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Discrowning the king: border performativity, humour and transgression around the Trump Wall

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies forms of creative visual resistance to a prevailing logic of border enforcement around the world – a logic aimed at curbing undocumented human movement, often with deadly consequences. These forms of resistance serve to highlight the porosity and triviality of borders, as well as the violence that increasingly defines their global management. This phenomenon is perpetuated through policies, rhetorical strategies, speech acts and media narratives that together sustain a toxic discourse of exclusion. Following a discussion of the theoretical framework of border abolitionism and a critical reading of performative and ritualistic state power, the article undertakes an analysis of two instances of artistic digital practices that mock the state border performance while subverting it. Both were prompted by the spectre of the ‘Trump Wall’ in the US-Mexico border during the 2016 election campaign. From the perspective of this article, visual forms of resistance transgress the border, exposing its violence and absurdity while reimagining it as a space for creative and alternative political strategies. The analysis engages with the concept of the carnivalesque, foregrounding its ambivalent character as a mode of transgression that can both reinforce sovereign power and, when reclaimed from below, enable forms of visual resistance that unsettle bordering practices.

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Securitization and border violence

The securitization of borders around the world has increasingly come to define the management of undocumented human movement, a trend that intensified sharply following the 9/11 attacks and their profound impact on Western conceptions of security, democracy and freedom. National security has since become the defining mantra of political discourse, fuelling moral

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panics (Cohen 1972) and hostility towards those perceived as outsiders – particularly, the ‘undeserving’, those who lack the documentation required for authorized entry. This prevailing narrative prioritizes state sovereignty and national order at the expense of human rights, while vulnerable individuals are systematically transformed into marginalized, undeserving populations.

As Huysmans poignantly observes, ‘Security policy is a specific policy of mediating belonging. It conserves or transforms political integration and criteria of membership through the identification of existential threats’ (Huysmans 2000, p. 757). It is not surprising that in contexts of securitization, borders, fences and walls have become the preferred tools to manage undesired movement. The premise here is that borders are not mere lines of demarcation that separate distinct sovereign entities. They are not ‘fixed or static lines marking territory’ (Walia 2024, np). Borders are much more than physical boundaries; as Mbembe suggests, they can be understood as ‘the organised violence that reinforces both contemporary capitalism and our world order in general’. He prefers the term borderization, which describes the process by which certain spaces are rendered uncrossable, but only for selected classes of populations, who are, as a result, subjected to racialization. In these places, speed must be disabled, time suspended, while the existence of numerous individuals deemed undesirable is intended to be immobilized, if not completely destroyed (Mbembe 2019, p. 9). Harsha Walia insists on defining borders as an expression of racial capitalism: ‘Borders are an ordering regime, both assembling and assembled through racial-capitalist accumulation and colonial relations that create migrants yet criminalise migration’ (Walia 2024, np). The securitization and criminalization of migration not only exclude migrants from the normal fabric of society, alienating them, but also provide a rationale for political interventions that become ‘the source of the violence not a response to it’ (Jones 2016, p. 37).

Borders around the world have been turned into violent and necropolitical spaces (Mbembe 2003). They not only restrict movement, but they also fail to prevent and often contribute to the people on the move’s death. Migrants are killed by border agents and by the military apparatus put in place to halt movement, in the name of democratic ideals of security and sovereignty. Migrants, as Jones observes, ‘are funnelled through the parched deserts of the southwestern United States, across the Mediterranean or Europe on unseaworthy boats, through ports in the cramped confines of shipping containers, wedged inside the engine compartments of buses, or stuffed in the trunks of cars passing through the Channel connecting France to the United Kingdom’ (2016, np). Nonetheless, the primary factor leading to most deaths is the restricted access undocumented migrants have to safe routes. Forced to depend on perilous methods mentioned earlier, they often lose their lives in the process.

This raises pressing questions: What specific strategies of control do borders play in this narrative of exclusion? And how might border violence

be resisted? This article will address these questions by examining visual aesthetic forms of contestations that subvert the logic of border violence and security speeches and open perspectives of care and repair. But before turning to the analysis of these cultural practices, the article first situates the discussion within the conceptual framework of border performativity, understood here as characterizing both the operation of the border regime itself and the bottom-up resistance it provokes.

