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Borderlands Tales: Representations of the U.S.-Mexico Border in *The Bridge* (2013-2014)

Opowieści graniczne: reprezentacje granicy amerykańsko-meksykańskiej w serialu *The Bridge* (2013-2014)

Abstract

Even though border scholars have for a long time reached a consensus regarding arbitrariness of borders as artificial human constructs, it seems that in the second decade of the twenty-first century “political borders separating peoples remain pervasive and problematic” (Ganster 2016, xv). Globalization and people’s flows at the beginning of the twenty-first century both opened some borders to international trade or services and at the same time turned other borders into almost completely impenetrable territories with its status reinforced by legislation and militarization, with the U.S.-Mexican border as the best example of the play between those antagonistic forces pulling together and pushing apart at the same time people and spaces on both sides of the border. As such the U.S.-Mexico border “provides a paradigmatic case of global border development” (2016, xvi) and hence the purpose of this paper is to analyze how the transformations of the concept of the border that took place at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries are reflected in American popular media on the basis of the TV series, *The Bridge* (2013-2014). In addition, the article will also examine the way the region is presented in the series, thus creating specific borderlands tales and contributing to the scholarship on the border.

Pomimo tego, że badacze zajmujący się problemami granic i pogranicza już dawno doszli do wniosku, że granice są sztucznym tworem ludzkim, wydaje się, że w kolejnych dekadach XXI wieku „granice polityczne oddzielające od siebie ludzi pozostają wszechobecne i problematyczne” (Ganster 2016, xv). Globalizacja oraz przepływy ludzi na początku XXI wieku otworzyły niektóre granice, umożliwiając międzynarodowy handel lub przepływ usług. Jednocześnie zaś inne granice zamieniły się w nieprzenikalne terytoria, których status jest wciąż umacniany przez zabiegi legislacyjne oraz militaryzację. Granica meksykańsko-amerykańska jest doskonałym przykładem ścierania się tych antagonistycznych sił, które jednocześnie przyciągają do siebie i rozdzielają zarówno ludzi jak i miejsca po obydwu stronach granicy. Dlatego też celem tego artykułu jest analiza, w jaki sposób zmiany definicji granicy, które pojawiły się w literaturze przedmiotu na przełomie XX i XXI wieku są odzwierciedlane w popularnych mediach amerykańskich na przykładzie serialu *The Bridge* (2013-2014). Ponadto artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób region ten jest przedstawiany w serialu i jak na podstawie tych reprezentacji powstają opowieści graniczne, które stanowią kolejny głos w dyskusji dotyczącej granic.

Key words

the U.S.-Mexico border, borderlands, *The Bridge*, border crossers, interdependent borderlands, immigrants, cartels

granica meksykańsko-amerykańska, pogranicze, *The Bridge*, przekraczający granice, współzależne pogranicza, imigranci, kartele

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Borderlands Tales: Representations of the U.S.-Mexico Border in *The Bridge* (2013-2014)

Even though border scholars have for a long time reached a consensus regarding arbitrariness of borders as artificial human constructs, it seems that in the second decade of the twenty-first century “political borders separating peoples remain pervasive and problematic” (Ganster 2016, xv). Globalization and people’s flows at the beginning of the twenty-first century both opened some borders to international trade or services and at the same time turned other borders into almost completely impenetrable territories with its status reinforced by legislation and militarization. Those transformations of border regions have been happening all over the world, yet as Paul Ganster observes, “[a]s the single best documented and most thoroughly studied case of a border region, the U.S.-Mexican border is the best-known illustration of the paradoxical continued importance of borders in our globalizing world” (2016, xvi) and as such it “provides a paradigmatic case of global border development” (2016, xvi).

