elite, and the financial centers of power.

Alpi was shot in Super16, a format that enhances the physical grain of matter—and mountains are the folds of the earth's matter par excellence. The tension generated by the fold is, in Deleuzian terms, an extension of each term into the other. Linke actualizes this co-extension through editing that carefully avoids emphasizing the film's crossing of borders, as well as a view of the landscape from the outside. In so doing, *Alpi* erases the distinction between here and there, us and them, local and global, center and periphery. In a place entirely crisscrossed by national borders, and that is a massive border in itself, it carefully extends into each other the couples of terms that are normally cast as mutually exclusive by ideological border discourse. The film's method enforces a range of perceptive readjustments, as in a series of parallactic views, which achieve what we could call with Deleuze an "optical fold." One of the most macroscopic examples of such a method is the episode in which we discover that the Alpine ski resort we have been admiring is in fact a large indoor replica situated in a Dubai shopping centre (Fig. 1). As Bruno Latour has warned: "Going to the Alps? Thinking of trekking outdoors? Dreaming of skiing in Switzerland? Watch Armin Linke's film first. Beware. You will always be inside, deep inside laboratories, factories, ski resorts, or Swiss bunkers hidden in the mountains" (quoted in Linke 2010). This achievement is the result of choices both technical and aesthetic. The film purposefully de-emphasizes the horizon, for instance, and thus the idea of an ultimate border. As Linke has explained:

> we did not use a wide-angle to show the whole landscape, or a tele to show distant things closer. Especially no wide-angle, which is a lens that is always used in mountain films to show the horizon, and in action films to create a more spectacular perspective. And we always have a fixed camera pan and camera movements that are typically used in films to show the "panorama." (Linke and Pausinger 2020)

This results in a continuous movement of extension: "Armin Linke has succeeded in doing with film what he has been doing for years with photography: situate the envelopes inside which our existence unfolds" (Latour quoted in Linke 2010). The film's perceptual unfolding of the two terms of the fold ultimately challenges the concept of the Alps as a physical border. Rather, ideas of porosity, imbrication, contiguity, mirroring and reversibility are evoked and explored, and ideas of authenticity, purity and national or European identity become deeply problematized.

Stretching, decelerating: Philip Scheffner's *Havarie*

Havarie by Philip Scheffner opens by giving the coordinates of a point in the Mediterranean—38 nautical miles from the port of Cartagena, Spain; 100 nautical miles from the port of Oran, Algeria—where on 14 September 2012 a cruise liner made visual contact with an inflatable dinghy adrift with thirteen persons crammed on board and reported the sighting to the Spanish Maritime Rescue Centre. The liner waited 90 minutes for the rescue

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Fig. 1: Alpine ski resort indoor replica in Dubai.
Alpi (Armin Linke, 2011).

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to arrive, before setting off again. A tourist on board filmed a 3'36" clip of the sighting with his mobile phone. *Havarie* slows down the approximately 5,400 frames of this unedited clip, stretching it to a staggering 90-minute duration, through a step-printing process. If *Havarie* is slow cinema, however, it is so at two different speeds. While the image track is nearly motionless, the sound track keeps changing places, countries, languages, and times. As we watch the portion of sea framed by the phone, and the distant dinghy with the adrift migrants waving and looking towards the liner and the lens, we listen to a complex documentary audio track composed of several sources; among them recordings of the radio traffic between the cruise liner, the Cartagena port authorities, and the rescue cruiser and helicopter, and interviews with the Algerian refugees who were on the dinghy, the captain and international crew of a container ship with sailors from Ukraine, Russia, the Philippines, which encountered the dinghy, a husband and wife who worked on the cruise liner, and Terry Diamond, the Belfast security man who shot the original video clip. These multi-sited voices superimposed over the infinitely slowed-down images interweave stories of emigration, death, war, terrorism, and borders from the present and the past, thus profoundly complicating our understanding of both the current politics of the EU's outer frontier and the "thinness" of the media images of endangered migrants crossing the Mediterranean. In *Havarie*, indeed, "while we look at the surface of the sea, a space is opened out, indeed many spaces, many living spaces" (Wolf 2016, 8). The experiment is reminiscent of Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), with its rich tapestry of voices and sounds paired to an extremely simplified image track, which in *Havarie* also is predominantly blue.

