

Memoria&Identità
Cultural&Linguistic Heritage

F. Di Gesù, S. Licata, A. Pinello, A. Polizzi
(eds.)

BORDER-CROSSING THROUGH
INTERDISCIPLINARY AND MEDIA STUDIES



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F. Di Gesù, S. Licata, A. Pinello, A. Polizzi (eds.)

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Table of Contents

Cultural Encounters and Narratives through the Borders STEFANIA LICATA, AMBRA PINELLO	9
--	---

EXILES AND BORDERS

L'identità degli esuli ucraini nei documenti del Ministero dell'Interno nel periodo interbellico OLEG RUMYANTSEV	19
--	----

Muri al confine Messico/Stati Uniti: <i>border art</i> e teorie del <i>mestizaje</i> MARINA DE CHIARA	37
---	----

Miradas coloniales y fronteras entre España y Marruecos: de los acuerdos a los desencuentros MOSTAFA AMMADI	53
---	----

Arraigo y éxodo. Experiencias migratorias de la España contemporánea VALERIA CAVAZZINO	69
--	----

Čudesnaja žizn' Iosifa Bal'zamo, grafa Kaliostro, ovvero le frontiere di un alchimista CLAUDIO MARIA SCHIRÒ	87
---	----

BORDER-CROSSING AND MEDIA

Border Crossing and (Cinematic) <i>Time Bombs</i> ENRIC BOU	107
--	-----

Primo, secondo e.... contorno: <i>A Big Night in the New World</i> GIOVANNA SUMMERFIELD	123
--	-----

Erasing the Borders: Transcultural and Ideological
Shifts in Disney Movies Retrospective 141
NATALIA DORFMAN

US Border Crossings during the Pandemic:
Multimodal Representation in Advertising Media 155
YULIYA STODOLINSKA

La migrazione in una prospettiva di studi mediterranei:
il caso di Dagmawi Yimer 175
ROSARIO POLLICINO

Post-Soviet Nostalgia in the Conceptualization of Coun-
ter-discourse in Ukrainian Digital Communication 193
ALINA MOZOLEVSKA

MEMORY, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Una aproximación a los feminismos peruanos de las
últimas décadas 215
GIOVANNA MINARDI

Traspassando el umbral: encrucijada de culturas e identidades
fronterizas en una novela española contemporánea 231
GERMANA VOLPE

Cinque viaggiatori italiani in Argentina e la propaganda
fascista: Marinetti, Pirandello, Bontempelli, Ungaretti e Puccini 241
LAURA RESTUCCIA

El mito quijotesco en la obra teatral *Quixote Nuevo* de
Octavio Solís interpretado desde la perspectiva de los
estudios fronterizos 259
OLEKSANDR PRONKEVYCH

Searching for New Identity as a Chance for Salvation in Ida Fink's Novel <i>The Journey</i> ANASTASIIA MIKHIEIEVA	275
Frontiere fisiche e frontiere psicologiche: figure femminili nell'opera di Andreas Karkavitsas MARIA CARACAUSI	291
Género y Dote en <i>Herencia de bindendee</i> (2016) de la es- critora fronteriza Trifona Melibea Obono STEFANIA LICATA	305
La búsqueda de identidad del ser apátrida ecuatoguineano en <i>Heredarás la tierra</i> de Edjanga Jones Ndjoli ANA ZAPATA CALLE	323
Cruzando fronteras entre España y Guinea Ecuatorial: la posibilidad de reconciliación entre el ex-colonizador y el colonizado en la novela <i>El Diario de Marc</i> de Edjanga Jones Ndjoli WENDY MCBURNEY	345
Identidad y muerte GERMAN JONES NDJOLI	357

Border Crossing and (Cinematic) *Time Bombs*

ENRIC BOU

Abstract: Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) is considered a film noir classic that opens with a time bomb being planted in a car in a Mexican border town, before exploding when it's crossing the border. In this article I propose to read a series of films under the "time bomb" suspense narrative device as a symbolic interpretation of the border crossing experience in the America's and in Europe's southern border. The paper will address questions relating to the construction and reconstruction of borders, as well as the experience and representation of physical, spiritual, imagined and symbolic borders, taking into account dialectical relations between culture, social relations and landscape, and the interplay of ideological constructions and material culture. Films discussed in my presentation include besides Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*, Josep M. Forn's *La piel quemada*, Sergio Arau's *A Day Without a Mexican*, Andrea Segre's *Io sono Li*, and Nacho G. Velilla's *Perdiendo el norte*.