Borders as performance: the cultural turn in critical border studies

The last two decades have seen an increasing interest among geographers in how culture plays a crucial role in shaping geopolitical actions, subjectivities and formations (Moze and Spiegel 2022, p. 1). Within what Moze and Spiegel term an 'aesthetic turn' in Critical Border Studies, there is a recognition that borders can no longer be perceived as static and linear manifestations of national sovereignty. Instead, their profoundly intricate and performative nature requires a more nuanced gaze: 'Critical Border Studies now conceptualise borders in terms of dynamic 'bordering' processes socially performed at both practical and discursive levels' (p. 2).

In fact, Schimanski and Nyman talk about two ongoing turns coming together in the 2000s, a 'cultural turn' in Border Studies and a 'border turn' in Cultural Studies. They argue that Border Studies has increasingly recognized that geopolitical boundaries are not isolated, but part of an interconnected web of power and meaning. The field now emphasizes the importance of examining the cultural and symbolic dimensions of borders, bringing together different facets of bordering practices, from policing, physical barriers and passport systems to international law, citizenship, political rhetoric, media, popular culture, literature, art and everyday life (Schimanski and Nyman 2021, p. 5).

On the other hand, they argue, within the realm of Cultural Studies, a shift towards border-related themes drew inspiration from the emphasis on margin and transgression that can be found in the works of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. A shift that is further reinforced by the influence played by postcolonial theory and Chicano studies, particularly Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work is specifically linked to the US-Mexico border (p. 5).

This interdisciplinary intersection is particularly helpful in a time when cultural productions – visual, textual and multimodal – around issues of migration and illegalized border crossings are abounding. As a result, the field of 'Border Aesthetics' has been developed thanks to the contributions of a series of scholars (Dell'Agnese and Amilhat Szary 2015, Schimanski 2015, Schimanski and Wolfe 2017, Ganivet 2019, Mazzara 2019) who have acknowledged the importance of accounting for culture and its

representations to better understand bordering dynamics, 'as their comprehension can usefully be utilized to enlarge the conceptual framework from which, and with which, we consider the border' (Dell'Agnese and Amilhat Szary 2015, p. 4).

Within the theoretical framework of Border Aesthetics, a crucial aspect for this article is the acknowledgement that the border is in itself an aesthetic construct, and as such, it is intrinsically performative: 'The appealing colours of the border posts, the overstated uniforms of the border guards at airports, the monumentality, and the ten-foot-high border fences or walls are not purely utilitarian: they are designed' (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017, p. 9).

This realization allows for a rethinking of borders that presupposes a certain degree of rituality, dramatic action and an audience. Nancy Wonders has spoken of state border performativity to refer to the ongoing 'choreography' enacted between governments (such as state agents) and individuals, where rituals of checking, waiting and surveillance produce borders as lived realities (Wonders 2006). Nicholas De Genova (2013, 2015) adds that this consistent ritualistic display amounts to what he calls a 'border spectacle', making 'illegality' at borders hyper-visible while rendering invisible the violence produced by enforcement itself.

Looking at borders from this perspective, this article seeks to shed light on the interconnections between culture and the formation, maintenance and transformation of borders in one specific borderland: the US-Mexico border. It will do so by first introducing the intrinsically performative nature of the border regime through an analysis of Trump's speech acts during the 2016 election campaign, and then challenging them through a counter – performance enacted at the level of digital arts – practices that have the power to propose a new conceptual framework that not only addresses the subversive essence of aesthetic interventions but also reveals their capacity to expose the absurd and nonsensical aspects of necropolitical borderlands. It is precisely this performative understanding of borders – as repeated acts that produce, sustain and naturalize exclusion – that makes Trump's rhetoric around the US-Mexico wall so analytically revealing.

Security speech acts: Trump and the 'Beautiful Wall'

As the following section will show, Trump's border discourse is a paradigmatic example of how border performativity operates at the level of political language, staging national identity and security as a grand, ritualized performance. What has particularly contributed to his ritualized state power are his security speech acts that occupy the public realm of political communication. In security studies, a speech act is an utterance which represents and recognizes phenomena as 'security', thus giving them special status and legitimizing extraordinary measures to respond to them (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 26). This is triggered

by the reference to 'existential threats that cannot be met within the confines of the 'usual' procedures and repertoire of actions' (Huysmans 2011, p. 373).

Trump's security speech acts– all revolving around the drastic measure he said he would put in place if elected to prevent the Mexicans crossing the US-Mexico border during his presidency– were highly mediatized both before and immediately after his first election. Several statements by Trump framed sovereignty as that form of power that comes with the enforcement of border security at the expense of those 'daring' to cross.