The Mexican-American border in Oscar Martínez’s typology represents “interdependent borderlands” (1994, 8) which he defines as a symbiotic connection between border regions on both sides, implying “the existence of a favorable economic climate that permits borderlanders on both sides of the line to pursue growth and development projects that are tied to foreign capital, markets, and labor” which results in “a mutually beneficial economic system” (Martínez 1994, 9). However, as he claims in his analysis, in the case of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, they “are a good example of strong asymmetrical interdependence” (Martínez 1994, 9), where the profits of economic interdependence and the financial, social and environmental costs of this relation are not distributed equally between the two neighbors. In addition, the flow of people, goods and services can be encouraged at one moment in history and practically blocked shortly afterwards, creating what some critics call a “revolving door policy” (Ochoa 1998, 125). The effects of this policy are experienced by people living in the border region, often defined as “the border heartland” (Ganster 2016, xix), in the twin cities located along the line, as well as by those living further away – “as far from the international boundary as Chicago, New York, and Atlanta” (Ganster 2016, xix).

Consequently, the economic interdependence, combined with social complexity and cultural diversity of the border and the border region result in manifold definitions of both spaces, as they defy easy classification. Paul Ganster admits that “[p]art of the challenge of studying the border region stems from the difficulty of defining the scope of the geographical and temporal area to be covered” (2016, 8). Moreover, he argues that due to “the vague limits of the territory and the shifting boundary” the concepts deployed to border research are often outdated, including, “traditional political and administrative units” (Ganster 2016, 9). Moreover, as he argues, “[e]conomic, social, political, and cultural borders fall in different places” (Ganster 2016, 11) and they “are hardly ever static for long” (Ganster 2016, xviii), which means that the definitions of the concepts should also reflect this fluidity and address the transformations of those spaces. In his study of the border in the twenty-first century Ganster reinforces this idea maintaining that “no single approach can adequately explain the evolution of border reality and no magic paradigm can unlock the mysteries of the border’s past and present” (Ganster 2016, 14).

This complexity and fluidity of the concept of the border and border region are also reflected in the representations of the border in cultural and literary texts. Jesús Benito and Ana Manzanás catalogue subsequent redefinitions of the border that have appeared in literature and cultural productions under the influence of the transformations of spatial paradigms at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They depart from the concept of the border as a demarcation line to replace it with Anzaldúa’s borderlands, followed by more inclusive spaces of Alfred Arteaga’s border zones or Mary Louise Pratt’s contact zones (Benito and Manzanás 2002, 3). Examining the trajectory of those transformations in definitions they note that first of all, borders always “engender border zones, that is liminal spaces that allow for mestizaje, and racial and cultural hybridization” (Benito and Manzanás 2002, 4) and secondly, borders always have the somewhat paradoxical role of dividing and connecting at the same time. Claire Fox takes up on these conclusions and develops them even further, arguing that “[t]here exists not a Border with capital B but unpredictable boundary encounters which show how the border repeats itself in different locations and times” (in Benito and Manzanás 2002, 4), which predetermines the existence of the border on different ontological levels and reinforces its multifaceted character. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how the transformations of the concept of the border mentioned above are reflected in American popular media on the basis of the TV series, *The Bridge* (2013-2014). In addition, the article will also examine the way the region is presented in the series, thus creating specific borderlands tales and contributing to the scholarship on the border.

The Bridge is the FX remake of a Swedish/Danish TV series *Bron/Broen*. However, it needs to be mentioned that only the first season is closely based on

its original counterpart. The second (and last) season departs completely from the original and hence the article focuses mainly on the second season to analyze representations of the border in the context of the Mexican-American borderlands. *The Bridge* tells the story of Sonya Cross (Diane Kruger) and Marco Ruiz (Demián Bichir), two police detectives from the U.S. and Mexico respectively who in the first season join forces to investigate a series of murders along the Texas-Chihuahua border. Their cooperation begins with the investigation of the first, and as it turns out double, murder of the American Judge, Lorraine Gates, and Cristina Fuentes, the Mexican prostitute – the upper part of the body belongs to Gates but the lower part is that of Fuentes'. The two parts are put together and staged right in the middle of the titular bridge – the Bridge of the Americas – on the border between Mexico and the U.S. which suggests that the border and relations between those two states are going to play a significant role in the series. The contested or striated character of that space, difficult relations between Mexico and the U.S. as well as problems typical of the borderlands are subsequently revealed throughout the first season, including undocumented border crossers, drug cartels, Juárez murders, violence and corruption of officials and authorities on both sides of the border. However, as the first season is to a large extent influenced by its Swedish-Danish counterpart, the U.S.-Mexican borderlands “only” provide a context-specific setting. In the second season, though, as the series departs from plot restraints determined by the original Scandinavian TV series, the border gains much more significance and border-related issues become even more apparent with the development of the story. Hence the two detectives, while coping with their personal problems, have to investigate aggravation of violence and kidnappings in the borderlands that leave murder victims both in the U.S. and in Mexico. Their investigation reveals new ways in which cartels operate, adjusting to intensified border policing and stricter border patrols' controls. At the same time during their work Sonya and Marco, alongside with a couple of journalists, Adriana Mendez and Daniel Frye, who conduct their own investigation, unearth tentacles of corruption among both Mexican and American authorities not known to them before. The involvement of officers of highest ranks in illegal operations puts numerous lives at risk and leaves both detectives disillusioned. Consequently, at the end of the series both Marco and Sonya have a completely different image of *la frontera* than they had starting the investigation and the one they will have problems to accept.