In *Havarie*, the step-printing reduces the video clip to its individual frames. Occasionally, the ticking noise of the frames slowly advancing one frame per second is allowed to emerge from the voices and sounds dominating the soundtrack, resembling a clock's hand marking the time. Time is indeed a crucial element of the film. It becomes all at once literal, as in the real time of the waiting for the arrival of the rescue teams; projected, as in the changing ETAs called at regular intervals by the operators; and subjective, as in the infinitely stretched experience of being at sea. The image track's infinite slowness is hallucinatory for the spectator, not least because of the impression made by the blue of the waves and the sunlight hitting them, and the anxiety generated by the sight of the fragile, helpless dinghy with its pitiable human cargo. To describe this affective experience, Nilgun Bayraktar has evoked Craig Martin's concept of "turbulent stillness"—"a purposefully paradoxical nomenclature that is intended to illustrate how stillness in undocumented migration is riven with uncertainty and instability" (2019, 359). As producers Merle Kröger and Philip Scheffner wrote, "[t]he reflections in the water and the slowing down of the material produce 'ghost images': the dinghy seems to multiply, to elude our grasp, and even disappears from our field of vision in the end" (2015). The stretched temporality of the experience of watching the film, then, is a (distant) echo of that of the migrants crossing the sea as border; its affective visuality hints at, without ever claiming to reproduce, the experience of being cast adrift in the immensity of open waters, and at the hallucinations from which migrants crossing the Mediterranean often suffer, as described by the voice of one of the *harragas*—the North African migrants who try to reach Europe

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in makeshift boats. The uncanny experience of being at sea for a very long time is also touched upon by several voices, including professional sailors who talk about how time feels radically different while on board. Rescue and surveillance operators, then, discuss the infinitely stretched, similarly hypnotic experience of staring at a screen for long hours.

As Kühnemund highlights, in *Havarie* "the spectating turns into waiting" (2018, 141). All the film's temporalities, indeed, both visual and sonic have to do with waiting—waiting for something to happen, waiting for someone to appear, waiting to be rescued, waiting to land. In so doing, the film materializes the border as a mainly temporal experience dominated by the act of waiting, and the border itself as an apparatus that has the purpose not to stop but, as already mentioned, "to decelerate the project of migration" (Ellebrecht 2013, 49).

The deceleration of the frame-per-second rate has another important effect, in that the low quality of the mobile phone image of the original video clip is further degraded in *Havarie* by the above-described operation of "stretching." The German word *Havarie* refers to a disastrous engine failure, resulting in the shipwreck; but it could also be referred to the breakdown of the image itself. In her discussion of the "poor image," Hito Steyerl comments that cell-phone cameras contribute to the production and circulation of poor images, whose "optical connections – collective editing, file sharing, or grassroot distribution circles – reveal erratic and coincidental links between producers everywhere, which simultaneously constitute dispersed audiences" (2009). In the case of *Havarie*, Philip Scheffner is at once a dispersed, coincidental spectator of the YouTube clip by Terry Diamond, and a producer who appropriates and puts the clip back into circulation, this time within the milieu of international film festivals and the circles of experimental documentary. Yet, it is not by glorifying the clip but by breaking it down that the potential of the poor image for critiquing regimes of vision in relation to the in/visibility of the border becomes fully unlocked. The rapidity with which YouTube clips are normally consumed is foreclosed, as we are made to watch at an excruciatingly slow pace both the imperfections of the amateur video capturing the "excitement" of "real life as it happens," and the image of the helpless migrants waving at us. Equally, the near-immobility of the image, as Bayraktar has remarked, breaks "the hegemony of the visual in the global mediascape" (2019, 362), and obliterates the "border spectacle" (2019, 363). Staring at the nearly stilled image, indeed, we experience not a dominant viewpoint but proprioceptive deprivation. At one point, the camera leaves the dinghy and tracks laterally to show us first one side of the cruise liner, then the other. The digital image collapses; flashes of saturated color—green, purple—striate and fill the screen (Fig. 2). Commenting on this crucial moment, Kröger and Scheffner write that "the film doesn't spare us from the tracking shot that leads us to our own position: the huge ship of glass and steel and the tourists staring off into the distance. We are bystanders" (2015). It is not so much the tracking shot but its radical deceleration, its catastrophic *Havarie* —and that of the image overall in this film—that force us to recognize, and very slowly experience, the problematic politics of our own position as both creators and consumers of border images.