In a 2016 speech, Trump described his long-time promised border wall between the US and Mexico in these terms: 'On day one, we will begin working on an impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful, southern border wall. [...] We will use the best technology, including above and below ground sensors [...]. Towers, aerial surveillance and manpower to supplement the wall, find and dislocate tunnels and keep out criminal cartels (New York Times 2016). Much more than a fence, Trump's proposed border wall was 'a grand, awe-inspiring monument to national security, and to Trump's entrepreneurial statecraft' (Kolås and Oztig 2021, p. 125). In another speech in 2020 in Pittsburgh, Colorado, covered by CNN, Trump talks about claiming 'We are building a wall, a beautiful wall, a big one that really works, that you can't get over, and you can't get under' (CNN 2020).

The beautification of the wall and the insistence on its grandness responds to the logic of border rituality and performativity mentioned earlier. The aesthetic requirement of the 'new' Trump's border wall, according to the eight prototypes – that cost \$3.3 million in federal funds – suggested a project of massive scale. The height of the wall was expected to be 30 ft and a minimum of 18 ft high, while the north side of the wall (the one facing the US) was expected to be 'aesthetically pleasing in colour, anti-climb texture, etc., to be consistent with [the] general surrounding environment' (US Customs and Border Protection cited in Kolås and Oztig 2021, p. 133).

Even though Trump's security policies differed little from the ones implemented by his predecessors – President George W. Bush, for instance, built 700 miles of high-security fencing between the US and Mexico in 2006, and the Obama administration completed the remaining fences – his fixation with the border wall, as a tangible symbol of US sovereignty, and, most importantly, the related speech acts that he generated around it made his approach look tougher and unprecedented¹:

I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively, I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall, Trump declared during his election campaign (The Washington Post 2015).

In other words, Trump's approach to the Southern border is clearly strongly characterized by a theatricality element that none of his predecessors

applied. As observed by Kolas and Oztig, 'Trump's border discourse is unique in the way it weaves together Trump's 'successful' entrepreneurship, the performance of the border wall, and the strength of the USA' (2021, p. 126).

The need for such an insurmountable fence was fuelled by a narrative of panic and fear that Trump consistently built during his campaign and presidency, to scapegoat all Mexicans as criminals or potential criminals. During his campaign launch, he declared, 'They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people' (June 16, 2015); in response to the Pulse Nightclub shooting, he stated, 'We cannot continue to allow thousands upon thousands of people to pour into our country, many of whom have the same thought process as this savage killer' (June 2016). And again, during a speech on the eve of his midterm election, he claimed:

At this very moment, large, well-organized caravans of migrants are marching towards our southern border. Some people call it an 'invasion'. It's like an invasion. They have violently overrun the Mexican border. You saw that two days ago. These are tough people, in many cases. A lot of young men, strong men. And a lot of men that maybe we don't want in our country. But again, we'll find that out through the legal process (1 November 2018).

The performativity of the US-Mexico border is also central to the current Trump administration. On 18 April and 1 May 2025, the Pentagon established two National Defence Areas along the border with the Mexican state of Chihuahua, effectively incorporating them into existing military bases. Elizabeth Goitein, senior director of the left-leaning Brennan Center for Justice's Liberty & National Security Program, interview by the BBC, observed how by deploying the military at the border, Trump has turned it into a 'military installation' (García Mundo and Ventas 2025).

The construction of the 'alien other' through a discourse of ritualistic security makes the logic of the border not only sustainable but also necessary and urgent, which is exactly what a security speech act aims at putting in place. His speech acts do not merely describe a border; they enact one, mobilizing the theatrical logic of state power to transform a contested geopolitical space into a spectacle of sovereignty.

However, there is more in Trump's security speech acts than just a performative element. What is particularly striking is his reliance on a discourse of absurdity and parade – style display that recalls the carnival. The next section will engage with this argument.

The Trump Carnival: Bakhtin, populism and the politics of spectacle

Particularly interesting about the rhetoric of the wall in Trump's speeches is how his border regime performativity is less about physically stopping the

crossing and more about visibly and ostensibly performing national sovereignty, security and his own identity. Trump, as seen in the speech acts mentioned earlier, is more than anything interested in staging a spectacle of state power through what scholars have defined as carnivalesque politics.

