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Borderlands: an Exploration of Contemplation in Creative Practice

Deborah Templeton and Monty Adkins

Borderlands is an experimental audio performance by Monty Adkins (composition) and Deborah Templeton (text) and features the cello playing of William Mace. The work explores liminal states and the borders of consciousness. The text is performed by Templeton, and was recorded and mixed by Adkins at various points throughout the sound component of the work with the cello¹.

Borderlands was originally created for *Totum One*, an interactive installation designed by the British company, IOU², and premiered at the Junction in Goole (UK) in September 2014. A large white inflatable space, created by the artist, Lisa Gort, housed examples of IOU's current experimentation in 360° sound and virtual world technology. *Borderlands* was the heart of the installation: the audience was invited to recline on white deck chairs and listen to the audio

Deborah Templeton is the pen-name of Deborah Middleton, a Senior Lecturer in Drama and co-Director of the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research at the University of Huddersfield (UK). As Deborah Templeton, she writes short fiction and performance texts. All of her creative work is founded on her contemplative practice, which involves both *Samatha-Vipashyana* meditation and Kripalu Yoga. Her short story, "Tender Light" appears in the iBook, *Rift Patterns* (Audio Bulb 2014) alongside the music of Monty Adkins. **Monty Adkins** is a composer, performer, and Professor of Experimental Electronic Music at the University of Huddersfield. He has created installations, concert and audio-visual works, and a number of collaborations with contemporary performers, video artists and photographers. His work since 2008 has been released by Audiobulb (UK) and Cronica (P).

Borderlands was co-created by Deborah Templeton (text) and Monty Adkins (composition), and performed by William Mace (cello) and Deborah Templeton (voice). The performance was commissioned by IOU Productions to form the centre-piece of an installation, *Totum One*, which premiered at the Junction, Goole (UK) in September 2014.

¹ This piece is the second collaboration between Adkins and Templeton, following the iBook *Rift Patterns* (Audiobulb, 2014). Listen to audio track at liminalities.net/12-3/borderlands.html

² IOU is a British production company, making work across a range of art forms since 1976, including theatre, installation, and digital arts. Led by artistic director, David Wheeler, IOU work with an international pool of artistic collaborators.

through wireless headphones. Some audience members wore the black eye covers provided; others gazed into the blank canvas of the white walls and ceiling.

The piece is written as a series of short poetic stanzas, organized into seven sections in response to the structuring of Adkins' composition. The movement of the music provides a slowing and stilling effect, and the voice is designed to drift in and out of the listener's consciousness, just as the world itself appears and recedes when we are on the borders of sleep, or when we pay close attention to the arising and constructed nature of reality.

Templeton's text explores shifts in attention, awareness, and perception and reflects her engagement with meditation practices such as the foundational training form, *Samatha*. B. Alan Wallace describes *Samatha* meditation as a "contemplative technology"³ designed to calm and stabilize the mind and to cultivate "attentional stability and vividness"⁴. These are prerequisites for the development of insight within the Buddhist tradition; for the writer, they provide a means by which to sustain an attitude of creative receptivity to chosen stimuli or objects of inquiry. In the sound, this "attentional stability" is achieved by restricting the sonic palette to that of the cello and minimal electronic processing. The cello was chosen as the onset (or attack) of the note can be carefully controlled allowing a greater sense of 'calm' within the musical line. The focusing on a single timbre over an extended duration encourages a more attentive perception as the ear listens in to the micro-fluctuations within each note of the cello's phrases.

According to Bhikku Bodhi, the Pali term *anupassana*, usually translated in English as 'contemplation' suggests "close, repetitive observation of the object"⁵. Closeness to the object of meditation conveys a sense of minimizing the distancing effects of conceptualization; drawing towards direct experience by bracketing habitual and discursive thought patterns. This same attempt at lucid perception that the meditator brings to the object of their attention (for example, the breath) can be brought into contemplative inquiry, as has been explored by Arthur Zajonc⁶. A word, phrase, idea or image is held in mind with a sustained attention that embraces both the object and the subject that perceives it. Bhikku Bodhi describes this metacognition, which is at the heart of meditational mindfulness (*vati*) practices:

³ Francisco Varela and Jonathan Shear. *The View From Within* (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 1999), 177.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn. *Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins and Applications* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 21.

⁶ A. Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love*. Great (Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2009).

