

Michael Gott

# Screen Borders. From Calais to *cinéma-monde*

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Where does contemporary Europe begin and end? The provocative question posed by political scientist Jean-François Bayart is the starting point of Michael Gott's book *Screen Borders. From Calais to cinéma-monde* (Bayart 2009). The question has no single answer, but depends on the mobility and background of the traveller. In order to boost unlimited tourism within the EU, internal borders tend to disappear for Europeans. On the contrary, for migrants seeking to reach and cross the barriers of *Fortress Europe*, containment and expulsion facilities multiply. Calais and its *jungle*, the checks for crossing the Channel Tunnel, refugee camps on the islands of Lesbos and Lampedusa, the Ceuta and Melilla border fences, the liquid borders of the Mediterranean and the checkpoints along the forested borderlands between Poland and Ukraine are some of the external borders and peripheral locations that deny access to migrants in Europe. From the so-called *migrant crisis* of 2015 to Brexit and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, during the 21<sup>st</sup> century boundaries have become ubiquitous across the territories of European states. These often unsuccessful attempts to contain the proliferation and acceleration of migratory flows increase border anxieties in the social composition and produce waves of media overexposure that subject migrants to various

forms of degradation, including the annihilation of singularities, their transformation into a frightening mass of invaders or even terrorists, victimisation, confinement to urban peripheries, and criminalisation. Shifting boundaries are also characterised by the constant presence of monitoring systems: the stages of the migration experience and the attempts at integration are both overseen by a complex media environment.

On the other hand, there are many artistic productions that challenge borderland restrictions and controls to promote otherness, forms of creolisation and transcultural narratives. As well as condemning the inability to manage migration flows, borderland narratives provide a privileged context for understanding Europe's current issues and future challenges.

Based on the assumption that the mental maps and geographic concepts that define Europe can vary, Michael Gott's *Screen Borders* contributes to the visual and cultural history of contemporary borders, both inside and outside Europe. If the "screen apparatus intersects and interacts with the narrative representation of borders that this apparatus helps to produce" (1), then the concept of screen borders "hinges on and acts upon how narratives and images about inside and outside are framed, who is framing them, and what audience views the images projected

onto screens" (10). Gott, Professor of French and Niehoff Professor of Film & Media Studies at the University of Cincinnati, draws from common research lines in cultural geography and interdisciplinary research fields such as border and mobility studies to analyse a corpus of popular films, auteur fiction, documentaries and TV series that fall under the category of *cinéma-monde*. This expression, which Gott already used in previous essays, refers to transnational audiovisual products that are linked to the broader Francosphere (Gott and Schielt 2018). The Francophone dimension of *cinéma-monde* can be found at various levels, including production, distribution, and narrative. Therefore, Gott analyses the ways in which the representative dimension, production systems, funding schemes, and distribution networks of the *cinéma-monde* interact with the borders and borderlands of the EU.

Stations and tunnels, ports and airports, watery and forested borderlands: the chapters of *Screen Borders* develop, drawing from films and TV series set in these and other crossing spaces, a dynamic cartography in which images mediate and influence our cultural, political and ethical understanding of borders. Let us follow some of the routes mapped in the five chapters.

The first chapter describes how *Géographie humaine* (Claire Simon, 2013), transforms the interzone of the Gare du Nord into the largest square in Paris, a microcosm marked by departures and arrivals. In her documentary Simon explores the station in the company of the camera and her collaborator Simon Méribet, two interfaces that capture the flow of exiles, migrants and travellers, and return their life stories to the spectators. Unlike a crossroads space like Gare du Nord, in the Channel Tunnel the function of filtering and separating those who are entitled to mobility from those who are not is more evident: *The Tunnel* (Sky, Canal+, 2013-2017), drawing on the atmospheres of Nordic noirs—the series is an adaptation of the Swedish/Danish production *The Bridge* (SVT1, DR1, 2011-2018)—depicts the

climate of intolerance and border anxieties of the pre- and post-Brexit eras.

The second chapter focuses on the borderland potential of Atlantic and Mediterranean ports. The five films analysed, including *A Season in France* (Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, 2017), *Le Havre* (Aki Kaurismäki, 2011), and *Journey from Greece* (Tony Gatlif, 2017), consider the perspective of residents in port cities and depict their encounters with migrants and refugees, the attempts at solidarity, and the social and legal barriers to hospitality.

The third and fourth chapters explore the intersections of tourism with migration to investigate the overlapping zones between free mobility within the EU (one of the founding principles of the European project), the excluding barriers of the Schengen area, and the rigorously controlled external borders of *Fortress Europe*. Chapter 3 introduces a specific typology of cinematic travel labelled "touring cinema", that is, "a variant of tourism that frequently overlaps with other types of mobility" (99). Through the lens of touring cinema and of films partially set in airports, including *Orly* (Angela Schanelec, 2010), *One Day in Europe* (Hannes Stöhr, 2005) and *L'Italien* (Olivier Baroux, 2010), Gott brings to light the relationships between the representation of mobility and the flexibility of transnational networks related to financing, production and distribution. In Chapter 4, Italian-French co-productions such as *Eden Is West* (Costa-Gavras, 2009), *Terraferma* (Emanuele Crialesi, 2011) and *Mediterranea* (Jonas Carpignano, 2015) reconstruct the emotional and social dynamics—from fear to first-aid and labour exploitation—that connect tourists on Italian and Greek shores, the migrants landing on those same shores and the everyday life of the locals.

TV series, thanks to their growing popularity and to the emergence of a contemporary focus, have become a useful tool for mapping the geographical and cognitive coordinates of the European space and for enabling the audience to position themselves within it. With this in mind,

the last chapter is devoted to European border series, organised into three macro-categories: networked borders such as the Norwegian *Occupied* (Arte, TV2, 2015-2020) and the already mentioned *The Tunnel*; forested borderlands such as the Polish *Wataha* (HBO Europe, 2014) and *Capitani* (RTL Télé Lëtzebuerg, Netflix, 2019); and migration-focused narratives such as the miniseries *Eden* (Arte, 2019).

Despite the European *obsession* with creating borders, the wealth of examples contained in *Screen Borders* testify to how “the very act of making a film or series about a borderline transforms it into a potential borderland, a site of dialogue [...]” (197). Gott’s book provides critical and theoretical tools to scrutinise what we see on the screens and what lies behind them, unmask the stereotypes that promote the proliferation of borders, and identify possible alternative strategies.

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## REFERENCE LIST

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