The fact that the border and border issues are going to play an important role in the series can be inferred from the opening credits of the film where we see snapshots from both sides of the border. The importance of the two spaces is reinforced by the film's theme song by Ryan Bingham, “Until I'm One with You,” playing in the background during the credits. The lyrics of the song refer to the longing for

the unity of two souls/people and, implicitly, two places. At the end of the opening of each episode there is a photo of *The Bridge* of the Americas which is a border crossing between El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. It shows the constant flow of cars between the two places. Subsequently, the scene becomes blurred and one can no longer identify individual vehicles travelling on the highway but instead it looks like a continuous wave moving between those two places.

Such a presentation of the border region not only indicates that in fact both sides of the border will play an important role in the story, but also implies a complex and changing character of the border – it is often perceived as a topographical sign, a demarcation line, marking two seemingly independent nation-states, but at the same time it can connect those apparently disparate spaces. The checkpoint on the bridge looks from above like a line restricting the flow from both sides and such a presentation of the border suggests that, as a fixed line dividing two political entities, “the border is . . . the locus which defines and secures the integrity of a nation” (Benito and Manzananas 2002, 7)¹, making it impenetrable to outside influences. However, as border research suggests such a fixedness of the concept of the border is illusive, as is the idea of closed nation-states uninfluenced by exogenous forces from neighboring nation-states, owing to the barrier of the closed border. Due to the complex history of interdependence between Mexico and the U.S., the border does not always sustain its closed and fixed character, owing to economic, cultural and social factors. Both NAFTA and subregional programs, including, for example “Cali Baja Bi-National Mega Region,” assume transborder cooperation. This idea is reinforced by Mike Davis who in his examination of the Mexican-American border emphasizes its equivocal character and underscores the fact that “La Línea, even in its present Berlin Wall-like configuration, has never been intended to stop labor from migrating *al otro lado*” (Davis 2008, 27). He argues that instead, “it functions like a dam, creating a reservoir of labor-power on the Mexican side of the border that can be tapped on demand via the secret aqueduct managed by *polleros*, *iguana*s and *coyotes* (as smugglers of workers and goods are locally known) for the farms of south Texas, the hotels of Las Vegas and the sweatshops of Los Angeles” (Davis 2008, 27). Enrique Ochoa refers to this “historical pattern of encouragement” followed by “legislative restrictions,” defining this phenomenon as a “revolving door policy” (1998, 125). Analyzing the course of this interdependence, Ochoa observes that it “has often led to a precarious boom-and-bust cycle, injurious to both workers and the environment on the Mexican side of the border” (1998, 122; see also Antoszek, “La Línea vs. La

1. See my discussion of the aforementioned concepts in my article “La Línea vs. La Frontera – Representations of the Border and Border Crossings in Grande’s *Across a Hundred Mountains*” published by Palacký University in Olomouc in 2014.

Frontera” 2014). This divisive and connecting function of the border makes it a more permeable construct than the all-prevailing image of a demarcation line so eagerly deployed to represent that space.