Parataxis and anamorphosis: Tadhg O'Sullivan's *The Great Wall*

In Tadhg O'Sullivan's *The Great Wall*, which premiered at the 2015

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Fig. 2: Breaking down of the image. *Havarie* (Philip Scheffner, 2016).

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Dublin International Film Festival, passages of Kafka's short story "At the Building of the Great Wall of China" ("Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer," 1917) are read out, in the original language, by a woman's voice over images of the EU's heavily militarized southern and eastern frontiers and other parts of the continent. The locations, which are never explicitly signposted but are simply shown, and thus not all of which are easily identifiable, include the Spanish autonomous city of Melilla, on the northern coast of Africa, bordering with Morocco; refugee centers in Bulgaria; the Polish–Ukrainian border; Athens's Syntagma Square; the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex's headquarters in Warsaw; Paris; Berlin; and London. Images of borders are pervasive in the film. These are sometimes conspicuous, "hard" borders, as in the fences at the EU's southern limit, or "borderlands" such as the Mediterranean Sea, which is patrolled and scrutinized by helicopters, boats and surveillance cameras.[9] The border is then evoked more subtly via a range of smaller walls, fences, police cordons, as well as intangible but equally or even more impervious barriers—such as those constituted by imposing buildings in the centers of the economic power, like the City of London, which convey impenetrability—or by ubiquitous technologies of surveillance and face recognition.

The concept of the border is also brought into focus verbally, by means of Kafka's story, which is about the Great Wall and, specifically, the process of its construction. It is a monologue narrated by one of the builders of the Wall, an old man who spent his entire life at the south-eastern margin of the Chinese empire. The man describes the Wall's counterintuitive method of construction, which proceeds in sections, rather than progressively and continuously, with gaps left in between sections:

> It was carried out in the following manner: groups of about twenty workers were formed, each of which had to take on a section of the wall, about five hundred metres. A neighbouring group then built a wall of similar length to meet it. But afterwards, when the sections were fully joined, construction was not continued on any further at the end of this thousand-metre section. Instead the groups of workers were shipped off again to build the wall in completely different regions. Naturally, with this method many large gaps arose, which were filled in only gradually and slowly, many of them not until after it had already been reported that the building of the wall was complete. In fact, there are said to be gaps which have never been built in at all, although that's merely an assertion which probably belongs among the many legends which have arisen about the structure and which, for individual people at least, are impossible to prove with their own eyes and according to their own standards, because the structure is so immense. ([1917] 2020)

As is typical of Kafka's work, this story has been read metaphorically by many critics from early on, with the Wall standing in for entities such as the state, Jewish Law, or culture, readings that have subsequently been shaped by evolving critical approaches including postcolonialism and orientalism.[10] Nellie Munin (2019) has drawn an engaging comparison between the construction of the Wall and of the Chinese empire in Kafka and the formation of the European Union. O'Sullivan's film rather invites us to compare Kafka's Wall to the EU's outer border, while also using the text to explore broad questions of power and control, and the role of the border in relation to both.