To fully understand this aspect of Trump's political approach, I will rely on Gaufman and Ganesh's thesis, according to which Trump's erosion of democracy is a clear example of populism that they argue consists of a 'collective violation of the rules, values, symbols and institutions of democracy' (2024, p. 7). They call this the 'Trump Carnival', borrowing Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque that they reframe to accommodate Trump's unique performance of state power.

The notion of carnivalesque was introduced by Russian linguist and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984a [1929]) and later in *Rabelais and his World* (1984b [1965]), Bakhtin explores the tradition of the carnival across Europe, especially in mediaeval times. Carnivals are spaces for questioning authority, ridiculing dogmas and subverting hierarchical structures, while people are given the possibility, albeit temporarily, to transgress without sanctions. The subversive nature of the carnival comes with a suspension of laws, prohibitions and restrictions that characterize the 'official' and 'serious' Church-sanctioned and feudal culture of the time.

Bakhtin's carnivalesque focuses on popular culture, 'its folkloric response to hegemonic culture, and its use of laughter and vulgarity are all aspects that make carnival populist' (8). He sees in the carnival an expression of dissent, the expression of an anti-establishment movement.

While Bakhtin frames carnival as a liberatory inversion of hierarchy – and his work has been applied in the study of movements of dissent (Çelikkol 2014, Mnatsakanyan 2019) — later critics (Thomson 1972, Gluckman 1963a, 1963b, 1965, Balandier 1970, Eagleton 1981) argue that the carnival can also function as a mechanism of control, a temporary release that ultimately stabilizes dominant structures.

Stallybrass and White (1986) help to better understand this ambivalence of the carnivalesque transgression, stressing that it makes little sense to agree 'whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression' (14). In other words, it is much more productive to look at the carnival as a multidimensional concept that crosses boundaries between high and low, where transgression is always part of a dynamic of repulsion and fascination from elites; it can be threatening but also easily absorbed and reordered by the dominant culture: 'This transposition not only moves us beyond the rather unproductive debate over whether carnivals are politically progressive or conservative, it reveals that the underlying structural features of carnival operate far beyond the strict confines of popular festivity and are intrinsic to the dialectics of social classification as such' (26).

Trump's political language is a perfect embodiment of this ambivalence, where the carnivalesque becomes a tool of domination rather than a tool of subversion. His rallies, his exaggerated persona, his transgressive humour, all mimic carnivalesque forms. This Trumpian transgression is – Gaufman and Ganesh argue – anti-democratic, 'it is about taking joy in the violation of claims to equality and representation' (7), a violation that, they argue, is central to far-right populism today. In the specific case of his speech acts related to the US-Mexico wall, it is evident how hyperbole, excess and spectacle dominate the discourse. Trump's statements about the impenetrable, monumental, beautiful wall align with the carnivalesque communication, where politics is transformed into performance, and where the seriousness of the matter is turned into an entertaining and humorous spectacle. In Trump's theatrical speech, the wall becomes a prop used to dramatize ideological struggles and reduce a very complex geopolitical issue, human mobility, to a simplistic symbol. Yet as Stallybrass and White remind us, the carnivalesque is never the exclusive property of those in power. If Trump's theatricality appropriates carnival logic to consolidate domination, the same carnivalesque impulse can be reclaimed from below – turned against the spectacle it once served. It is precisely at this point of reversal that border aesthetics come into focus, revealing how visual practices can unsettle, expose and contest regimes of bordering. The final section of this article turns to these visual strategies of subversion.

Border abolitionism and visual strategies of subversion

From photos to documentaries, from artworks and installations to Tik Tok videos, visibility has become a crucial tool to express hegemonic bordering forces, while most importantly also serving to generate counter-hegemonic narratives and gazes.

Elsewhere, I have applied the concept of 'aesthetics of subversion' to forms of visual interventions that resist the distorted and exclusionary scopic regime, in other words the dominant way of seeing the migratory 'crisis' (Mazzara 2019, 2020). This conceptual framework allows for a recognition of the potential of aesthetic forms to challenge prevailing representations and discourses that tend to marginalize migrant experiences and voices. An aesthetics of subversion confronts the structural and regimented narratives and gazes around migration, through art practices that aim at reversing the strategies of visibilities/invisibilities, subverting the social contract with migration, and promoting a logic of care and repair. As such, it finds a natural conceptual ally in Martina Tazzioli's 'border abolitionism' (2023), which shares its commitment to dismantling the epistemic foundations of the border regime rather than simply contesting its physical manifestations. Tazzioli asks us to shift attention from borders as objects and national

frontiers to borders as socio-political relations and mechanisms that form the regime: 'Border abolitionism as an analytical gaze does not call for abolishing borders in order to fulfil a utopian goal but rather because its main stake is the border regime' (p. 15). From this perspective, abolitionism of borders is not about dismantling and tearing down, but more about creating new institutions (p. 19). Tazzioli frames this constructive component of border abolitionism as a political horizon of critical knowledge production on migration governmentality. It is within this horizon that the critical potential of aesthetics becomes salient, especially in relation to the use of the transgressive carnivalesque.

