

On Smugglers, Pirates and Aroma Makers

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Capsized boats and clandestine immigrants washing up on European shores: these are the dramatic images by which the European Southern border gets into the news again and again. The media seems to say that these images communicate the essence of the border in its most compressed and climactic form. But there is no defining image of drama that can narrate the endless story of inclusion and exclusion. There can be no violent icon to which the event of crossing can be reduced: there is only the plurality of passages, their diverse embodiments, their motivations and articulations. Turning the focus away from the simple trespassing of a line, and redirecting it towards exposing the transnational, diffuse and semi-legal economic transactions behind the multiple movements at the borderlands, might bring us closer to understanding the nature of the border as a site, and how perfectly the clandestine boat passages fit into the whole picture.

This text relates to the video *Europlex* (made in collaboration with visual anthropologist Angela Sanders) that looks at the Spanish Moroccan borderland on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar. This area is given its cultural meaning only by being crossed: by the routes of container ships from West Africa on their way to the Mediterranean; the perilous nocturnal boat voyages undertaken by clandestine migrants; the helicopter patrols keeping watch; the frames of the radar pictures; the itinerant plantation workers who pick vegetables for the EU market; the commuting housemaids, the *domesticas*, who go to work for the



señoras in Andalusia; the seasonal movement of the Spanish teachers in the enclaves; the patrols of the border guards along the mountain paths; the bus trips of the Moroccan women who peel imported shrimps for Dutch companies in Tangier; the pirates who buy articles imported from China in Spain, and the women smugglers who tie them up under their skirts and carry them into the *medina*. This is the movement that we are concerned with, the everyday mobility lived out on a local level. It produces micro-geographies that are deeply intermeshed with one another and at the same time reflect global dimensions.

In a series of border recordings, *Europlex* examines the circular movement of people around the checkpoint between the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and the surrounding Moroccan territory. This checkpoint controls the coastal road that ends at the most northern point in Ceuta. Directly across the Strait is Gibraltar and the Spanish mainland. At this extreme geographic location the flourishing city of Ceuta has always been assigned the role of a well-guarded bridgehead. The Moroccan port of Tangier, located on the Atlantic side of the Strait, has a history marked by various European manoeuvres and is thus considered a more cosmopolitan city with great potential to become a crucial zone of transnational trade.

Logging the Border

The videographic recordings, which we call 'border logs', relate to the two distinct sites of Ceuta (*Border log I + II*) and Tangier (*Border log III*). We use the term 'log' to link the travel logs and the ethnographic recordings with the practice of video editing, whereby the log, i.e., the chronological list of the filmed material, is considered an indispensable preparation for the montage. *Europlex*, particularly in the first border journal, visualises the observation process by describing just what it does, namely, an accurate registration of the spatial-temporal process. It introduces a time, which allows an unhurried interpretation of the event, a temporal mode beyond the spectacular. Video becomes a cognitive tool. While this pragmatic procedure could be experienced elsewhere as utterly boring, it is almost a prerequisite for grasping the diffuse bustle in this location. At first sight it is rather difficult to make sense of the exhilarating, confusing course of affairs occurring here, and it requires more than one visit to the border to understand the logic of the busy multidirectional stream of people carrying a multitude of plastic bags and parcels.

Border log I is first of all a meticulous observation of the extensive smuggling activities that circumscribe the *frontera de tarajal*, the border to Ceuta. Filming is strictly prohibited, so images can be made only under constant interruptions, with a hidden camera or from a distance. The activity, which continues through the day, begins at 6 am when the gates open to the crowd of impatiently waiting Moroccans. Smuggling takes place in broad daylight in front of the eyes of the officials, and is part of the everyday culture. Many of the



smugglers come from the town of Tétuan nearby, others from villages of the Rif Mountains further away. The aim of those who cross the border is not to get into the city of Ceuta but to pursue their semi-legal businesses in the expanded border complex. Wholesale warehouses and street markets are just around the corner from the checkpoint. Here, smugglers rummage around for good deals and buy as much as they can carry. Some articles, such as woollen blankets, are of better quality and still cheaper than in Morocco, even though they are not necessarily made in Spain but imported from China or procured from pirates and other questionable sources. Still, these goods will be marketable in Tétuan. On their way back, the heavily loaded smugglers pass the same officials who get compensated for their forbearance. Circumscribing the architecture of the authorities up to 11 times a day, smugglers inhabit the border in a circular way, carving out an existence for themselves. Working out an ingenious mode, female smugglers strap shirts and cloths onto themselves, layer by layer, until they have doubled their body volume. This seems to be a technique only women use. Each piece will increase the profit margin of the passage. The economic logic inscribes itself onto every layer of the transformed, mobile female body.

