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Border as Proscenium

Constructing Borders
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In modern theatre, the proscenium is at once a liminal area at the front of the stage and a kind of frame around the action often literally embodied by the proscenium arch. When the curtain falls, the proscenium remains on our side, the audience's side, a visible threshold for the relations of sight that bind audience and action as subject and object of vision. As a zone unto itself, it gives bulk to that difference, poses it as a problem, introduces an ambivalence absent in the ancient world, where a proscenium was literally that, a proscenium, the space in front of the scenery where the action took place. Since the Renaissance, the proscenium stage has dominated Western conceptions of theatre, making them revolve around a boundary and the question of leakage across it, of mirroring across it, of the possibility of passage and interchange across this portal between fact and fiction. The proscenium gives flesh to a metaphysical boundary, and the ambivalences of that boundary – safeguarding the distance between audience and actors, even as it threatens to collapse it – are the signature and keystone of the theatre as scopic regime.

Scopic regime is a term made famous by Martin Jay; he uses it to describe how routinized ways of seeing can come together to form a cross-modal matrix joining elements as diverse as urban space, pictorial representation, and interpersonal interactions (2011:58). In Jay's words, the concept focuses attention on "the protocols of seeing and the techniques of observation, the power of those who have the gaze, the right to look, as well as the status of those who are its objects, the obligation to be on view" (59). His starting point is the Cartesian regime that wed the invention of perspective in painting to new philosophically-honed forms of subjectivity, and perspectivalism perhaps most compellingly highlights how scopic regimes involve the production of projected subject positions in relation to each other: most simply, the observer's disembodied eye, projected in front of the canvas, and the objectification to which it submits all that is represented there.

Painting, however, is only a starting point in understanding the scopic regime that took root in the Renaissance. The proscenium theatre turned perspectival painting's relations of sight into an embodied encounter; the proscenium mediated these relations in much the same way the flat surface of the canvas mediated them in painting. Indeed, Parma's Teatro Farnese – the first proscenium stage, built during Descartes' lifetime – used perspectival painting extensively in its trompe l'oeil staging. Theatre thus helped effect the imbrication

of similar modes of seeing across multiple sites. Standing halfway between painting and architecture, it was an important link helping conform a larger scopic regime across media and genres of interaction that were radically distinct in their material organization.

Here, I want to follow Jay's cue outward from his primary focus on pictorial representation, to think of theatrical space and its relations of sight as a model implicitly calqued onto and thus helping to organize geopolitical space: the space around international borders as a scopic regime in which the border consistently acts as a proscenium. Current migratory and refugee crises across the world may serve as an introductory example. People cluster into heightened visibility at political boundaries; bodies accumulate there, journalists descend, and images are broadcast to audiences around the globe, including, crucially, the countries to which those on the move seek entrance. "They" are a spectacle for consumption by a "we" constituted and reconstituted as such in that very act, in the act of looking, an audience that watches transfixed as the world beyond verges across the border as proscenium.

These are most often spectacles of securitization, of course: a drama played out between two protagonists, state and migrants. But their thrill and fascination – their productiveness, for instance, for politicians (Andreas 2009) – derives from their exploitation of the proscenium and its built-in ambivalence. The action threatens to spill across into the audience, and there is a tug and a flirtation and a catching of the breath with that possibility, even and especially when the drama is played in the direst of registers. For those who believe immigrants will be the downfall of the nation, its very survival is at stake in the spectacle. When the focus is on the life and death struggles of refugees, the border is no less a proscenium where the drama of their salvation seems to hang in the balance. Once these bodies cross the border, they disappear into the penumbra in which the audience sits. The show goes underground, and migrants' emergence into public visibility in the nation's interior comes across as a revelation of the concealed, of those who live "in the shadows."

All this, however, plays out at a level of remove and generality. At the border itself, its role as a proscenium can be literal, feeding historically into the larger structures of viewing I just described. In the 1880s, Mexico's border with the United States was barely a few decades old, unpoliced, and marked only by a string of obelisks. Nonetheless, boxing was legal on one side and not on the other. In 1888, at the border's westernmost terminus between Tijuana and San Diego, California, a match was staged straddling the boundary line, so that the audience could gather on the US side to view the spectacle prohibited there but allowed in Mexico (Félix Berumen 2003:123-124; Vanderwood 2010:73-74). The match was not, apparently, a unique event; Berumen mentions a bullring in Tijuana constructed with the arena itself in Mexico and a portion of the seating in the United States. As in a proscenium theatre, these shows align a hierarchical exchange of gazes spatially, staging and reinforcing in terms of sight a set of differential subject positions. By turning the border into a proscenium, boxing match and bullring calqued the relation between actors and audience – with all its inequalities, ambivalences and titillations – onto Mexico and the United States as nations.