Reflecting on the power of certain aesthetics expressions to 'make critical fun' of borders and forms of governmentality, Matthew Abbey returns to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to stress how it not only turns borders upside down but also disrupts their capacity to govern, by opening up new ways to conceive and imagine the securitization and enforcement of borders: 'The carnivalesque offers not only a new political imaginary surrounding borders but an undoing of borders as they currently exist. Making critical fun through the deployment of humour therefore disrespects the violence of borders by showing their power is not all-encompassing, as opposed to only highlighting their devastating impacts' (Abbey 2022, p. 960).

To explain the subversive power of the carnivalesque, and its *monde à l'envers*, Bakhtin uses the example of the crowning and discrowning of the king, a ritual act in all carnivals, whereby in place of a king, it is a slave, a fool or a mock priest who is crowned allowing for the inside-out world to be sanctified. In this performance, the act of discrowning is highly symbolic of change and renewal. It is when the regal vestments of the discrownee are stripped, the crown is taken off, and all remaining symbols of authority are removed, so that a new gaze is possible. The king is ridiculed and beaten but never naked, since being naked would imply an absolute negation and destruction, contrary to what the transgressive carnival wants to achieve. In this context of ambivalence, carnivalistic laughter has a crucial function, to liberate from the fear enacted by the authority, counteracting 'the gloomy, one-sided official seriousness which is born of fear, is dogmatic and inimical to evolution and change, and seeks to absolutize the given conditions of existence and the social order' (p. 133). Building on this, Bakhtin emphasizes that carnivalesque laughter is a fundamentally collective experience, one that, I argue, embodies care, repair and transformation. In this sense, collective laughter not only resists rigid social orders but also fosters community, where individuals support one another through humour, contrary to Trump's carnival that is highly individualized.

Within the framework of this article, this collective experience is transformative. By subverting the established order, the laughter challenges existing power structures even if these rely themselves on carnivalesque performative

strategies, such as those mobilized by Trump. This transformation is not just about overturning the old but about imagining and embodying new social realities where care, equality and justice become the foundation of human interaction. In so doing, the carnivalesque spells a new light on the relationship between power and resistance, redirecting laughter and reclaiming its subversive logic.

As a collective subversive form of care, repair and transformation, the carnivalesque aligns itself with a counter-geography in action advocated by Taz-zioli, serving as an expression of border abolitionism. What follows is the analysis of two examples of ritualistic counteracts, grounded in carnivalesque aesthetics that transform the imagery of borders in response to the ritual of state power performed by President Donald Trump in his 2016 election campaign.

Together, these three frameworks– carnivalesque, aestheticsof subversion and border abolitionism– provide the conceptual ground from which the artistic practices analysed in this article operate: both insist that the most powerful challenges to border violence are not frontal attacks but imaginative reconfigurations of how borders are seen. The two case studies that follow demonstrate how this convergence operates in practice, through visual interventions that discrown Trump's wall spectacle and initiate new gazes and understandings.

'Best of Luck with the Wall': Trump Wall and its aesthetic digital subversion

President Trump's pronouncements have inspired a wide range of artistic responses including documentaries, shorts, cartoons and art installations that were interested in revealing the triviality of his wall project.² The focus of this section is on how digital artistic platforms have been used to reclaim and reshape the narrative promoted by Trump, offering at the same time a commentary on the surveillance aspects of digital technologies deployed to monitor borders.