Keywords: Time bomb, Border, Film, Migration, Hitchcock.

1. *Time bomb and Film*

I would like to start with a reflection on Alfred Hitchcock's concept of ticking bomb. As he explained to François Truffaut:

There is a distinct difference between «suspense» and «surprise», and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. [...]. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing

happens, and then all of a sudden, “Boom!” There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware that the bomb is going to explode at one o’clock and there is a clock in the decor. [...]. In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. Except when the surprise is a twist, that is, when the unexpected ending is, in itself, the highlight of the story. (Truffaut, 1986: 91)

The importance of suspense to Hitchcock’s films is something that was both acknowledged and actively cultivated by the director himself through his frequent definition of his work in such terms, suspense and surprise. Hitchcock’s definition incorporates the awareness of the ability of suspense to elicit both an intellectual and affective response, in the sense that his method of privileging the audience with certain information that is not available to a character and at the same time produces anxiety (or some other emotion) for that character (Smith, 2000: 17). The «time bombs» I am referring to here are in plain view but very few of us acknowledge their existence at all. Let me just spell out a few examples of different «time bombs» linked to borders and migrations.

2. *Borders and Migration*

The first one is environmental migration. According to a report published by the UN in 2019, *Climate change and migration in vulnerable countries*, environmental migration as a topic is relatively recent on the international scene, attracting increasing attention from the general public, the media, researchers and policy makers. In fact, human migration related to climate and environmental change is at the heart of issues of adaptation, economic and social development, security and protection of rights, crisis and disaster management, social consequences, climate change and environmental degradation. as well as international governance. Migration can be a positive adaptation and

livelihood strategy for communities and people affected by environmental degradation (*Climate change*). An example would be the case of tens of thousands of Nepalese migrant workers who returned home after losing their jobs following India's lockdown to try to contain the coronavirus, creating a humanitarian crisis that now also threatens the stability of the Nepal's fragile economy. Remittances from overseas Nepalese workers have long sustained the country's economy.

The second one is the demographic crisis that Europe is facing. According to reports by the European Commission, *Ageing Europe. Looking at the lives of older people in the EU* (2020), nine of the 10 nations with the largest populations of over-60s and over-80s are in Europe. After decades of greying, Europe's pension and healthcare systems are struggling to cope with the rise in the numbers of elderly and proportional decline of the working population. The European Commission report suggested that by 2060 there will be only two workers for every person over 65, half the current figure. The old-age dependency ratio, which shows the number of people aged over 65, relative to those aged 15-64, will rise from the current 28% to 50%.

A third one is the collaboration EU- Turkey. Linked to the Syrian war refugee crisis more than 3.6 million to date have sought refuge in Turkey. It is the country in the world hosting the highest number of refugees, and has already spent significant financial resources on addressing this crisis. On 29 November 2015 a joint EU-Turkey Action Plan was activated. The Action Plan aims at bringing order in the migratory flows and stemming the influx of irregular migration. The EU and Turkey reconfirmed their shared commitment to end irregular migration from Turkey to the EU, to break the business model of smugglers and offer migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk in their joint statement of 18 March. The establishment of the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey at the end of 2015 aimed to provide the European Union with a coordination mechanism that should allow for the swift, effective and efficient mobilisation of EU assistance to refugees in Turkey. A lack of political will in both Europe and Turkey to implement the pact's key provisions has proved to be its Achilles' heel. And as we know, the consequences are already felt from Ankara to Berlin. Recently the crisis has moved to the Poland-Byelorussia border, and now (March 2022) to the massive influx of refugees from Ukraine. One result is that borders are becoming walls. The lack

of cooperation between European Union members is shocking and is helping to create a humanitarian crisis beyond control. Countries such as Italy, Greece or Spain are left at their own mercy thus creating a situation of non-solidarity. Andreas Grimmel has described it as «“Le Grand absent Européen”: solidarity in the politics of European integration» (2021).