Moreover, no matter how militarized the border has become in recent years, “[t]he border region . . . is characterized by a tremendous movement of people, both short term and permanent” (Ganster 2016, 2), ranging from individual shoppers through groups of people working for international companies on both sides of the border to the exchange of large-scale trade and investments. Finally, geographical factors also play an important role in creating orifices in the demarcation line – the mountainous and desert terrains in some parts of borderlands are highly inaccessible both to border crossers and Border Patrol, thus allowing a (however difficult) passage into the U.S. The character of the border fence on the U.S.-Mexico border also varies depending on the location, from complex constructions equipped with the latest surveillance technologies to less impassable constructs. Therefore, the border becomes to some extent permeable or porous, restraining the flow of people but not preventing it completely, just like the checkpoint in *The Bridge* that slows down moving cars but does not stop them altogether.

Those transformations of the border into a more liminal space and its multiple roles suggested already in the opening credits are reflected in the series itself. First, the concept of the border is presented as a line, dividing the two states. The aforementioned double-body from the Pilot is placed exactly on that line separating the two states. Subsequent murders and crimes also require the detectives to cross the border back and forth, which often involves certain restrictions. For example, even though Sonya Cross is a police officer, she cannot carry a gun in Mexico, as she would require a special permit to do that. Such legal limitations pertaining to officials, let alone illegal border crossers, imply a divisive character of the border. Crossing the border in either direction always means relinquishing one’s rights, which reinforces the separating function of the border. However, during their pursuit of the self-proclaimed killer the detectives visit different places in the borderlands of both sides of the border (for example, the desert where the border crossers are killed). Significantly, in the course of their investigation it turns out that in order to close the cases Sonya and Marco will have to unearth correlations between those spaces, as the events happening on both sides of the border are closely related. Throughout the series it becomes apparent that crimes committed in Mexico and in the U.S. overlap and they originate on both sides of the border.

The first series focuses on the self-proclaimed killer, David Tate, and his personal vendetta on Marco that results in numerous atrocious crimes. The second series discusses in detail the operations of the cartel leader, Fausto Galvan, on both sides of the border and this theme exemplifies in a great way the transformation

of the border into the more liminal space. At first Galvan's operations are limited to either side of the border. He is the local boss in Juárez controlling the city and feared there but his power seems to be limited to the Mexican side of the border. He also does business with his counterparts on the American side of the border, yet, significantly, the border stifles his "entrepreneurial endeavors." His across-the-border business gains momentum when he begins cooperation with Charlotte Millwright and uses her tunnel to transport people, drugs, and guns. At that time the tunnel still symbolizes this divisive character of the border, yet the border itself has become more porous, allowing across-the-border contacts and encounters. With time, the viewers learn that Galvan in fact has bought out officers, policemen, and businessmen on both sides of the border and as such his operations can take place simultaneously in both regions and he can move freely between the two places. Moreover, his representative's, Eleanor Nacht's "cleaning operation" reinforces the interconnectedness of those spaces. Therefore, the way cartels in *The Bridge* operate illustrates the changing role of the border – it is no longer the impenetrable line separating the aforementioned classical body/nation(s) but part of the grotesque body/nation that becomes permeable and porous and that allows the crossers to transgress its space.

Another example that reflects the transforming role of the border is Eva Guerra's (symbolic) story. In the first series, she is "abducted" by Steven Linder who, owing to his personal story (his sister disappeared in mysterious circumstances), tries to help women who are in danger in Mexico (for example, those who are kidnapped to brothels or are girlfriends to gang members) and transports them illegally to the U.S. in his car trunk to put them in a safe house and provide them with an opportunity to start a new life in the U.S. However, in the case of Eva, after her abusive boyfriend, Hector, is killed she decides to leave the shelter and starts work in a *maquiladora* where she is spotted by one of the managers whose task is to find good-looking girls for officials. When Sonya and Marco finally find her in the monastery in Mexico she is in a terrible state after having been beaten, abused and raped repeatedly. As the story unfolds in the second series it turns out that her nightmare began at the police precinct in Juárez and her perpetrators involve officials, businessmen, and police officers of different rank from both sides of the border. Later on, Sonya and Marco discover that in fact the police precinct in Juárez is where many young women disappear. This motif is obviously an allusion to the question of unsolved Juárez murders and *The Bridge* suggests that the crimes remain unsolved because many people in power are involved in them and it is their vested interest to keep them buried. Apart from that, Eva's story in the plot illustrates this developing role of the border – from a line she crosses illegally

several times to the contact zone where the two worlds not only meet but overlap, influencing the trajectory of her life.