In response to the spectacularization of the border facilitated by Trump's speech acts, American artist Josh Begley, known for his digital visualizations, created an aesthetic work in 2016 in collaboration with filmmaker Laura Poitras that enacts the carnivalesque counter-act discussed in this article, aiming to subvert the logic of the border as imagined by Trump. Begley's work is a short film called 'Best of Luck with the Wall'³ and consists of 200,000 satellite images downloaded from Google Maps via an algorithm that he designed. This algorithm generated high-resolution images of the 1,951-mile border between the United States and Mexico that he then put together and turned into a 7-minute speed-mode video showing the whole length of the wall, as it really is, a succession of various geographical

scenes of which only parts are fenced (650 miles to be more precise). A description by Sara Larson explains how the film poetically unfolds:

The film begins with the sound of the ocean and an overhead view of the deep-blue Pacific coast; as the taut score, by Jace Clayton (as DJ /rupture) and Andy Moor, begins, the images speed up, panning from west to east, allowing us to scan the southern border as if we're reading a book. The screen turns from beige to green and back again, dotted with construction, mountains, fields, forests, deserts. The arid landscapes are stunning in their vast impenetrability; the prospect of crossing them is daunting. In some places, the border is visible—partial walls exist in California, Arizona, and Texas. When the Rio Grande comes on the scene, legendary, gorgeous, and all over the place, it's like encountering a celebrity, or a dramatic friend who's a bit of a handful. The images race along the river's twisty aqua switchbacks as if trying to keep up, in a dizzying fashion, and then, suddenly, there's the sea: freedom, danger of a different kind (Larson 2019).

The project was inspired by an interest in understanding how this borderland appears and how vast it is: 'what does the geography of this landscape look like? is it industrial? desolate? populated? All of the above?', Begley wonders (2016). He recognizes that any border is a highly performative space: 'Borders begin as fictions. They are performed. They are lines drawn in the sand, spaces that bend and break and make exceptions for certain kinds of bodies. But borders are made real by the policies built around them' (2016). The performative and ritualistic nature of the US-Mexico border enforcement is exemplified by the extensive data collection methods. As noted by Begley, this data is gathered through a variety of means, including radar blimps, drones, fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, seismic sensors, ground radar, facial recognition software, licence-plate readers and high-definition infrared video cameras (2016). All for the purpose of a spectacle of surveillance and control.

Starting from this sensational AI and digital apparatus of border enforcement that the artist calls 'seeing machines', the film uses the same machinery to offer an aerial view of the border for what it really is: a long line of various natural landscapes, most of which seem impenetrable. Begley's hope is that this project will allow the viewers to 'gain a sense of the enormity of it all, and perhaps imagine what it would mean to be a political subject of that terrain' (2016). The digital work does so by subverting the hierarchical structure and by reversing the functional meaning of the border, in an act of counter-geography that ridicules the whole premise of Trump's sensational and performative wall project. *Best of Luck with the Wall* exposes the concealed reality that the wall is not only unjust and violent but also impractical, a subject deserving of ridicule.

The short film also shows that Trump's wall idea is based on lack of knowledge of the geography of the borderland. Republican Will Hurd who supported

a digital wall of sensors and security cameras operated by border agents and drones instead of a physical structure, commenting on Trump's administration and its take on the building of the wall, said, 'Unfortunately, people who talk about border security have never been at the border. There's a lack of understanding about what's really needed' (Fear 2017). All eight dystopian prototypes of Trump's wall were dismantled in 2019 because they failed basic penetrability tests. According to the Department of Homeland Security, the agents instructed to try and breach the wall did so with simple hand tools. The porosity and friability of Trump's wall ideology are easy targets in a counter-ritualistic act, where the absurdity of the norms is replaced and repaired by a call for free, familiar contact between people, as auspicated by Bakhtin.

What makes Begley's digital artwork particularly interesting and effective as a form of carnivalesque transgression is the use of an aerial vision, a gaze from above, which, as Eli Mangold and Charles Goehring observe, is a practice of looking – a way of seeing (Berger 1972) – commonly produced within dynamics of power relations and ideology. The drone gaze, in particular, situates itself within a scopic regime of modernity whose representational properties are perceived as truthful, especially in contexts of warfare. A gaze historically employed and controlled by State authority to push certain rhetorical narratives, the aerial vision also presents itself as an inventive and subversive tool, given the increasingly easier access to new technologies, including citizen-operated drones, or mapping software which are publicly available. Mangold and Goehring are particularly interested in investigating this counter-hegemonic potential of public appropriations of aerial viewings, and their ability to attract viewers to challenge political content (p. 26). *Best of Luck with the Wall* uses the 'seeing machines' of the aerial gaze – commonly used to watch over the border – to reveal previously hidden and distorted truths, in this case the geography of what is otherwise depicted as a metaphorical border, while also 'unsettling scales to alter geographical imagination' (Mangold and Goehring 2019, p. 34).

