

Introduction

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Introduction

Isabelle Schmitt-Pitiot and Julia Echeverria

- 1 After Wendy Everett's inspiring words, we too wish to say how honoured we are to have been entrusted with this double issue. We hope the publication will be worthy of that trust and that we shall not fail in our endeavour to revive the Bath spirit ten years after a superb conference, and to express our gratitude with these two back-to-back issues. However, beyond the nostalgic tribute, our deepest wish is for the essays to gain fresh relevance as they are read in a new context, which we hope they can still help understand. That is why the first frontier we invite our reader to cross will be temporal, from the pre-Brexit, pre-Trump, pre-COVID era of the early 2010s into the current crisis where, paradoxically, global frontiers prove both porous to viruses and forbidding for travellers.
- 2 However, even as we eagerly follow the rover Curiosity in its exploration of Mars, we keep dreaming of new frontiers to cross. The sky seems the limit when, thanks to new information and communication technologies, cinema still allows images and sounds and stories, the stuff films are made of, to travel around ever faster. The contradiction between these wonderfully easy and apparently free – of any bounds as well as charge – exchanges and the harrowing conditions in which exiles try and flee their countries and meet with almost universal rejection probably accounts for the great number of films and festivals and conferences organized on the theme of borders and their crossings, as five minutes on the Internet can prove.¹
- 3 To start from the beginning, the link between borders and cinema dates back to the very invention of the technology, as it is indeed the perforated borders of the film reel that allow the animation of pictures or, in other words, the original crossing from fixity into movement. Ever since, cinema has dialectically evolved along elusive, ever-shifting frontiers between art and industry, creation and marketing, commitment and entertainment, to name but a few of the opposites the making and the reception of films transcend. The essays this double issue presents explore the borderlands and borderlines and what happens when they are crossed, or not, and how the crossings are made possible or impossible and what such crossings involve, whether they are actual

or symbolical or stylistic or generic or intermedial. However, the border itself must be examined before we go any further.

- 4 In its purest conception, taken as a demarcation line that delimits territories, the border has historically defined nations and shaped national identities by opposition, by establishing a line between what “we” are and (or *against*) what we “are not”. In such conception, the border bears an almost exclusionary signification that keeps the undesirable out, with the potential to become a punitive practice against anything that “is not” – against the Other. Postcolonial discourses have signalled these dichotomies as central to the construction of unequal relations of power and cultural hierarchies. Yet, at the same time, as recent border theories sustain, borders also create liminal spaces between two areas, forming a borderland, a hybrid territory “in a constant state of transition”.² This third space, and the crossing of boundaries it entails, constitutes a transgression of clear-cut dichotomies, and the creation of points of contact between cultures that may result in new dynamics of cross-cultural diversity, intense connectivity, and potential transformation.³
- 5 Borders and their crossings have been central to the art of cinema since its early beginnings. Borderlines are present in films not only as a quest for national identity, like the mythical frontier of US Westerns, but also in cinema’s own aim to supersede national borders and establish cross-cultural points of contact. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, the long-standing dichotomy between a hegemonic Hollywood cinema and (or opposed to) world cinemas started to be replaced by new burgeoning transnational theories that took inspiration from the social sciences in their diagnosis of a new context influenced by globalizing synergies. The term “transnational cinema”, in all its complexity, was coined as a necessary conceptual tool that encapsulates these global forces affecting and shaping cinema both in industrial, narrative, and aesthetic ways. Since Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden’s 2006 seminal edited work, *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*,⁴ the field has expanded significantly, advancing conversations on cinema and borders, and incorporating new approaches from the social sciences, like the concept of cosmopolitanism. In these recent studies, all contemporary films are understood as being potentially “part of a transnational culture with borders, border crossings and other bordering experiences at its center”.⁵ As a testament to this topical and expanding field, in 2010, a year before the celebration of the Bath conference, the academic journal *Transnational Cinemas* (re-named as *Transnational Screens* in 2019) was launched, gathering important research on the matter and confirming the need to adopt new theoretical approaches to understand and describe the cinema and television of the new global and digital age. Moreover, the next SERCIA Conference in Zaragoza in September 2021 will provide searchers with opportunities to fulfil Wendy Everett’s liminal wishes and move forward in their journeys along or across frontiers.
- 6 The centrality of cinematic borders has been regarded from multiple perspectives, as these two issues attest by offering a glimpse of the different “borders” we can encounter in films. On the one hand, borders can be analysed by attending to the diegetic universe of films, their border-crossing narratives, and themes. In this sense, borders do not only constitute geographical frontiers dividing territories which characters cross, but also conceptual and symbolic boundaries related to questions of identity, both of which are also articulated in aesthetic terms. On the other hand, border-crossings can be analysed at an industrial level, attending to the production,