3. *Five films*

Some of these problems can be illustrated analyzing aspects from five films that in different times and mixed approaches have dealt with the immigration issue using the time bomb device.

Orson Welles in one of his best films, *Touch of Evil* (1958), tells a story of corruption and intrigue on the US/Mexican border. Mike Vargas (Charlton Heston), a Mexican policeman, and Susan Vargas (Janet Leigh), his American wife, are a newly married couple who witness the explosion of a vehicle along the border. Hank Quinlan (Orson Welles), a corrupt and obese American police chief, takes over the investigation. When Mike Vargas suspects that the young man Hank Quinlan accuses is innocent, he began his own investigation to clarify what happened.¹

Among the many crucial moments of *Touch of Evil*, we must highlight the beginning of the film, which is considered by many to be one of the best sequence shots in the history of cinema. It took 15 days to record the 3 minutes it lasts, something logical if we take into account how it is done. In its opening sequence, in which a time-bomb is placed in a car and later explodes, is one of the most famous in film history. By explicitly calling attention to its temporal continuity, the suspense of the ticking bomb is heightened. This sets the tense mood for the film. There are a few ambiguities that are worth stressing: it is an international couple that picture the clash between North-American and Mexican police to what we could add suspicions over Mexicans that live in the United States.

¹ The initial sequence shot can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhmYY5ZMXOY> [date of access: 23.05.2022].

Josep M. Forn's, *La piel quemada* (1967), is a film dealing with immigration from southern Spain to affluent Catalonia. Emigration flows began to have a capital importance for the Francoist economy from 1957, moment in which the regime had to liberalize the population movements, both those that developed towards the interior of the territory and those that were oriented abroad. Until 1965, it is estimated that almost one million Spanish citizens were displaced, one tenth of their demographic assets. Most went to work in the industrialized countries of Western Europe, especially France, Switzerland and Germany (Aragón Bombín, 1986: 105-34). All this migratory movement was accompanied by the existence of a strong internal immigration, from the poorest regions of Spain - Andalusia, Extremadura, Castilla and La Mancha - towards the big cities, mainly Madrid and Barcelona. Between 1962 and 1973, it is estimated that almost four million people changed residence. One of the areas that received the highest number of emigrants was Catalonia, especially around the metropolitan area of Barcelona. The tourist boom allowed the expansion of this internal immigration to other territories, such as the Costa Brava in which the tourism and real estate industry was developing. Immigrants came to do 'summer season' in the tertiary sector or established themselves in the construction sector due to strong real estate growth and the need for labor.

As indicated by Ángel Quintana: «La relación existente entre el mito turístico alimentado por el franquismo y la realidad social provocada por la inmigración interior hacia las zonas de la costa es un factor clave para poder entender el contexto en que se desarrolla una película como *La piel quemada* (1967) de Josep Maria Forn» (135). The title of Josep Maria Forn's film - *Burnt Skin* - functioned as a metaphor for both the tanned skin of the tourists who came to the beaches of the Costa Brava but it also referred to the tanned skin of the bricklayers who hung on the scaffolding to build hotels and apartments. The film is presented as a kind of dialectical clash between the contradictions of a policy aimed at opening up Spain to European tourism and the imbalance that is established between the industrialized North and the latifundist South. This tension, which Josep Maria Forn explores with great success in his film, is key to understanding how the Franco regime introduced the chimera of well-being as a dream to imple-

ment a false middle class, while they were unable to observe territorial inequalities and class that existed in the interior of Spain.