Best of Luck with the Wall discrowns the King; his authority is removed through a new carnivalesque gaze that also liberates from the fear, fanaticism and intimidation of the border carnival imagery. The idea of building a wall along the whole US-Mexico border is laughable. Bakhtin would say Begley and Poitras' project celebrates a 'liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order'. It marks the 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 1965, p. 10) by mocking its political ideology.

Moreover, Begley's project works as a commentary on the imaginary of the border as a tangible and physical artefact. As Parker and Vaughan Williams point out, borders have nowadays grown progressively more ephemeral and impalpable 'electronic, non-visible and located in zones that defy a straightforwardly territorial logic' (2009, p. 593). 'Might simply *looking* at a

place that has been so heavily politicized – a place abstracted into a sound bite’, Begley asks, ‘give a small amount of texture and meaning to a phrase like ‘build that wall?’’ (2016). Giving tangibility to the US-Mexico’s border, looking at its entirety, allows Begley to highlight the absurdity and triviality of Trump’s wall project.

Satirical fantasy and visual effects: Robo Trump and the grotesque

A second case of carnivalesque intervention in the imaginary of the US-Mexico wall that responds to Trump’s wall project is *M.A.M.O.N.* (Monitor Against Mexicans Over Nationwide), a satirical fantasy sci-fi short film produced by Uruguayan creative studio *Aparato* and directed by Ale Damiani. The video was created during Trump’s 2016 election campaign and was part of a new project named *WecanFXit*, by which *Aparato* intended to promote global change through short films, ‘putting a touch of black humour in situations that need to be improved or reverted’, explained the project’s producer, Leticia Almeida (Seymour 2016). In the style of dark comedy, *M.A.M.O.N.* transports the audience into a dystopian borderland in which some individuals, soon recognized as Latino immigrants, are catapulted across what is purportedly Trump’s wall after being abruptly removed from their daily American lives by an unseen force. These individuals include a surgeon, a worker and a series of stereotypical members of the Mexican and Latino community, such as the *quinceañera*, the *mariachi* singer, and the *chapulín colorado*, displayed together with other symbolic caricatures of Latino culture, like the *Quetzalcoatl*, the *lucha libre* and the sugar skull (Failes 2016). They fall from the sky landing on the other side of the fence, only to realize it is Mexico. Faced with this revelation, they begin to protest, asserting their right to be in the US. One worker approaching the wall shouts: ‘Now what? you fucking gringo, I have my green card?’; but after asking for fair treatment, his taco stand is forcefully tossed over the wall, while a \$450,000 invoice is issued to him. Looking at the other Mexicans he explains: ‘Ah and the gringo wants to charge us for the wall’. What follows is an even more grotesque series of scenes where the Mexicans are confronted by a massive robotic figure of Trump that emerges from the opposite side and carries a flag that reproduces the iconic Uncle Sam recruitment poster modified to feature Trump’s face and the caption ‘I don’t want you’. Robo Trump is there to kill and using a miniscule metal wiener he launches lethal rockets, executing many. A series of well-meaning heroes step forward only to meet unfortunate fates, with some being crushed and others, including a diplomat, fleeing in fear.

When everything seems lost, a colossal robotic figure in between the Virgin Mary and the *Quetzalcoatl* descends from the sky, and some exclaim, ‘it’s a miracle’. The *Quetzalcoatl*, one of the major deities of the

Aztec pantheon, is considered the God of light, mercy, justice and wind, and is represented by a feathered serpent that symbolizes renewal and transformation. The Virgin Mary, a paramount symbol in Catholicism, gradually supplanted the ancient idols of the Indigenous people, especially after the conversion of many Aztecs following the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century (Granziera 2004, p. 250). This syncretic saviour is there to protect the Latino community, and it does so by expelling a chicken that will finally terminate the evil Robo Trump. The last scene shows a dying Trump on a hospital bed operated by the same surgeon who was catapulted on the other side of the wall; the irony of fate.

The carnivalesque and absurd nature of *M.A.M.O.N* triggers a laughter directed at Trump's wall project and its related performative speech acts, including his plan to have the Mexicans pay for the wall. The mocking of the border is actioned with a gigantic retro-futuristic robot, obsolete and old, in place of the real Trump, the King, the authority. The robot recalls the grotesque body as conceptualized by Bakhtin, an in-between figure, an unfinished metamorphosis of death and life, of growth and becoming. Something threatening and degrading and at the same time implying a renewal, a positive aspect:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in all their indissoluble unity [...]. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 19).