... to establish mindfulness is ... to adopt a particular stance towards one's present experience. I characterize this as a stance of observation or watchfulness towards one's own experience. One might even call the stance of sati a 'bending back' of the light of consciousness upon the experiencing subject in its physical, sensory, and psychological dimensions. This act of 'bending back' serves to illuminate the events occurring in these domains, lifting them out of the twilight zone of unawareness into the light of clear cognition.⁷

Bodhi's "bending back" is the deploying of attention in such a way that even as the object of creative inquiry is held in mind, the attentional field lifts into awareness the echoes, residues and associations that are sparked within one's own physical, sensory and emotional fields. This serves as a process of dilating both sensory awareness of the object and, simultaneously, streams of emotional response and meaning association. The contemplation, then, is of the word or image or other stimuli in all its rich personal resonance. *Borderlands* aims to retain some sense of these shimmers of multiple and multi-sensory associations.

*Heavy in the hum of the room, you sink into sand,
somnolent.
The ceiling softens.
Walls balloon and lift,
breathing you.*

(*Borderlands*, lines 14-18)

The "repetitive observation of an object" is similarly a key component in the structuring of the music. Throughout the piece only twenty-eight short phrases, comprising from two to seven notes each, are utilized. Throughout each of the sections these phrases are subject to constant permutation. In addition, each section is presented at a higher pitch, rising a 3rd each time, providing a sense of gradual elevation and distance from the physical world. Each section therefore presents the same material in a slightly different manner. This change is subtle enough for the listener to retain the sonic material as the subject of 'present' contemplative inquiry without creating a disjunction from the object itself when too great a change occurs at once.

Fauconnier and Turner⁸ have written in detail about the process of conceptual blending by which we construct new and emergent meaning from the fusion of two or more mental inputs. Deborah Middleton and Tim Moss have applied

⁷ Williams & Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness*, 25.

⁸ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

that theory in the analysis of ‘resistant blends’ in the creative work of IOU⁹. The process of writing the text for *Borderlands* entailed just such a holding of divergent elements in a single conceptual space in order to allow new meaning patterns to emerge. The initial impulse for *Borderlands* came from David Wheeler’s design for the *Totum One* environment—a ballooning white inflatable; a space that was at once enclosing and suggestive of vastness; a blank canvas cast as a ‘laboratory’ for virtual worlds. Creatively blending a fascination with inner worlds with the suggestion of a virtual world led to the idea of the world as a construct, played out on the screen of mind.

*Something on the screen flickers, resolving,
hoving into the blue-white light.
An emanation from the far past,
from the deep honeycomb of the brain stem.*
(*Borderlands*, lines 67-70)



Fig.1: Adkins, *Borderlands* (2014) Panel I phrases

The liminal nature of the installation environment is echoed in the liminalities of consciousness that *Borderlands* explores; the movement in the sound component is deliberately slow—the temporal span between certain elements being on the threshold of perception where one hears sounds or pitches to be linked in one long extended phrase as opposed to being separate events; the text toys with

⁹ D. Middleton and Tim Moss. "Beware the Dangers of Merging: Conceptual Blending and Cognitive Dissonance in the Work of IOU Theatre." *Journal of Artistic Research*. 2015.

the experience of falling asleep, draws on the white sheets of the inflatable to evoke a hospital or neuroscience laboratory, flickers between realities as the mind flickers in hypnagogic states. The disembodied voice of the speaker, inside the listener's head, as it were, responds to notions of an awareness, even identity, beyond the surface of the conditioned personality – that which Thomas Merton called the 'deeper, silent self' beyond the 'social self', and which is voiced in Juan Ramon Jimenez's poem 'I am not I'¹⁰. In *Borderlands*, the unknown speaker appears to shift in and out of proximity to the listener, even insinuating that she may be an intimate aspect of the listener's mind,

*At the end of tunnelling tubules, you glimpse me,
always a shadow away,
ghosting behind your misplaced words, lost thoughts.*
(*Borderlands*, lines 31-33)

Borderlands appropriates and dislocates a neuroscience vocabulary, suggesting that we might be in a laboratory or hospital, whilst using the associational properties of each word to evoke other meaning-possibilities. A palette of words drawn from brain research creatively evokes landscape.

*Now, you are journeying in intercellular space,
dropping deeply inward,
passing galaxies;
skirting the nodes of Ranvier,
adventuring on the crests of Gyri.*
(*Borderlands*, lines 23-27)

The shifting associations are themselves comments on, or illustrations of, the movement of thought.

Through listening and contemplating the work it is the artists intention that the audience will experience their own personal form of conceptual blending, in which they are able to construct their own emergent meaning from the fusion of text and sound.

¹⁰ Zajonc, *Meditation*, 30-31.



The *Totum One* Entrance Tunnel. Photo Credit: IOU Productions.



The *Borderlands* Deckchairs. Photo Credit: IOU Productions.



A *Borderlands* Audience. Photo Credit: IOU Productions.

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