This early use of the border as a proscenium was subsequently scaled up and away into mass-mediated relations of viewership like those of today's border crises. In the 1910s, the

Mexican Revolution was the subject of a brisk US trade in postcard photographs (Vanderwood and Samponaro 1988), but even without the postcards, the war – and Mexico itself – was framed as a show for US consumption. In El Paso, Texas, crowds gathered to view the battles in Ciudad Juárez either from the Rio Grande’s northern bank or from the comfort of the Hotel Paso del Norte’s rooftop downtown (Image 1). Similarly, when locals defended Tijuana against the insurrectionary Magonista army, soldiers charged San Diegans twenty-five cents apiece to watch from across the line (Fox 1999:82). Bullfight, boxing match, or war, all were but a spectacle for US eyes. The border as proscenium promised to keep the watchers safe, anchored in their own reality, even as it tantalized them with the risk of not proving firm.¹

These sightlines running from north to south continued to evolve and consolidate over the course of the twentieth century. Again scaling between in situ stagings in the border cities and national audiences, Mexico’s Programa Nacional Fronterizo (1961-1965) sought to transform the border into “an enormous show window 1600 miles long” (promotional material reproduced in Ward 2009:198; see Image 2). It did not just appeal to cross-border tourists, though; the program called on Mexicans to see themselves as being seen, as part of a spectacle now not of illicit pleasures or exotic dangers but of wholesome national value. In effect, it was an attempt to reharass the scopic regime of the border to Mexico’s advantage—at least, as determined by the federal government. The PRONAF thus set the stage for mounting anxieties around the US gaze in the border cities’ rapidly urbanizing context, where, as Claudio Lomnitz (2001:136) has argued, the disorder produced by modernization could not always be kept out of sight, confined to the backstage.

At the proscenic border, relations of power both between nation-states and within them crystallize as relations of sight. In Tijuana, the anxieties around US spectatorship came to a head in the 1970s with a series of mass evictions. The last of these, in 1980, was of remarkable violence and is remembered in Tijuana to this day. Even though the evicted settlements ran the length of the Tijuana River, they were emblemized by the one most visible settlement immediately adjacent to the international port of entry, and the eviction of this settlement was both demanded and justified in intensely scopic terms. Cartolandia was “un espectáculo de lo más desagradable y vergonzoso para el país entero” (a spectacle of the most disagreeable and shameful sort for the country as a whole; Hernández Tirado 1983:29), completely exposed “a la vista de nuestros numerosos visitantes extranjeros” (in plain sight of our numerous foreign visitors; Milton Castellanos, governor at the time, cited in Valenzuela Arce 1991:107). The fact that foreigners would photograph it was recurrently mentioned. Such commentary, insistently repeated in the press, framed Cartolandia as the inverse of the spectacle the PRONAF had sought to establish. Once again, the border appears as a proscenium. With Cartolandia as with the PRONAF, Mexican publics take shape around the idea of a US audience and of Mexican governmental agencies as stage directors responsible for orchestrating the right kind of show.

¹ In El Paso, the gaze of the US crowds had the power to determine strategy, to warp the lines of bullets themselves. In the battle in which revolutionaries took Juárez, Francisco Madero’s contingent attacked parallel to the river so as to avoid firing into the United States (Katz 1998:110).

At certain points, the proscenic border seems to flip, and these Mexican publics find themselves in the place of audience. The United States appears as a spectacle for Mexican eyes in registers of consumption such as Hollywood films; historically, it is not Mexico but the United States that has acted as a show window full of goods (McCrosen 2009). Just as importantly in today's securitized context, the US state apparatus of the border itself appears as a spectacle. Acts of state violence work as warnings, as affirmations of territorial sovereignty; the call to "Build the Wall!" was itself brandished at Mexican audiences (and sometimes individuals) as a weapon of intimidation (Dick 2019). In monumentalizing prohibition, the Wall sets in motion a paradox: apparently built to shut off lines of sight and relationality itself, it instead attracts the gaze, draws it in.

