

# LOGGING THE BORDER: EUROPLEX



Capsized boats and clandestine immigrants washing up on European shores: these are the dramatic images by which the southern European border gets into the news again and again. The media seem to suggest that these images communicate the essence of the border in its most compressed and climactic form, and yet there is no defining image that can narrate the endless story of inclusion and exclusion. There is no single, violent icon to which the event of crossing can reasonably be reduced, only a plurality of passages, with diverse motivations, embodiments and articulations. Shifting the focus from simple acts of trespass onto the diffuse, and semi-legal, economic transactions that stimulate multiple movements within the borderlands aims to bring us closer to an understanding of the site.

*Europlex* (2003) is a video essay I made with visual anthropologist, Angela Sanders, on the Ibero-Moroccan border. Anthropological in its approach, this project primarily involves a precise process of observation. The border, as considered here, is far from being a linear formation; it encompasses the Strait of Gibraltar, with all its transverse shipping traffic, the two Spanish enclaves on the Moroccan side and the plastic-covered vegetable plantations of Andalusia, which are powered by an African labor force. *Europlex* is a geographic project in the sense that it engages in a process of visualizing spatial relations. When geography is understood as a spatialization of the dynamic social and economic relationships connecting local systems to the transnational, it becomes clear why border geographies are the site of extreme compression at all levels. *Europlex* examines the terrain through various forms of mobility generated by the differential economies of Europe and Africa.

The Strait of Gibraltar is a veritable bottleneck for the flows of people between two continents, which become particularly visible along the terrestrial border surrounding the Spanish enclaves. This area is given its cultural meaning predominantly by being traversed: by container ships en route from West Africa to the Mediterranean, by boats transporting migrants on their perilous nocturnal journeys, by helicopter patrols keeping watch, by radio waves and radar lines, by itinerant plantation workers who pick vegetables for the EU market, by commuting housemaids going to work for the señoras in Andalusia, by border-guard patrols along the mountain paths, by buses transporting Moroccan women to Tangier where they peel Dutch shrimps to be shipped back to Holland, by pirates who procure goods from China and by women smugglers who tie these goods up under their skirts and carry them into the medina. This is the mobility we are concerned with in this video – the everyday mobility lived out on a local level, to produce micro-geographies that are deeply intermeshed with one another while reflecting a global schema.

Through a series of video recordings, *Europlex* examines the circular movement of people around the checkpoint between the Spanish enclave of Ceuta

and the surrounding Moroccan territory. Powered and ruled by the European economy, southern Spain and northern Morocco form a space that is ultimately defined by the people who move across and between the territorial imperatives of the borders. Our main concern here lies neither with the global players nor with the deconstruction of power. Instead, we are more interested in the close observation of often invisible counter-geographies and dissident practices operating at the edge of the law. We call our videographic recordings “border logs,” where the term “log” refers both to ethnographic travel logs and to the logs of the captured video material used in the editing process. Angela and I stayed in the Moroccan town of Tetuán and repeatedly visited the border at six in the morning, when the gates opened to an expectant crowd of Moroccans.

Border Log I primarily reflects our meticulous observation of the extensive smuggling activities that circumscribe the border at Ceuta. As filming is strictly prohibited, images could only be recorded with a hidden camera, or from a distance, and were subject to constant interruptions. Many of the smugglers come from nearby Tetuán, others from villages of the Rif Mountains further away. The aim of their border crossing is not to get into the city of Ceuta but to pursue their semi-legal business in the expanded border complex which hosts wholesale warehouses and other tax-free markets. The smugglers buy as much as they can carry back to Tetuán, performing this border circuit up to eleven times a day. Smuggling – which takes place in daylight and within full view of the border officials – is part of the everyday culture. Female smugglers strap contraband shirts and other clothes to their bodies, layer upon layer, until they have doubled their volume. Since each item of clothing increases the profit margins of their passage, the logic of economics is inscribed in every layer added to these mobile female bodies.

