East European Film Bulletin

REVIEW

Hopelessness, Hatred, and Activism: European Reactions to Migrant Suffering

Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border* (*Zielona Granica*, 2023)

VOL. 139 (NOVEMBER 2023) BY ANTONIS LAGARIAS

The European (anti)migration policy of the last decade will probably be remembered as one of the darkest pages in the political history of the European Union, enabling the rise of xenophobic national narratives in European countries, and justifying the often-illegal actions of patrol forces that result in injury, torture, trauma, and death. The practice of pushbacks and drift-backs,[1] the act of forcefully expulsing or abandoning asylum seekers who recently crossed national borders on the ground or by sea, is perhaps the deadliest of these actions. While officials systematically reject the existence of pushbacks on European soil, personal testimonies, journalist investigations, research groups and even courts have identified and recorded numerous pushback operations orchestrated by both national bodies and EU forces such as Frontex.[2] The research group Forensic Architecture currently lists more than 2,000 incidents that have taken place around the Aegean Sea over the past three years,[3] and reports suggest that more than 28,000 people have gone missing – in most cases a result of their death – on and near EU borders since 2014.[4] The reality of these figures weighs heavily on the minds of many who witness such violent actions taking place in their name, which are supposedly conducted for their "safety", "security", or for "national purity".

Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border* is a product of this reality. According to the director, the film is her reaction to a feeling of hopelessness, a result of her witnessing horrific images and testimonies of the atrocities committed on Poland's borders, and more specifically in the forested area that separates the country from Belarus. The film opens with a visual play. A drone shot shows a green forest stretching in all directions. When the title appears, its white letters

absorb the green of the forest. Stripped of its natural colors, the now black-and-white forest suggests that the events unfolding within its perimeter are anything but “natural”. The contrasting gray tones of the cinematic universe also obscure the characters’ vision and heighten the rest of the senses. Rain, cracking branches, whistling, muddy footsteps, and the sound of distant police cars saturate the film’s audio, as danger, whether caused by nature or by man, appears first on the soundtrack. The film is divided into chapters, each one devoted to a different perspective on the same events. First, viewers are introduced to a Syrian family of six aboard a plane bound for Belarus. With their lives in immediate danger, they discuss how they decided to flee the war and enter the European Union, feeling lucky to have avoided the deadly waters of the Mediterranean. Indeed, a few hours after the plane lands, the family along with other asylum seekers easily cross the barbed-wire fence separating Belarus and Poland, a scene that ends with them yelling – joy evident in their voices and faces – “we are in Europe”. This initial cry of joy, which echoes a common narrative painting the “civilized” West as a safe haven that cares for and protects those in need, comes out as naïve as the promise of safety is immediately rescinded and the asylum seekers are routed by Polish border guards and forced back to Belarus. However, the Belarusian guards force them again into Poland, and thus the group ends up being transferred from one country to another for days in a row. The other chapters follow various characters involved in the illegal pushbacks. First, a young Polish border guard whose wife expects a child is shown taking part in the pushback operations and participating in their violence. Next, a group of activists are seen attempting to bring medical care and supplies to groups of refugees stranded in the forest, within the limitations imposed by the Polish government that has declared a state of emergency prohibiting access to certain parts of the forest. Finally, the film introduces the viewer to Julia, a psychologist in her forties who lives close to the border, witnesses the horror of the pushbacks and decides to take action, even at the risk of her own imprisonment.

If, at first glance, the film looks like a moral tale highlighting what is right and wrong when faced with human suffering, its length (over 150 minutes) and its insistence on extensively presenting different points of view, suggest that it has a different goal. Since 2015, cinema has produced many stories about refugees, relevant EU policies, the NGOs involved in trying to alleviate migrant suffering, and our collective and individual reactions as European citizens. Given the political urgency of this issue, and assuming that most of these films aim to contribute to making a difference, for example by challenging and even changing the perspective of those who support anti-migrant and nationalist narratives, the first and main question to ask is what kind of audience such films can reach. *Green Border*’s accessible narrative structure, camerawork and editing as well as its considerable budget suggest that Holland wished to appeal to a wide and diverse audience, both international and Polish. It was perhaps because of this accessible format that high-level Polish government officials felt the need to publicly voice their disapproval of the film, accusing

Holland of hating and betraying her own country, an indication that the film disrupted national narratives to some extent.[5] Indeed, the film shows the absurdity of discourses commonly found in Poland and other European countries describing the incoming refugees as a “hybrid” invasion that needs to be combated by the state. It also highlights how a general state of fear and helplessness pervades society, coupled with the pleasure of violence exercised by the “heroes” of the border patrol units whose violent actions are guarded by impunity. In this way, the film aims to reflect the many facets of a Polish society found in a state of moral crisis, so that viewers can place themselves within the conflict and find an angle to identify with.