distribution, exhibition, consumption, and reception of films and TV products. In the last decade, the worldwide consolidation of streaming platforms has further emphasized the need to understand and read these changes from new global perspectives. These two levels, the thematic and the industrial, are, more often than not, interconnected, as several authors in this issue sustain by offering enriching explorations of the bridges existing between, for instance, a film's treatment of borders and the border-crossing experience of its filmmaker or the varied contexts of reception of a film across nations. In a middle ground between these two levels, the thematic and the industrial, lie aspects related to genre and the crossing of generic boundaries and conventions, a "borderland" which will be explored in issue 8.

- 7 Regarding issue 7, seven essays have been selected, which mostly hinge around the idea of crossing actual or material frontiers, between countries, races or social classes. We have adopted a broadly chronological principle in their order, as they also bear witness to the historical context of their production and reception. However, our wish is not to hint at any artificial divide between content and form, that border being in most cases easily erased and forms naturally conveying contents, as we shall see in the presentation of each of the essays.
- 8 Had the issues been closer in time to the Bath conference, the essays would have covered a wider range of subjects. In Bath in 2011, several presentations tackled current sociological and geopolitical issues and were devoted to films dealing with migrations from one country to another, especially across the US/Mexico border. The issue was at the heart of many debates then, with migration on the rise on a global scale and the development of a "border theory" among geographers, in social and political sciences as well as cultural studies.⁶ To give but one example in the area of English-speaking film studies in France, we can refer to the collection of essays Elyette Benjamin-Labarthe edited at the same period.⁷ The same applies to studies on migrant directors and industrial practices. Finally, we also regret the lack of essays on gender issues, especially at a time when intersectionality is foregrounded and would indeed provide specially interesting perspectives that were but emergent ten years ago. However, the subject is not totally absent since the first and fifth essays do deal with the crossing of racial divides as experienced by young women.
- 9 In "The Frontier Within", Penny Starfield studies two American silent films both dating back to 1910, James Young Deer's *White Fawn's Devotion* and J. Searle Dawley's *Frankenstein*, and shows how they stage internalized frontiers within characters suffering from split identities. In the latter film, the monster appears as a hybrid in which borders are blurred between the human and the non-human, the natural and the artificial, whereas in the former, *White Fawn's* daughter is torn between her native American mother and her White father. The characters' conflicts are externalized on screen thanks to the visual division of spaces and marking of frontiers to be crossed. Penny Starfield then "extends the frontier" and evokes several more recent films that resort to similar visual devices to depict frontiers and their crossings.
- 10 One of the two films studied in the second essay also dates back to the 1910s, but Nimrod Tal's perspective is quite different, since he analyses how two iconic US productions, David W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), "crossed the Atlantic". Thanks to a wealth of contemporary press reviews and mass-observation diaries, he delivers a reception study that shows how two films on the American Civil War were used in the United Kingdom for the British

public to position themselves in relation to the American society. In the context of their own experience of the current European conflicts and within the dynamics of the alien/familiar, local/universal dialectics, the spectacle of a divided America would reinforce their vision of themselves as belonging to a united nation/empire.

