

Transgresiones / Transgressions

“The curtain rises, the borders fall: a city between the Third and the First World. A piece for two photographers, three visual artists and four writers, interpreted by two Europeans. A gardener builds a Japanese Zen garden from Hitachi television sets. A young woman takes pictures of outer space in a storage building. A group of writers sell poems at a takeaways and a professor of literature converses with ravens. The borderlands are open, the curtain falls.”

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY Diana Grothues AND Florian Geierstanger
 WITH THE COLLABORATION OF Amaranta Caballero Prado, Jenny Donovan,
 Abril Castro, Ingrid Hernández, Roberto Castillo, Julio Orozco, Jaime Ruiz,
 Omar Pimienta AND Marcos Ramírez
 MUSIC BY Murcof AND Nortec Collective
 SHOT IN March 2006 IN Tijuana (Mexico) AND San Diego (U.S.A.)
 RUNNING TIME: 35 min
 LANGUAGE: Spanish SUBTITLES: English, German

DESCRIPTION Transgresiones = Transgressions. Actually, the title should contain at least two terms because this documentary film shows two entirely different forms of transgression. One of them follows directly from the setting: Tijuana / San Diego. A border region between Mexico and the U.S.A., the South and the North, the so called ‘Third’ and the ‘First World’, between poor and rich. It is the physical form of crossing the border: the transgression of migrants, both legal and ‘illegal’.

A man is sitting against the metal wall that divides both worlds. He receives some final advice about confrontations with the Border Patrol (“Do not run away if you see la migra!”). And there is also the transgression of goods: Due to low wage level and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Tijuana, seen from above, appears like a gigantic conglomeration of factories. Between them, an endless stream of trucks that wait for hours to cross through a single opening in the border fence, just a few meters wide.

The bird’s eye view on Tijuana is also an example for the second form of transgression in our documentary, for the artistic one: transgression of the art, of the fantasy, of the thoughts. We met artists, writers and musicians who live and work in Tijuana. Those interviews create the second topic of this film, and at first sight they seem unrelated to the geopolitical situation. The art easily crosses the hard physical limit that the border fence represents to the migrant. In one of her poems, a writer flies over the fence, leaves behind the factories of Tijuana and heads towards the shining skyscrapers of San Diego. Another writer transforms into a mythological raven, guardian of the ‘plumaged children’. The cultural borders are crossed with similar ease, the music of the documentary is a hybrid of Mexican folklore and U.S.-Hip Hop. In this documentary we don’t highlight the stark differences of the border fence’s physical reality from the limitless possibilities in the arts as described above. Instead, when the poet Abril Castro says that “pain is also a form of contact“, we have to think of the borderlands as “an open wound” (Gloria Anzaldúa). Hundreds of wooden graveyard crosses are attached to the Mexican side of the metal fence, in memory of thousands of undocumented migrants who did not survive the transgression to the other side. (JUNE 2007)

Tijuana and Tangier – first essay concerning similarities between two bordertowns

We visited Tangier for a few days in November 2008 and noticed similarities with a city where we shot a documentary film three years ago: Tijuana. Both cities are border towns. Both are characterized by the closeness to something different. In Tijuana, Mexico touches the U.S. – in Tangier, Africa encounters Europe. Which qualities do these contacts have? Is it a collision? Or a touch? Either way, these forms of contact happen in various ways. In this text, we briefly introduce the following aspects: mixture of languages, tourism, migration and trade, and we try to show the distinct quality evident in each one of these, respectively.

In the North of Mexico and in the South of the U.S., if someone asks “Me das un raite?”, he or she needs a ride. An exciting form of contact happens on a linguistic level. “Un raite” originates from the English word “ride”. The mixture and use of English words in Spanish sentences is common in this region. Mexicans in the North of the country speak English fluently; in California, administrative issues can be attended in Spanish (Hispanics have grown in numbers past African Americans to be the largest minority in the U.S. and gain more and more political influence). Both languages cross national boundaries and create an area where both influences can be heard. A poet in Tijuana tells us that precisely this area is the realm of his activities. He distances himself from the center of Mexico where he doesn’t feel linguistically or culturally understood. We noticed the same omnipresent multilingualism in the city of Tangier. After three days our dreams were in French, Spanish and English, and the sound of Moroccan-Arabic words rang in our ears, their meanings concealed to us...