Seeing from this perspective, Robo Trump and its grotesque and degrading performance symbolizes the need to reverse the gaze of securitization and replace it with a regenerating one that prioritizes justice. Robo Trump is a salient case of caricature that Gilbert defines as humorous 'when it expresses a reality as it could be seen otherwise, when it converts a laughing-at-the-world trope into a laughing-in-spite-of-the-self ethos that offers up an alternative way to visualize follies' (2021, np). Through distortion, caricatures operate as a looking glass, Gilbert argues, magnifying flaws and deforming bodies, as in the case of *M.A.M.O.N*. Turning Trump into a grotesque and caricatural figure fulfils the need to resist the intimidating hegemonic discourse, Trump's speech acts and their border fanaticism.

Stressing the important contribution that the Latino community makes to American society, for instance, *M.A.M.O.N* reminds us that walls and fences will always be challenged as obstacles to humans' desires and rights.

M.A.M.O.N contributes to the aesthetics of subversion put in place to reconfigure and mock the contested US-Mexico grotesque ritual of state power at the border. By rejecting that border legitimacy and embracing a creative, dystopian perspective, *M.A.M.O.N* eradicates any potential for borders to persist.

Conclusion

This article began with a critical analysis of the escalating securitization regime that, over recent decades, has regulated global undesired human mobility, fuelling fear within the public imagination while confining mobile individuals to enforced immobility, precarity and, too often, death. Borders continue to be perceived as effective tools of containment exercised in the name of sovereignty and state order, despite their systematic violation of human rights and their role in producing tragic loss of life. To confront the brutality of performative border enforcement, this article has explored the potential of certain aesthetic forms to subvert, care, transform, and repair. Drawing on the concepts of 'border abolitionism' as articulated by Tazzioli in the context of critical knowledge production on migration governmentality, it has emphasized the capacity of border aesthetics to generate alternative forms of knowledge.

The subversive potential of these aesthetic practices has been analysed through the lens of the carnivalesque, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin. Carnival is, however, an intrinsically ambivalent mode of transgression. While it promises the suspension of authority, the inversion of hierarchies and the profanation of official culture, through laughter, it can also be appropriated from above and folded into authoritarian spectacle. This ambivalence becomes particularly visible in the context of Donald Trump's political performativity, where carnivalesque excess – ridicule, vulgarity and theatrical transgression – has been mobilized as a tool of domination, reinforcing bordering practices and securitization through spectacle rather than undermining them.

Against this top-down appropriation of the carnivalesque, the artistic practices examined here reclaim carnival from below. The two examples analysed – *Best of Luck with the Wall* and *M.A.M.O.N.* – emerged in response to Trump's 2016 electoral campaign and its fixation on building a 'beautiful wall' to halt migration across the US-Mexico border. Drawing on digital technologies and playful subversion, these works offer a gaze on the border that exposes its dystopian and unfeasible character. Through carnivalesque reversals of perspective, they unsettle the seriousness of sovereign power and the ritualistic security rhetoric mobilized by Trump, transforming fear and intimidation into collective laughter and critical distance.

In this bottom-up carnivalesque, laughter does not merely mock but disarms, opening spaces for counter-knowledge and shared imagination. As Bakhtin suggests, such laughter liberates from fear, illusion and reverence for authority, while fostering collective modes of recognition and alliance. In this sense, the carnivalesque aesthetic practices discussed here operate as abolitionist acts: not by offering a fixed alternative to the border, but by rendering its inevitability unstable and thinkable otherwise, enabling what

Tazzioli describes as transversal alliances and solidarities to emerge across and against the border.

Notes

1. Some of Trump's enforced policies on immigration were however more violent. In 2018 the Trump administration enforced a very controversial immigration policy, the so-called 'Zero-Tolerance' policy on the US–Mexico border that allowed children to be separated from their parents or guardians at the border. More than 2634 children were separated from their families causing them lots of stress. Some were never reunited. In 2019, the Trump Administration also shifted US asylum policy by signing agreements with Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador that allowed the USA to refer asylum seekers to these countries to apply for asylum (Kolas, Oztig, 2021: 130–131).
2. Some of these projects are listed and briefly described in a *New York Times* article by Robert Ito called 'Trump Proposed a Wall. They Imagined How It Would Work' (April 2017). Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/movies/trump-border-wall-films.html> (accessed on 01/05/2026)/.
3. The film is available from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sle9p7tslpg> (accessed on 01/05/2026).

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