- 11 That idea of a British people united in the fight during the second World War also underlies Jean-François Baillon's essay on the semi-documentary wartime production of two British directors, Michael Powel and Emeric Pressburger. The author focusses on interstices or spaces of indetermination that open within the film texts as a response to totalitarianism. He analyses several scenes showing how an agenda of "subtle propaganda" is achieved by erasing social boundaries between characters within hospitality spaces where to enjoy kinship and, indeed, democracy, as opposed to the enemy's barbarous ideology.
- 12 In his analysis of Elia Kazan's *Man on a Tightrope* (1953) in the light of the filmmaker's own comments in his autobiography, Yves Carlet also tackles a highly ambivalent political and moral frontier, the elusive line between right and wrong in Kazan's self-justification of his ambiguous position regarding the HUAC auditions. Based upon the story of a Czechoslovakian circus which eventually succeeds in crossing the Iron Curtain, the lesser-known film depicts a transgressive courage Kazan could not find. Yves Carlet considers that the justification partly fails, as the metaphor of a borderline life results in a picture sometimes too contradictory and obscure.
- 13 "Borderline" may also describe the conception of themselves and their lives as experienced by the young mulatta characters in the two versions of *Imitation of Life*, John M. Stahl's (1934) and Douglas Sirk's (1959), when the lightness of their skins apparently allows them to cross the colour line and break from the racial and social conventions of the American society of the thirties and fifties. In her essay, Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris shows how the two films materialize the impossibility of in-betweenness by staging the tragic tension between America's democratic dream and the ambiguous discourse of the melodrama punishing the "dreamers"⁸ entrapped in their race and class.
- 14 Yann Roblou then presents another dreamer, Grace in Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), in which an apparatus that is both sophisticated and austere visualizes an outsider's failed attempt at integrating a community. Nearly a century after *White Fawn's Devotion*, exclusion is made visible on a set where walls are reduced to symbolical yet uncrossable lines on the ground. However, a few scene studies show how Lars von Trier transgresses his own conventions to make boundaries uncertain and create an indeterminate space where the filmic and spectatorial spheres as well as different modes of representation, film, theatre, literature, may intersect.
- 15 Isabelle Singer concludes the series of essays with yet another demonstration of how the representation of actual crossings of geographic frontiers may bear symbolic or metaphoric meanings. In her overview of the topic of frontiers in Atom Egoyan's filmography, an essay she updated to include the filmmaker's more recent works, she starts from a survey of scenes at customs checkpoints where the characters face their identities, then refers to Deleuze's theory of the crystal-image that implies the co-existence of two sides, for example the actual and the virtual, within one single, yet complex image.

- 16 Although all the films studied in this issue base their diegeses on the actual crossing of geographic frontiers or identity divides, their narrations allude to other crossings, either metaphoric, generic or intermedial. When the crossing implies irrevocable choices or when politics and social conventions forbid it, an ambivalent, in-between position may be tried and maintained, like Elia Kazan's "man on a tightrope" or Peola and Washington in the two versions of *Imitation of Life* – even if both endeavours seem doomed to failure in the films representing them. However, all the different stories may also read as appeals to embrace the inexhaustible complexity of the borderland, of passing from one country and culture, one status and identity into another. In *Calendar* (1993), when asked about his feelings as he travels around his family's cradle, Armenia, the Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan gives an answer that sums up that complexity and that we suggest readers keep in mind as they go through the essays: "being here has made me from somewhere else."

NOTES

1. For films, see for example, "9 Must-See Drama Set Against the Border," *IndieWire*, 18 September 2015, <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/09/9-must-see-dramas-set-against-the-border-57794/>; or Chris Vognar, "When American filmmakers try to cross the border", *The New York Times*, 31 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/movies/mexico-border-movies.html>.
2. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987: 3.
3. Maria Rovisco, "Towards a Cosmopolitan Cinema: Understanding the Connection between Borders, Mobility and Cosmopolitanism in the Fiction Film," *Mobilities* 8 (1), 2013: 148-165.
4. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (eds.), *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
5. Celestino Deleyto, "Looking from the Border: A Cosmopolitan Approach to Contemporary Cinema," *Transnational Cinemas* 8 (2), 2017: 96.
6. See for example Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Border*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.
7. Élyette Benjamin-Labarthe (ed.), *Cinéma métis aux États-Unis, représentations de la frontière Mexique États-Unis*, Bordeaux : Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 2012.
8. To echo the interesting name given to immigrants brought to the US unlawfully as children and protected by the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that the Trump administration planned to scrap but was saved by a Supreme Court decision in June 2020. See Joanna Walters and Amanda Holpuch, 'Explainer: What is DACA and who are the Dreamers', *The Guardian*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/18/daca-dreamers-us-immigration-explainer>.