This may also explain why the refugee characters appear generic rather than as fully-developed and singular characters: they appear to be employed to represent the familiar situation taking place at the borders. Contrary to the many angles of Polish society explored in the film, the side of the refugees remains underdeveloped. They merely evoke the current problem to serve Holland’s purpose, namely to dissect the morality of people who assist during or collaborate in atrocious acts. *Green Border* is therefore not a story about migrants, but a story about the way their presence challenges European values and self-perception. It tackles the so-called “refugee crisis” so as to analyze and speculate about our reaction, drawing on both realistic facts and the fundamental concept of moral good. Thus, all the Polish characters have clearly reprehensible qualities as well as redeemable ones. For example, the border guard is shown both to enjoy his power and to suffer from guilt; the activists are courageous, but their justified fear leads to inaction; and a leftist upper-class family is shown to provide for the refugees while being utterly ridiculous in their attempts to understand or relate to them.

The film’s ideology is most clear, however, in the story of Julia (Maja Ostaszewska). Faced with the death of a young refugee boy in another scene that seems to stage violence only to display our reaction to it, she is quick to dismiss her initial trust in the EU asylum system as naïve and take part in an activist operation despite the risk of imprisonment. In her character, Holland expresses her desire to witness a passage from rhetoric to action, from acts justified by reason to those born of fundamental affect and empathy. Another ideological statement can be seen in the storyline centered on Jan (Tomasz Włosok), the border guard. Jan represents a common argument, that the “normal” and absolute priority is to look after one’s own family and avoid financial hardship at all costs. To this end, Jan chooses to follow orders and maintain his position, while occasionally enjoying the power and authority conferred by his military status. To ease their guilt, Jan and his wife force-feed themselves blatantly absurd national narratives they clearly do not believe in. In Jan’s story, the film asserts that the right choice is always possible and, in fact, quite obvious. Jan can continue to personally contribute to the violence (it is after all his “job” or “duty”) and delegate the responsibility to his superiors, or he can choose to “do the right thing”. Despite a few minor acts of

redemption (he allows a few refugees to escape towards the end of the film), Jan keeps taking part in violent acts even while being morally tormented, suggesting that even when one knows the right choice, many people are afraid to choose it. The film's epilogue shows Jan taking part in a completely different border operation some years later, when Ukrainian refugees were warmly welcomed and the military guards finally got to be the "good guys", implicitly admitting the institutional racism behind the current European policies. By treating characters like Jan as ordinary people whose fear and prejudice enables atrocities even if they may want to "do good", the film clearly aims to appeal to an audience that partly identifies with this side of the conflict.

Perhaps it is easy to feel numb in front of "another" refugee film, especially when the refugees become a reason to, once again, talk about Europeans. The events are not only known and expected, but also unbearable for the conscience of those of us who remain passive. Yet *Green Border* aims to be one of the most "exhaustive" cinematic contributions on the subject, shedding light on the fundamental affective responses that have shaped public opinion in European countries over the past decade. It invites viewers to situate themselves within the conflict and identify with its various aspects, such as the helplessness and anger born of the inability to act in the face of violence, the weak speech-acts of those who choose to remain blind to the problem, and the rationalization of violence as a self-defense mechanism. Even if it ultimately boils down to right versus wrong, the film genuinely succeeds in emotionally engaging the (hopefully broad and politically diverse) audience from start to finish, in a film that comes across as a cry for justice. If obvious, a cry for justice is as necessary today as it ever was, particularly given Europe's consistent failure to address the escalating xenophobia and nationalist hatred across its territory as well as its own moral and political collapse.

References

1. While there is no internationally accapted definition of the term "pushbacks'', the term is understood according to EU reports as "various measures taken by States which result in migrants, including asylum-seekers, being summarily forced back to the country from where they attempted to cross or have crossed an international border without access to international protection or asylum procedures or denied of any individual assessment on their protection needs which may lead to a violation of the principle non-refoulement''. Quoted from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738191/EPRS_BRI(2022)738191_EN.pdf [accessed on 2 February 2024].
2. To name a few cases: the European Court of Human Rights condemned Greek authorities for failing to protect the lives of migrants during an

operation that left eleven dead in 2014 in what is known as the “Farmakonisi case’’; the Frontex unit in the Aegean sea was found to have been involved in the pushbacks of at least 957 asylum seekers between March 2020 and September 2021, according to a joint investigation by Lighthouse Reports, Der Spiegel, SRF Rundschau, Republik and Le Monde; the actions of the Greek navy lead to the death of more than 700 asylum seekers in 2023, on the second-deadliest shipwreck in the Mediterranean.

3. See the interactive map on the site of Forensic Architecture: https://aegean.forensic-architecture.org [accessed on 2 February 2024].
4. See the full report here: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751479/EPRS_ATA(2023)751479_EN.pdf [accessed on 2 February 2024].
5. Coinciding with the Polish 2023 election, Green Border was seen by Polish officials (including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice) as a threat to the country’s patriotism. According to the New York Times, the Polish government linked the film to Nazi propaganda and Holland received death threats. See: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/28/movies/green-border-poland.html#:~:text=The%20Award%2DWinning%20Polish%20Film,likened%20it%20to%20Nazi%20propaganda [accessed on 2 February 2024].