Border Log II follows the daily journey of the Moroccan maids who live in the Moroccan town of Tétuan and work in the enclave. Since Spanish women increasingly seek paid work outside their homes, the need for cheap domestic personnel in the enclave city has grown. Most of the service personnel are recruited from the neighbouring Moroccan region; only very few will be given a work contract that would guarantee a minimum wage and facilitate easier entrance into the enclave. So, for many the day begins by being shoved through the crowded gated passage on the border, hoping to be let in. The state officials use every pretext to slow down or choke the flow completely. Yet *Europlex* doesn't focus on the difficult conditions young Moroccan women are facing when they enter the European labour market. Rather, it takes a detailed look at



the casual but unusual fact that the workers' daily commute is actually a journey between the Moroccan and the European time zones. Due to the fact that the two adjacent territories are located in distinct time zones with a two-hour time lapse, the domestic worker turns into a permanent time-traveller within the border economy. The rhythm of her life is thus performed through an alternating delay and acceleration with respect to her social context. Deferred time becomes the signifier of a cultural position. In the video, the time-travelling maid is represented in front of an electronically generated, organically moving pop striped background, her gesture and her smile appear unnaturally repetitive, they are interrupted by drop-outs, i.e., missing images which stop and restart in a choppy fashion. The animated portrait of the Muslim woman takes on likeable robotic features, asserting that she is to be calibrated according to different chronological parameters.

Border log III enters the transnational zone near Tangier where Moroccan women manufacture biological and technological products for European subcontractors: shrimp peelers, aroma makers, toy moulders. As in so many other sites on the edge of developed nations, we recognize here the typical mechanism of globalisation, i.e., the outsourcing of labour-intensive processes under more advantageous conditions regarding wage, labour rights and taxes. Tangier wants to position itself as the most important transnational trade centre in the Southern Mediterranean basin at the beginning of the 21st century. As I have argued elsewhere with regards to the US-Mexican border, transnational zones are comparable to heterotopian places, which distinguish themselves by not being embedded in the cultural context but operating according to another, remote-controlled set of rules and rationales.¹ As in the case of Mexico, in Tangier too there is a mainly female work force being taken into consideration for jobs in the disenfranchised zone. The border crossed by these women on a daily basis is a lot less visible than the fortified one around Ceuta that is negotiated by smugglers and domestic workers. Still, upon entering the transnational zone the worker experiences a distinctive split from her cultural environment. In *Europlex*, this is imaged through a series of portraits of female workers captured at a factory exit in Tangier harbour. Technically, the split is performed by means of a brusque freeze of the worker; her face and her gaze remain in sharp focus while the background dissolves slowly into a granular field beyond recognition. Accompanied by electronic rhythms, the sequence is overlaid by fast-accumulating figures suggesting labour hours and performance statistics. The woman's presence is decontextualised, her body entirely technologised, in this fragmented composition.

These log journals describe three diverse practices which transform the border space into a translocal reality. What the border recordings aim at, and attempt to influence, is not the consolidation of national unity, but on the contrary, the permeability and constant subversion of it. Television reports on clandestine boat passengers achieve this to some extent, but it also seems crucial to acknowledge that the shadowy and partially transgressive circumstances of these land border passages are not assimilated all too quickly into a disciplined national order, where intervening state officials play the leading part. Instead, they are allowed to cultivate an alternative imaginary based on translocal existences and transformative cultural practices.

The control tower of Algeciras, the second largest container harbour in the Mediterranean, oversees all navigation activities across the Strait. Visual contact with the vessels is provided by surveillance cameras located in the harbour areas and through radar signals rendered on monitors, whereas vocal contact is established via radio with ship





captains. *Europlex* coalesces these two separate modes of communication. The clean technological representation of radar lines, which trace the projected path of each ship through the waters of Gibraltar, is juxtaposed with the crackling radio announcements of heavily accented captains from all over the world, occasionally interrupted by snatches of Moroccan music blasting from one of the ship cabins. These rough, live sounds introduce a different register of cultural meanings, and disrupt the mechanical organisation of the disembodied electronic maps.

Southern Spain and Northern Morocco form a space that may be driven and ruled by the European economy, but which is ultimately produced and energised by the people who are moving across and between the territorial imperatives of national borders. The focus is not on the global players, nor on the apparatus of state power, but on the accurate observation of counter-geographies and dissident practices, mostly semi-legal, often invisible. It is necessary to visually track the course and meaning of these border circuits, how they inscribe themselves discursively and semiotically, and how the travellers documented in the border logs perform their crossings and leave a daily imprint on claimed terrain.

We are not speaking about traditional, well-discerned urban formations but about new constructs, enclaves and informal free trade areas, sites which are not embedded in the surrounding context but are in fact artificially created zones of alienation that operate according to the unruly logic of the translocal.

The translocal zone is dramatically marked in terms of the contrasting economies it accommodates. Its hub consists of massive, highly mechanised Western-style production units, plants and assembly lines, while at the periphery and beyond stretch belts of sustained rural poverty and unemployment. This difference is strategically created and reinforced by state policy, enabling companies and investors to profit from the large pool of cheap local labour always accessible, always available and always in need. While there are obvious postcolonial and transnational motivations behind these emplacements, local inhabitants usually don't take long to recognise the possibilities of setting up alternative economic circuits that will benefit the whole region. The problem arises from the fact that these improvised translocal activities are excluded from legal regulations, which are designed to primarily address the needs of corporate trade. Thus, micro-economies drift too easily into semi-legal fields of action where the goodwill of officials, feudal work conditions and piracy make the rules.

NOTES

1. Biemann, Ursula (ed.). "The Transnational Video". In *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Voldemeer/Springer, 2003, Wien/New York).