“I am like the bottle of Coca Cola – everybody knows me!” Just how many times has the city guide amused tourists with this sentence? His routine of baiting us in the Medina, the historic center of Tangier, a routine built on hundreds of contacts with tourists every week, reminds me of the waiters in Tijuana trying to convince groups of young U.S. Americans to visit their bars, striptease clubs or restaurants. “Tijuana” and “Tangier”, these are also brand names for a short trip “to the other side”. Mexican or Moroccan food, a snapshot of a zebra or henna, Tequila or Hashish. As well as everybody knows the taste of Coca Cola, the tourists know what they will get across the border. And this demand is satisfied. Tourism is a form of contact that has been exhausted, gotten cold by its routine...

“Pain is also a form of contact.” We remember these words by Tijuana based poet Abril Castro when we hear the narrations and see the images of migration and the militarized intent to stop it. People from all over Latin America pass through Tijuana in search of a chance, in search of work or education. They expect opportunities in the wealthiest country of the American continents: the United States. On the other hand, people from different African countries of the Sub Sahara region pass through Tangier aiming for the politically more stable and economically advanced Europe.

Both groups of migrants hit a barrier, if not before, then in Tijuana or Tangier. Strict immigration laws deter them, the sought nations lock themselves against those without resources. To those who can't feature financial or human capital (in form of a higher qualified education) the entrance visa is denied.

This political decision manifests in physical barriers: Man-made obstacles (concrete walls, high fences with barbed wire) as well as natural borders (the desert, rivers, the open sea). For those who are not allowed to take the ferry to Tarifa or Algeciras, the 14 kilometer wide Strait of Gibraltar is as perilous as the crossing of the desert in the borderlands between Mexico and the U.S.

Relatives meet at the beaches of Tijuana. Through the bars of the metal fence they touch their loved ones who set up a small business in California, San Diego's glittering skyline on the horizon. This view is similar to the one from the cliffs of Tangier: overlook the sea and perceive the blue hills of Tarifa, almost hidden in the mist around them.

Proximity creates longing for contact. The impossibility of contact produces frustration, anger, disappointment, lethargy...

A powerful, active form of contact is trade. We read news about a planned Renault factory in one of the free trade areas around the new industrial harbor TangerMed. This year its construction defies the recent world economic crisis. The crisis doesn't change anything about the calculated qualities of the location. The closer the production is to business markets, the lower the cargo charges. The economically underdeveloped region offers plenty of low-qualified factory workers. Reuters: "TangerMed transships one million containers every year".

Tijuana is located around a small hill, el cerro rojo. After one hour of trekking under the blistering sun we found ourselves below the transmission tower at the summit. From this perspective, big, grey squares dominate the image of the city. These are the flat roofs of the Maquiladoras, factories in which electronic devices are assembled. Only the thick layer of yellow smog was clouding our view. In a poem, Jenny Donovan describes the agglomerations of long, colorful cuboids at the customs clearance. These are the cargo trailers... (MAY 2009)

FLORIAN GEIERSTANGER, born 1981 in Oberstdorf / Germany. He studies art and cinema in Munich. His documentary films include: Spur (Oberstdorf 2005), Koenig der Spiele (Munich 2006), Transgresiones (Tijuana / San Diego 2007), My Way (Stuttgart / Munich 2008), Paulus: What you did in my head (Bavaria 2009). florian@geierstanger.org

DIANA GROTHUES, born 1981 in Tuebingen / Germany. She studies Latin American Studies and North American Studies at the Free University of Berlin. She is Co-author of the following documentaries: Parkbesucher (Berlin, 2005), Transgresiones (Mexico / San Diego, 2007), Luta por espaços (Berlin, 2007). In her final paper she will analyze the cinematic representation of the U.S-Mexican - border compared to the border of Morocco and Spain. dianagrothues@web.de