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The film, indeed, encourages us to see the unfinished construction of the Wall in Kafka's story, with its gaps and weaknesses, as a powerful commentary on the incomplete nature and ultimate inadequacy of hard borders. Reece Jones, for instance, points at the constitutive deficiency of the border when he observes that "[t]he necessity of re-narrating and constantly patrolling boundaries is evidence of their incompleteness, a fact which allows for further contestation and re-evaluation" (2009, 183). When a border is of the magnitude required by an entity of the size of the EU, then, its inchoateness is even more obvious. The film clarifies this point by insisting on the borderwork activities of those who incessantly patrol, defend, inspect, and scrutinize the border, in person or via technologies of surveillance. The same point is also conveyed by means of a structural choice. The film may indeed be said to mimic and reproduce the perplexing method of the Great Wall's construction. As in Kafka's story groups of builders are periodically moved and sent to vastly different regions, in a way that seems devoid of logic, so the film keeps changing setting, journeying from Europe's outer border to various continental locations and back again. The reasons behind each change of location is not self-evident; this choice is further compounded by the radically paratactic mode of the transitions: relationships of coordination or subordination between sequences (and locations) are never made explicit. The film's parataxis invites the spectator to an intense activity of interpretation, in particular of the possible connections between Kafka's text and the different scenes and sites that are visualized by the film. While analogies may be traced, the overarching connection that emerges is the one between the outer border of the EU and a range of internal sites at which the EU's structures of power and control become visible: Frontex's headquarters, refugee asylums, and various centers of law enforcement and economic and political power.

Kafka's story explicitly reflects on power, connecting it to the will at the origin of the construction of the Wall. This is associated at first with authority—as a response to the perceived need to protect the inhabitants from the peoples of the North (the South in the film's adaptation of the text)—who, in an act of textbook othering, are depicted as a savage, even monstrous threat generating profoundly irrational fears. At the end, however, the narrator reveals that the decision to build the Wall predates the current regime and, therefore, emanates from power itself, seen as an almost abstract force that comes before any historical embodiment of it. The Wall, thus, is necessary to power; it is its very foundation. The film ends on the truly Kafkaesque image of empty leather armchairs, which brilliantly evoke faceless executive power, whose sole purpose is to exert control, and safeguard itself. From the setting, it is clear that we find ourselves in a European center of finance or politics; the scene, indeed, was filmed in the Ministry of Finance in Berlin. Behind the EU's center of governance, then, a more sinister force is identified: power as power, as well as the capital as power. Interestingly, this is precisely the force that thrives on the free circulation of goods in a custom-free, "borderless" world. This power is surrounded by an invisible frontier that feels infinitely more impenetrable than the visible, hard border of the South—which needs constant patrolling and surveillance, and which is periodically "jumped" by migrants.

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The film, then, shows that the border is constructed by power not for a real need for protection, but to establish and perpetuate itself. The film's paratactic movements from the outer border to the heart of Europe effectively amount to a careful unfolding of the EU's outer border. The latter is the original fold generated by the active force of power, which in turn generates a scission, and therefore an infinite number of further folds, endowed with variable degrees of visibility—but usually more imperceptible, and therefore more acceptable to the peoples of "borderless Europe" than the outer border/Great Wall itself. The film's mobile structure suggests the intimate connection between all these folds, and the ripple effect of the unfolding of the border, from the outer fence to the prison-like gates of the refugee centers, from the invisible barriers of the City of London to the police cordons against the popular protests against the Troika in Athens, from the centre of the EU in Brussels to Frontex's headquarters in Warsaw. In this way, the experience of the border is shown to be diffused rather than condensed, and plural rather than singular. The distinction of interior and exterior is challenged by this experience of the border, which is everywhere—and in every time too, given the mythical narrative framework of Kafka's story, with its sense of timelessness, duration and repetition. The ubiquity and omnitemporality of the border is further materialized in the film by the use of a very wide anamorphic lens, evoking the idea itself of a wall (Fig. 3). As Manon Girault has written, "the merging of certain lights and angles lines create this other conceptual border, omnipresent throughout the film" (2017). These considerations also have a bearing on how we think of the quote from Kafka that opens *The Great Wall*: "A cage went in search of a bird." By the end of the film, there is no inside or outside of the cage.