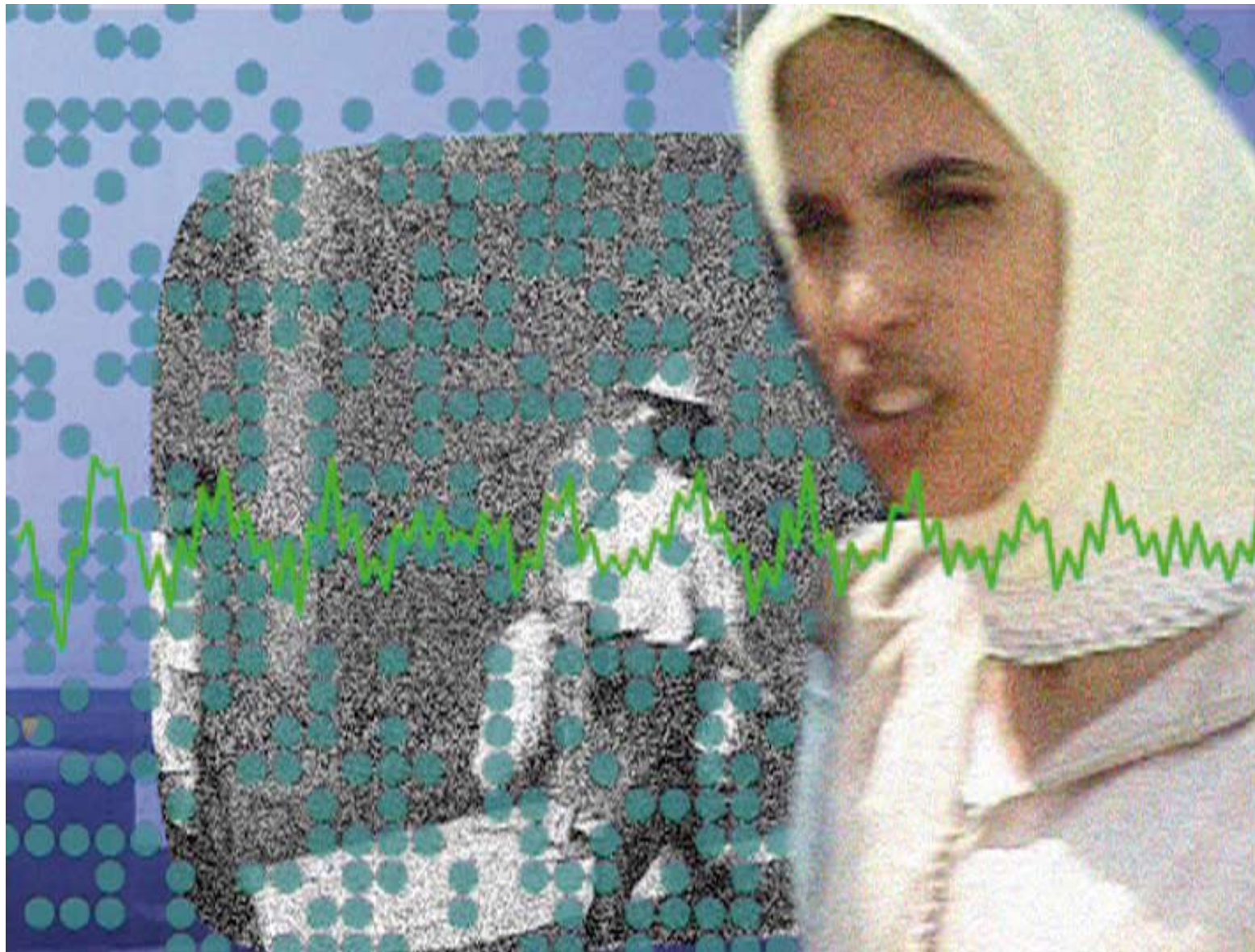
Border Log II follows the daily journey of the housemaids who live in the town of Tetuán in Morocco as they travel to work in the Spanish enclave. For many of them, the day begins as they shove through the crowded, gated passage at the border, hoping to be allowed into Spain, while state officials use every pretext to slow down, or completely block, the flow. Yet *Europlex* does not focus on the difficult conditions faced by these young Moroccan women when they enter the European labor market; rather, it looks at the curious fact that the workers commute between Moroccan and Spanish time zones. Since the adjacent territories have a two-hour time difference, the domestic workers turn into perpetual time travelers within the border economy. They have to leave their Moroccan homes at 5.30 in the morning, to be at work in Ceuta at 9, and return home in the middle of the afternoon when everyone else is still at work. Their life rhythm is out of sync, performed through alternating acceleration and retardation relative to the social context around them. In the video, the time-traveling housemaid is seen in front of a pop



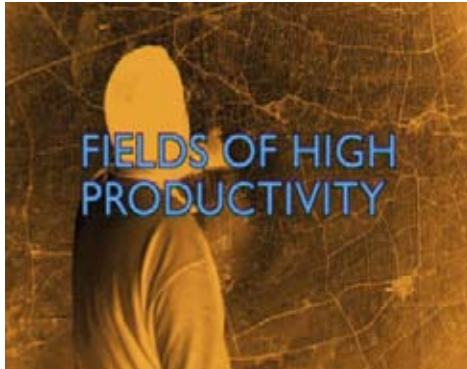


In Biemann's videos, images and texts are reclaimed in a constellation that renders a provisional picture of the situation. By working at the interstices of image and text, her documentaries actualize what we should call a learning process. After all, we realize that, beneath the uniformity that unites us in communication, there is a chaotic diversity of personal connections, a myriad of subjective perceptions, and, for each of us, the connections continue to evolve, because no two of us learn our language alike. Hence the importance of a structure that connects a wide range of footage yet avoids erasing its original sense and value. In such a scenario, no final picture would be legitimate, and neither a summary nor a singular narrative would be possible.

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art backdrop, her gestures appearing unnaturally repetitive as she goes backwards and forwards through time and space. Her movements are interrupted by drop-outs as the filming is halted, creating a narrative that stops and restarts in a choppy fashion. Thus, this animated portrait of a Muslim woman, with its unchronological movements, assumes robotic features that further separate her from the conventional system of measuring time.

Border Log III enters the transnational zone near Tangier, where Moroccan women manufacture products for European subcontractors. The border crossed by these women on a daily basis is a lot less visible than the fortified one around Ceuta which is traversed by the smugglers and domestic workers. Nonetheless, upon entering the transnational zone, the worker experiences a distinct split from her cultural environment. In *Europlex*, this is expressed in a series of portraits of female workers, captured at the exit to a factory in the harbor of Tangier. At short intervals the image freezes, singling out a worker's portrait so that her face and gaze remain sharp, while the background gradually dissolves into graininess. Her manufacturing activity is posted in bright green letters on the screen: *aroma extractor*, *toy plastifier*, *gambas manipulator*. In this fragmented composition, her presence is decontextualized, her body entirely technologized.

Collectively, the border logs describe diverse practices which transform the border space into a trans-local reality, as manifested in the time difference that disconnects the Moroccan context from the reality of the Spanish enclave. What the border recordings aim at is not the consolidation of a national unity, as media reports on border defense inevitably attempt, but its opposite: the permeability and constant subversion of national space. To some extent, television reports on clandestine boat passengers do this too; yet, importantly, the shadowy and potentially subversive circumstances of such border passages are assimilated all too quickly into a disciplined national order in which the interventions of state officials play a leading part. Here, border passages are allowed to cultivate an alternative imaginary, based on cultural practices that harness and play with national boundaries.