La piel quemada is structured around two parallel actions. The film is based on the description of José's last evening before the arrival of his wife, brother-in-law and children in the coastal town where they plan to settle. This story is parallel to the family's journey from Granada to Lloret de Mar on the Costa Brava. The trip takes place on the train popularly known as *El Sevillano*, which transported emigrants from Andalusia to Catalonia. The montage between the two parallel movements is broken by the existence of six flashback scenes in which the situation of the protagonists in the *latifundios* world of Andalusia is recalled. There are also other social tensions such as the clash between the Catalan bourgeoisie and Andalusian emigrants, the clash between sexual freedom from Europe and repression in Franco's Spain or the tension between the dream of a hypothetical welfare paradise and the reality of a world of poverty and exploitation (Quintana, 2017: 135-137).

The approach to immigration and cross-border in Forn's film is quite different from other films. Largely because there were no borders between the different regions of Spain. There were social, cultural boundaries. This is not the case for people leaving Mexico and trying to start a new life in California. The son of *Like Water for Chocolate's* director Alfonso Arau, is the director of a third film, Sergio Arau's *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004). This was his directorial debut. The film looks at the potentially catastrophic consequences if Mexican migrants living in California, who make up more than a third of the state's population, suddenly disappeared. The film is set a mockumentary and plays with the fact that the lack of gardeners, babysitters, cooks, police officers, maids, teachers, farm workers, construction teams, entertainers, athletes, and the largest growing consumer market in the world would create a social, political and economic disaster that would challenge the concept of the «California Dream» and leave it in shambles. *A Day Without a Mexican* was controversial even before its launch: Billboards reading «May 14, there will be no Mexicans in California» caused a stir among immigrant rights groups, who believed the publicity was a declaration against the Hispanic community. In the film we see the wife of a musician who's gone, a state Senator whose maid doesn't show up for work,

and a farm owner whose produce is ripe and unpicked. A scientist asks any Mexicans who haven't disappeared to volunteer for genetic experiments: a female newscaster and the daughter of the musician may be the only missing links around. Why them? And where have all the Mexicans gone? Even the border guards grieve. The state and its economy grind to a halt.

Sergio Arau's dystopic fable detects the internal border existing in our contemporary world inside our cities, between those that belong and those that are always under suspicion: not having legal status, not being recognized by their crucial contribution to the functioning of society. The film is also an effective reflection of the benefits of legalizing illegal immigrants: it allows unauthorized immigrants to come out of the shadows, reducing risks of workplace exploitation and increasing mobility; tax revenues may rise as more immigrants start paying taxes or contribute more as their incomes rise; better job matches may result from legalization, increasing wages and non-pecuniary benefits. Legalization may also result in increased investment in education and health and lead to reduced crime. Legalization can address some humanitarian and political concerns by allowing access to social services, higher education, and equal protection under the law (Bansak-Pearlman).

Another possibility is that offered by intercontinental migrations, where social and cultural differences are mammoth. Andrea Segre, *Io sono Li* (Shun Li and the Poet) (2011) is a migration drama set in Italy's Veneto region. The film's original Italian title is *Io Sono Li*, a play on words meaning both «I Am Li» and «I Am There», a reference to the themes of cross-cultural identity and belonging featured throughout the film. Chioggia, a city on the Venetian lagoon, is the hometown of Andrea Segre, the film's director, and representative of a very traditional Italy: native fishermen have been making their living off the sea for many generations. After a day of hard work they spend the evening in the bar, where an older Italian Mamma rules the roost and serves the half-rough customers. Segre explained that during a visit to one of those bars in his hometown, one day he found a completely alien face. Instead of one of the old ladies running the show, there was a Chinese woman. This was a clear indication of change, a change that is happening all over southern Europe for the last twenty five years. Segre explained how the idea for the film «Io sono Li» started here:

Enric Bou

I still remember my encounter with a woman who could have been Shun Li. It was in a typical Veneto pub, where local fishermen had been going for generations. The memory of this woman's face, so extraneous and foreign to these places weathered by time and worn by habit, has never left me. There was something dreamlike in her presence. Her past, her history, the inspiration for the story all came to me just looking at her. What kind of relationships could she build in a region like mine, so little accustomed to change? This question was the starting point for trying to imagine her life. (Segre, 2011: s.p.)