Performing the border, bending the line: Essay film as *limitrophic* thinking

> We have to manage to fold the line and establish an endurable zone in which to install ourselves, confront things, take hold, breathe – in short, think. Bending the line so we manage to live upon it, with it: a matter of life and death. (Deleuze 1997, 111)

The strategies employed by these films demonstrate that they do not seek to merely represent the border or narrativize it, but rather to perform it, to unfold it, and to theorize it. A semiotics of the film-essayistic border image has emerged from this brief study. Strategies such as extension, deceleration, and anamorphosis bend and stretch the border ad infinitum, both spatially and temporally. Parallax and parataxis confound distinctions and defeat the typical binaries of border discourse: in/out, here/there, them/us. Borders in these films—and others that could not be discussed here, like Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan's *Grossraum* (*Borders of Europe*) (2005), Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo's *Sudeuropa* (2007), Lisbeth Kovacic's *Minor Border* (2015), Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *The Border Fence* (*Die Bauliche Massnahme*, 2018), or Isabelle Ingold and Vivianne Perelmuter's *Ailleurs, partout* (2020)—are multiplied, reversed, thickened, and extended into both sides of the divide. By making recourse to utterly filmic tools such as lenses, step-printing, transitions, sound mixing, they transgress the border as limit, and its characteristically thin representation as a line in the sand, as razor-sharp

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Fig. 3: Anamorphosis of the border. *The Great Wall* (Tadhg O'Sullivan, 2015).

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edge; and they equally challenge the thin image of surveillance technologies, border spectacle, and hegemonic media discourses. They perform the border by putting it into operation: they unfold it, and in so doing they thicken it. This unfolding is a *limitrophic* form of audiovisual thinking. As a process, it is, ultimately, a temporalizing strategy: it stretches, bends, multiplies, expands, slows down; it opens temporal gaps for thought, and lengthens our spectatorial activity of cognizance and apprehension of the limit. This slowness resonates in important ways with the stalled temporality of the border and its "turbulent stillness"—and it is a conduit for an essayistic, emancipated, counter-hegemonic engagement with the complexity of the world.

1/ The Schengen Agreement, originally signed in 1985 by five European nations, and later expanded to include progressively more continental countries, effectively abolished internal borders between the signatories, so creating a borderless European "Schengen Area" currently including twenty-six countries.

2/ Consider the results achieved in 2019 by anti-immigration parties such as Sebastian Kurz's centre-right Austrian People's Party, the separatist Vlaams Belang in Flanders, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary, and Matteo Salvini's far-right League in Italy.

3/ Frontex is the European Border and Cost Guard Agency. It currently defines itself as "one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing agencies" of the EU which will soon "grow even bigger," confirming the renewed importance of the European outer frontier (Frontex 2020).

4/ In terms of "bordering lives," Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) uses the concept of borderland as a theoretical framework for marginalized existence, often lived uncomfortably, in the liminal/border spaces of (at least two) different cultures, nations, identities.

5/ The concept of "borderscape" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) first emerged to investigate borders "not as taken-for-granted entities exclusively connected to the territorial limits of nation-states, but as mobile, relational, and contested sites" (Brambilla et al. 2016, 2).

6/ See, for instance, Best (2003); Woodward and Jones (2005); Sohn (2015).

7/ What I am articulating here by invoking borderwork as a form of audiovisual thinking is distinct—though not incompatible with—the "border thinking" notion by Walter Mignolo, which is a decolonial border epistemology, that is, "the recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the perspectives of people in subaltern positions" (2010, 736–37). Igor Krstić has recently invoked Mignolo's border thinking in his discussion of the position of placeness of accented essay films, which he defines as an "emerging transnational body of films [...] produced by diasporic, exilic or interstitial documentary and/or essay filmmakers [which] deal with displacement, exile or migration in the essayistic format" (2020, 55). The case studies I will analyze in my article do not fall in this category, though the notion of borderwork as audiovisual thinking that I discuss here could be applied to relevant accented essay films.

8/ Nikolaus Geyrhalter's documentary feature *The Border Fence* (*Die bauliche Maßnahme*, 2018) engages with the tension between Austria and Italy in 2016 around feared immigration through the Brenner Pass.

9/ "Hard" borders are those borders that are enforced; they can be made tangible by any physical infrastructure, from barriers, signs and guard posts to surveillance cameras.

10/ See, for instance, Greenberg (1958); Goebel (1993); Goebel (2006); Mlačnik (2019).

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