Another story – that of Adriana Mendez also shows how the border and border crossings function on different ontological levels. Adriana is a University of Texas graduate and a skillful journalist in El Paso Times. However, due to her origins and looks, she is often mistaken for a cleaning lady or a nanny. She is also disregarded by her colleagues in the office as someone inferior and has to prove herself all the time. The first time she can show her skills is when she and Frye begin to conduct an investigation that leads them to Mexico, her home country. This is where she gains advantage over her colleague and only after does he recognize her aptitude, zeal and devotion, which is the beginning of their long-lasting and turbulent relationship.

Adriana's story illustrates the existence of the "repeating border" (Benito and Manzanos 2002, 4) mentioned above. Adriana in a sense crosses this "repeating border" several times and those passages through geographical or psychological borderlands contribute to the formulation of her independent yet nomadic identity. First of all, she has to go through psychological borderlands in order to come out as a lesbian, which she does at the end of the first season. Then she needs to challenge the accusations of her mother who cannot get reconciled with her daughter's sexual orientation. That coincides with yet another border crossing Adriana has to perform when she separates from her girlfriend, Lucy, after Lucy gets stabbed by a hitman, instead of Adriana who was the real target of the attack. For Adriana, it is the only way to protect her girlfriend, while Lucy interprets that as a sign of disloyalty and betrayal. Left with those accusations in mind, Adriana has to cross this metaphorical border once again in order to determine her status and answer questions about her identity. Finally, in the finale, the viewer learns that crossing metaphorical borders has been an inherent part of Adriana's life, as she attempted a suicide a few years before, not being able to come to terms with her sexuality and expectations her family and community had about her. In this way Adriana's life-story testifies to the significance of the "repeating border" (Benito and Manzanos 2002, 4), existing on different ontological levels, which Latinos/as cross in their lives. Apart from that, through the presentation of Adriana's multiple crossings her story also shows how the concept of a "third border" (Davis 2008, 70) is constructed. He explains this idea, arguing that borders "tend to follow . . . Latinos wherever they live and regardless of how long they have been in the United States" (Davis 2008, 70-71). As a result, Davis maintains, "the interface between affluent Anglo majorities and growing blue-collar Latino populations is regulated by what can only be typed a 'third border' . . . [which] polices daily intercourse between

two citizen communities” (2008, 71). Owing to that, the border will always play an important role in the migrant’s life, either in its material or symbolic aspect.

All in all, *The Bridge* cannot to be treated as a document on the status quo of the U.S.-Mexican border and, as Victoria Byczkiewicz argues, even documentaries should not be treated as such, since they “may be informative, yet they must be understood more precisely as argumentative with the goal of furthering the filmmaker’s favored worldview” (2013, 2). Even Elwood Reid, the screenwriter, maintains that it is not the role of *The Bridge* and he “is not going to educate anybody in social issues,” since “political and social matters are like “vegetables” – people do not want to eat them unless they are turned into something tastier” (Grochowska 2014). Nonetheless, intentionally or not, *The Bridge* not only illustrates the still urgent and pressing problem of the U.S.-Mexico border but it is also an apt reflection on the status quo of the borders in general, since as Byczkiewicz maintains, “Borderlands tales the world round echo similar sentiments of nationalism, racism and nativism” (2013, 5). *The Bridge* refers to this “continued importance and divisiveness of borders throughout the world” (Ganster 2016, xv), which in turn, as Ganster suggests “will affect people far from borders as well as those who live in close proximity” (2016, xv). As a result, *The Bridge* contributes to the ongoing discussion on the status of the U.S.-Mexican border and at the same time is an important contribution to the debate on the political, social, economic and cultural power of spaces, which in the light of the current socio-political situation all over the world remain inconclusive and unresolved.

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