Li is a Chinese woman, who, in order to acquire passage to Europe and a better life, has essentially sold herself into slavery. Having left behind not only her father in China but also an eight-year old son, she is tirelessly working off the debt owned to her traffickers in hope that her child will soon join her halfway around the world (Prinzl, 2012: s.p.).

Little by little, she becomes close to one of the bar's regulars: Bepi. Also an immigrant, Bepi grew up in Yugoslavia, but has been in Italy for 30 years. Having recently lost his wife, he spends his time fishing from his hut over the lagoon, composing poetry, and countering his son's insistence that he leave his tiny apartment in Chioggia to live with his son and young family in more urban Mestre.

The main characters in Nacho Garcia Velilla's *Perdiendo el norte* (Off Course) (2015) fit the profile of typical young Spanish recently graduated professionals: overeducated and underemployed. Hugo has been trained in the financial sector and Braulio as a scientist. Both decide to migrate to Berlin lured by a TV program showing an interview with an émigré who describes Germany as employment paradise. Within minutes of arriving in Berlin, Hugo runs into Carla, a fellow Spaniard who has finally broken through as a professional after a similar struggle with underemployment. Hugo and Braulio become roommates with Carla and her drug-dealing brother Rafa. They share a building with an older Spaniard, Andrés, who had a similar experience migrating to Germany, many years before. Among the problems they face are the language barrier that proves to be insurmountable. Eventually Hugo and Braulio are employed in a Turkish café by Hakan. Nacho G. Velilla's third film, *Perdiendo el norte* (2015), uses the country's current unemployment issues to create a poignant, if narratively unoriginal and somewhat simplistic, comedy-drama that

deserves viewing for its interesting and entertaining exploration of these themes.

Hugo returns to Spain to work for Nadia's father while they prepare for the wedding. Hugo finds Andrés's daughter and informs her of her father's diagnosis, telling her that the wrong decision can cause a lifetime of regret. On the day of the wedding, Próspero gives Hugo a speech telling him he should marry for love, not money; emboldened, Hugo jilts Nadia at the altar and flies to Berlin, where he finds Carla jogging amongst thousands in the Berlin Marathon. Hugo and Carla reconcile, as do Hakan and Marisol, who is forced to give birth in the café's delivery van (with Braulio and Andrés attending) on the way to the hospital, as they are caught in marathon-induced traffic.

The film exploits Spain's financial and social crisis. A key theme, employment-emigration, is highlighted during the opening credits. An animation sequence at the beginning of the film shows two male stick figures running around the screen as they are pursued by graphs and pie charts, while words such as unemployment, crisis, debt, and corruption are superimposed on them. The sequence's message is further underlined by a modern version of Cecilia's 1975 «Mi querida España» song on the soundtrack; a song that was originally conceived as a veiled criticism of the socio-political situation under Franco's dictatorship (Gras-Velázquez, 2017: 709). Velilla has stated that his intention was to imitate Spanish directors such as García Berlanga or Fernán Gómez, whom used comedy to highlight Spain's socioeconomic issues and make them more palatable to the audiences. This is a good clue about the use of comedy, even if it is not successful, to introduce in a lighter way issues that are depressing and linked to social problems of the present.

4. *Conclusion*

These five examples may allow us to draw some conclusions and read borders with innovative meanings. We can strive for an idea of smooth identity, not a striated one, following Foucault's call for a society with many heterotopias, as a space for the affirmation of difference, and also as a means of flight from authoritarianism and repres-

sion.² We need to draw and read borders of another kind, which may allow us to invent a tradition, imagine a community not curtailed by the limitations of lands and borders, of intellectual closeness and repression, but one open to dialogue and diversity, to multiculturalism and multilingualism.