Nonetheless, the primary addressees here remain US publics; the north-to-south "one way hierarchy of vision" (Weizman 2007:133) is not in fact reversed. Writing of the West Bank, Eyal Weizman describes how Israeli settlements, set upon the hilltops, impose themselves as an unavoidable spectacle upon the Palestinians below. But if a soldier catches someone looking at a settlement, they may shoot to kill. The seat of sovereign sight as itself a spectacle is underwritten by the lethal reminder that, ultimately, only "we" have the right to look at "you." At the US-Mexico border too, the spectacle of policing attracts Mexican gazes only to repel them.

With the global securitization of borders, their nature as state apparatuses has increasingly been at the center of the show. As proscenia, borders are more important than ever as sites where national sovereignties are staged. And yet this function may have become more key precisely because the exercise of sovereign power is actually increasingly spread out, seeping, imbricated in processes of outsourcing and collaboration. In the Western hemisphere, these processes subordinate to US projects the immigration policing apparatuses not just of Mexico but of Guatemala and Honduras and beyond (Miller 2019). They strengthen US extraterritorial control by dissipating US sovereignty into a gangling governmentality, which the proliferation of proscenic borders obscures. Mexican publics, for instance, have in recent years been perhaps more transfixed by the spectacle of refugee crisis unfolding at the country's own southern border than by anything going on in the north. Proscenic borders, it would seem, jack up the fiction of separate sovereignties just where governmental control works in increasingly integrated and continuous ways.²

Mexican publics have been fascinated by new spectacles of migration, by the proscenification, if you will, of the country's southern border, but Mexicans must also come to terms with the settlement of newcomers within the country. Out of migrants' movement, out of their settlement, new relations take shape. How they might break with the old proscenic configuration and build new matrices of sightlines and subject positions, however, is a question for another paper.

² Weizman (139-159) makes a similar argument about Palestine and Israel: the proliferation of ports of entry puts on display a Palestinian sovereignty that does not exist, and this illusion has facilitated even more thoroughgoing Israeli control over Palestinian lives.



Image 1. On the print is written, “American sightseers near Madero’s camp. F.C. Hecox.” The image appears in Fox (1999:82); the original is in the Southwest Collection of the El Paso Public Library.

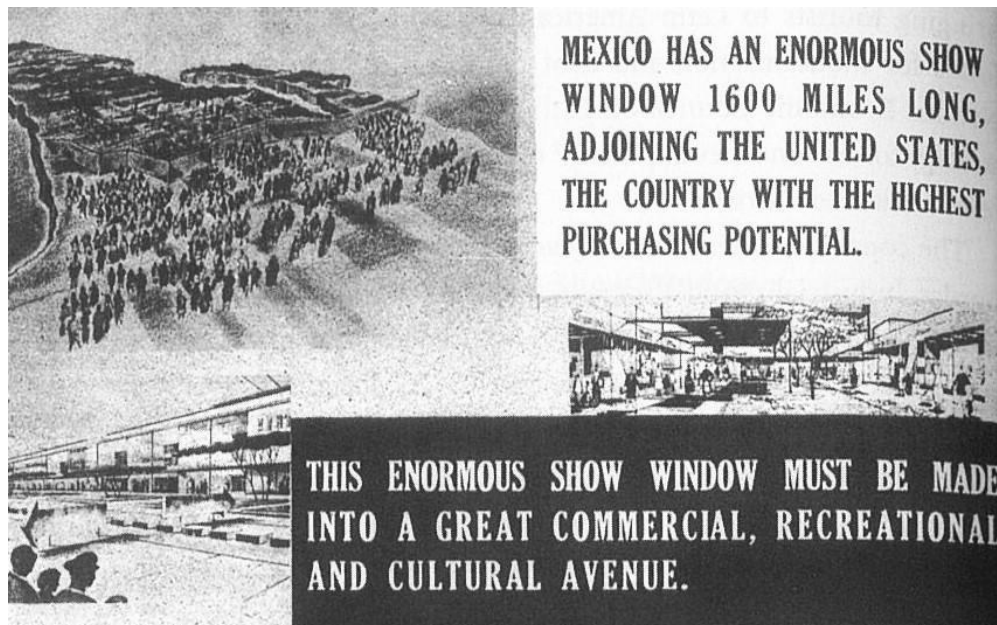


Image 2. A 1961 cartoon produced by the PRONAF in 1961, reproduced in Ward (2009:198). Note the image in the upper left corner, in which the border as show-window is literalized.

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