

# PERMEABILITY OF THE BORDERS: LIMINAL SPACES AND SURVIVAL.

by Consuelo Rosa Servan

"Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right"<sup>[1]</sup>.

Borders are abstractly conceived as lines drawn on a map. When, in reality, they are vast permeable landscapes, not easy to control, where life, in its many forms, passes through like a sieve. In this short essay, I contrast two examples in a shape of movies that enact themselves the liminality of the 'raia'<sup>[2]</sup>. Homi Bhabha gives the theoretical framework. The terms *liminal* and *third space*, basic to his postcolonial view, help us approach 'the border'. Thoreau provides the key position; the understanding of how vital is to engage with oneself in doing 'what I think right'. I created an art piece connected with this essay that was presented last year in an academic context, as part of the MRes in Creative Practice at the GSofA. Making this was my way to honour the courageous inhabitants of the 'raia'.

The River Minho marks the frontier between Portugal and Galicia. Despite the river separating them, there is a common landscape; it is a fertile, green, undulating panorama full of forests and creeks. Even the language does not change dramatically, they sound so similar that sometimes it is difficult to differentiate.

'MULHERES DA RAIA' [women from the border] is an ethnographic documentary film made in 2009-2010, focussing on smuggling activity around the border in the 1960's. At that time, both countries were living under dictatorships<sup>[3]</sup> where the economic model was basically an autarky that pushed the male population<sup>[4]</sup> to migrate. This left the women in charge of family and land, with many of them drawn into smuggling. According to Alves Pacheco<sup>[5]</sup>, smuggling was a way of subsistence, accepted as a vital lifeline for low income families. But, it was also a tacit form of opposition to the government. Participants of Pacheco's study blame this situation on the restraint, control and poverty suffered during the 'Estado Novo'<sup>[6]</sup>. They added:

'Although they are not political acts directed against the State, contraband incorporates a form of resistance from the moment they cease to be isolated acts and begin to gain expression collectively'.<sup>[7]</sup>

The landscape supports the illicit activity, rich in hideouts, shortcuts and escape routes. The term 'Liminal' refers to the space occupying a position in-between two sides of a boundary, implying the idea of 'third space'. It is, visually speaking, a very powerful location, that carries many connotations. For example, Homi Bhabha links the liminal to the idea of hybridity:

'These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself'<sup>[8]</sup>.

A diametrically opposed landscape is the protagonist of the next film, but, as with the other border described before, also full of the idea of liminality. 'THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA' (2005) is a fictional story inspired by real events. In it, Tommy Lee Jones' character brings back to Mexico the dead body of his friend, accidentally shot by a 'migra'<sup>[9]</sup> officer, (and quickly buried with no report) fulfilling a promise made to Melquiades. The film was shot between the Big Bend National Park (Texas) and the Chihuahuan Desert within the Coahuila State in Mexico; two countries and a controversial border in a dignified land.

'Mulheres da raia', where the women quietly confront established power, constitutes a perfect example of what Bhabha calls 'social articulation of difference' that 'emerge in moments of historical transformation'<sup>[10]</sup> and through border situations. In 'The three burials', friendship, loyalty and conscience act as a resistance against the law. In Gonçalves' film, we watch the now old lady smugglers following the same paths or walking cross-country as they did in their youth, remembering old days and becoming quite emotional sometimes. They also show some of their tricks, like a skirt with hidden pockets they filled up with contraband eggs or other goodies. Listening to their experiences and the reasons they faced the risks, we can hear a strong sense of dignity and pride in what they did, by following their sense of rightness across the River Minho.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Henry David Thoreau "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849) Later known as "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience", from Ranjana Thapaljal pdf: 'Introduction to Course and Hidden Histories in Music of the Iberian Peninsula', p.6

<sup>[2]</sup> Raia is a Portuguese term for boundary, frontier or limit. Literally it translates as line.

<sup>[3]</sup> At that time Salazar governed in Portugal and Franco in Spain.

<sup>[4]</sup> 'It was through a combination of these types of wage jobs [heavy construction works] performed mainly by Alberto in migrant destinations and the women's work raising cattle and crops at home that the family was able to survive as well as make improvements to the house and provide some funds for the two children's education'. "Strong Women" and "Pretty Girls": Self-Provisioning, Gender, and Class Rural Galicia. *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 104, No. 1 (Mar., 2002), p. 7

<sup>[5]</sup> Alves Pacheco wrote in 2016 a sociological study about smuggling, supported by the Universidad do Minho in Braga, Portugal.

<sup>[6]</sup> The so called Salazar's regimen

<sup>[7]</sup> 'Tendo em conta o clima de repressão, controlo e carência em que se vivia durante o Estado Novo, o entendimento desta problemática é perceptível. Apesar de não serem atos políticos direcionados contra o Estado, o contrabando incorpora uma forma de resistência a partir do momento em que deixam de ser atos isolados e passam a ganhar expressão coletivamente' (Alves Pacheco, p.52)

<sup>[8]</sup> Bhabha, p.2

<sup>[9]</sup> Migration officer

<sup>[10]</sup> Bhabha, p.12 check