Every single one of these films relates to the construction and reconstruction of borders, as well as the experience and representation of physical, spiritual, imagined and symbolic borders, taking into account dialectical relations between culture, social relations and landscape, and the interplay of ideological constructions and material culture. Borders can be explored through several common keywords that have emerged in current border studies, such as identity, inclusion/exclusion or inside/outside. Borders are increasingly interpreted as a process, and scholars have shown interest in the cultural and narrative perspectives of borders and how they are perceived and constructed. Recent approaches include a holistic study of various kinds of border – topographic, symbolic and medial – viewed together to delineate a complex circulation of border concepts (Kannike-Tassa, 2016: 13). The «time bomb» device is common in all films to introduce both suspense and surprise.

Identity is characterized by juxtaposing layers of history and ethnicity, thus encouraging collisions of time and space, and allowing for the phenomena of hybridization and the dynamic mixing of discourses. These films have many layers, which can be read in terms of borders. This approach helps us redefine the concept itself. It is difficult to reduce borders to a basic definition. A border is a strip of territory located between international boundaries. The boundary in turn refers to a region or strip, while the limitations it creates are linked to an imaginary conception. There are different types of boundaries: cultural, economic, social, natural. A battlefield, a river, a mountain range, the infamous *Checkpoint Charlie*, all define separations. A border is related to both separation and its opposite: a bridge, or the idea of rapprochement. Crossing a border can have a political meaning and a transgressive one: go into exile, changing religious

² «L'hétérotopie a le pouvoir de juxtaposer en un seul lieu réel plusieurs espaces, plusieurs emplacements qui sont en eux-mêmes incompatibles» (Foucault, 1984: 48).

environment, or fleeing a political regime. The border is thus twofold: physical and symbolic, it relates to space and to identity. The border plays a dual role in literature and film, because it opens the doors of imagination, while it is also a means of limiting or determining the text, or, conversely, abolishing the limits of imagination. These examples interpret the meaning of space in terms of border separation, and the authors are lost in a physical place that is well known to them.

Touch of Evil shows us the most common topographic concept of a border, a dotted line on a map, one that separates two sovereign states, regions, or counties. But borders also play a crucial role in the simultaneous perception of social and political identity, and Otherness. Josep M. Forn's film discusses an internal rift or separation that shows the swift transformation of Spain in the 1960's. That one is a symbolic and economic border. Trespassing it with all its rites of passage meant a movement of promotion. Sergio Arau's *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004), postulates that the border is not between Mexico and the US (or in any major advanced country for that matter), but it is already inside the country. Or even worse the new border is created in people's minds through prejudices and absurd fears. In *Shun Li and the Poet*, Shun Li and Bepi share stories about sons and of home. He tells her about his own family and growing up back in Yugoslavia. Although very different, their experiences as immigrants unite them through a common understanding of the difficulties of being accepted as an outsider in modern-day Italy. Nacho Garcia Velilla, *Perdiendo el norte* falls into a more conventional culture-clash narrative with obvious national stereotypes: Spaniards are unable to properly speak or learn another language, while Germany is portrayed as a cold climate country that is busy ruling Europe's finances, and the attitude of its people is at odds with the friendlier, party-loving latino south. Throughout the film, the director plays with these clichés to varying degrees of success.

If we recall now Hitchcock's reflection on surprise and suspense it can be useful for our conclusion: «The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. Except when the surprise is a twist, that is, when the unexpected ending is, in itself, the highlight of the story» (Truffaut, 1986: 91). These films, with their twist and surprises seem to agree with what Predrag Matvejević has proposed as the new architecture of boundaries, one that should be defined in

different ways, not by aggression, defense, or separation, but attending to notions such as permeability, accessibility, and permissiveness, fragility, «customs» (*doganalità*) and «controllability» (*custodialità*). An excellent example would be what Tacitus wrote in his introduction to his book on Germany:

Germania omnis a Gallis Raetisque et Pannoniis Rheno et Danuvio flu- minibus, a Sarmatis Dacisque mutuo metu aut montibus separatur: cetera Oceanus ambit, latos sinus et insularum immensa spatia complectens, nuper cognitis quibusdam gentibus ac regibus, quos bellum aperuit.³ (Tacitus, 1914: 128-129)

This idea of fear expressed by Tacitus takes the concept of borders beyond sheer geography or physical traits, making us aware that it is much more important than mere orographic accidents.

Nation states have always worked to defend and promote a concept that gives borders a very aggressive meaning, such as being used as a weapon within the formidable propaganda machine. There are many examples of such geographical-cultural propaganda, ranging from Goebbels in Nazi Germany, the American Tea Party and Trump's followers, the PP-PSOE alliance defending Spain's sacrosanct unity, or Padania's imaginary Italian region according to the Lega Nord political party. Borders are strengthened through the collective imagination of schools, national ceremonies, books, and songs. The propaganda takes many forms, such as images (maps and postcards), stories (travel guides), representations in collective commemorations (military parades), drama (games, songs), and become a way to emphasize the dichotomy of Identity / Alterity (Velasco-Graciet).

From a contemporary perspective, Étienne Balibar helps us to push even further with the debate on how to reconfigure (redefine) the meaning of borders and what their role should be in modern times. This philosopher often suggests borders no longer divide terri-

³ Germany as a whole is separated from the Gauls and from Raetians and Pannonians by the rivers Rhine and Danube: from the Sarmatians and Dacians by mutual misgivings or mountains: the rest of it is surrounded by the ocean, which enfolds wide peninsulas and islands of vast expanse, some of whose peoples and their kings have but recently become known to us war has lifted the curtain.

tory, but they can be located anywhere that there is a selective control of the population. It is a term that is undergoing a profound transformation:

The borders of new politico-economic entities, in which an attempt is being made to preserve all the functions of the sovereignty of the state, are no longer entirely situated at the outer limit of territories; they are dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled – for example, in cosmopolitan cities. (Balibar, 2002: 72)

Balibar also includes that it is in the so-called peripheral areas, where secular and religious cultures confront each other, that differences in economic prosperity are more acute and obvious. Peripheral areas are the melting pot for the formation of a group of people (*demos*) without which there is no citizenship (*politeia*) (as identified since antiquity in the democratic tradition). It is in this sense that the border-zone areas, countries, and cities are not marginalized in the constitution of a public sphere, but are in the middle. So concludes Balibar: «If Europe is for us first of all the name of an unresolved political problem, Greece is one of its centers, not because of the mythical origins of our civilization, symbolized by the Acropolis of Athens, but because of the current problems concentrated there» (2002: 72).

Marc Augé has proposed an idea of border based on a time dimension. Scientific knowledge is always looking towards the future, «déplace les frontières de l'inconnu» (Augé, 1997: 16). Borders do not disappear, they are redesigned. Because we look for new frontiers: «La frontière, en ce sens, a toujours une dimension temporelle, c'est la forme de l'avenir et, peut-être, de l'espoir» (Augé, 1997: 16). Thus cities have always had a time dimension, as «figure spatiale du temps où se conjuguent présent, passé et future» (Augé, 1997: 75). Borders and cities are much more intertwined than we suspect. We desperately need to re-examine the concept of the historical urban border.

I speak of boundaries that obviously have little to do with those between states (except in the case of a city-state). They are closer to the perception and definition of urban space in terms of a series of oppositions: center-periphery, rural-urban, high-low, rich-poor. Some

Enric Bou

of the films examined allow us to closely inspect border concepts (as indicated at the beginning) in terms of their physical and spatial, symbolic or identity, meanings.

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Enric Bou

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