

## **THE ROLES OF BORDERS IN TWO POLISH FILMS: *IN HEAVEN AS IT IS ON EARTH* (1996) AND *YUMA* (2012)**

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this paper is to analyse the images of the border in two Polish movies: Yuma (2012) and In Heaven as it is on Earth (1998). Although they belong to different genres, the border is a major theme in both films. This essay refers to the three points of interest concerning border movie analysis suggested by Dodds (2013), namely: the materiality of borders; different aspects of border crossings; and governance issues. His approach is combined with Lotman's (1990) "boundary of a semiosphere". The literature concerning American border cinema is also considered. It may be argued that both movies represent the understanding of borders in the current border studies agenda (Scott 2011). This means that they are shown as incoherent and mutually conflicting constructs.*

**Keywords:** border film, border culture, Poland

### **Introduction: interdisciplinary border studies**

This paper examines cinematic borders in two Polish movies: the drama *Yuma* (2012) and the comedy *In Heaven as it is on Earth* (1998). In doing so Dodds's (2013) framework of border movie analysis will be used. This framework suggests three points of interest: the materiality of borders; different aspects of border crossings; and governance issues. These points resonate with the more general border studies agenda. Many scholars (c.f. Newman 2001, Scott 2011) point out that border studies has evolved over the years. At first limited to the cartographic notion of boundary, borders have sparked the interest of representatives of many other disciplines. Paasi (2011) points out that cross-border flows are of interest to economists, while ethnographers study the communities inhabiting borderlands. The situation on borders also has an impact on states' foreign policies. Dodds's framework is interesting in that it applies 'real life' instruments of analysis to representations of borders in film. However, this approach risks forgetting that a film

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border is above all a symbol, and thus serves a different purpose than an “actual” border. It therefore seems natural to add elements of culture and film studies to the approach of human geography.

This multidisciplinary approach is also more responsive to the fact that border studies is a flexible and dynamic discipline. Scott (2011) notes how perceptions of boundaries shift in response to changing contexts. Because of the current complexity of the discipline, Paasi (2011) criticises attempts to develop a border theory. Borders, he argues, “[...] can be theorized reasonably as part of a broader effort towards social-cultural theory” (Paasi 2011: 28). Yuri Lotman's (1990) semiotic theory of culture certainly enriches border studies. The concept of a boundary of semiosphere, which is an important element of this theory, influences how borders are presented, for example, in the cinema. The boundary “[...] can be defined as the outer limit of a first-person form” (Lotman 1990: 131). The spaces on each side of the boundary are defined as binary oppositions: ‘our’-‘their’, ‘safe’-‘hostile’, and so on. In the same work Lotman also argues that the boundary is ambiguous and dynamic to the point of becoming an oxymoron.

Border films and other works of art set in borderlands combine different perspectives. On one hand, they portray the banal reality of people in the borderlands and their relationship with the other side (or lack thereof). However, this everyday reality is transposed into the artistic space to present identity issues, for example (Lotman 1992 as cited in Könönen 2015). The mundane act of a state border crossing is juxtaposed against a cultural boundary crossing. In her overview of Lotman's works, Könönen (2015) describes the boundary as inaccessible. Not everyone is allowed to cross the boundary, but if one does, it requires a violation of order. Thus, a film border crossing situation represents more than just a move to the other side.

### **Introduction: The border film**

The border has been a recurring theme in various arts, including the cinema. This should not be surprising: the border is a powerful symbol that lends itself to many interpretations. The border may, for example, serve as a visualisation of the semiotic boundary between ‘us and them’ (Lotman 1990), or as a metaphor for a rite of passage (Dell’agnese 2005). It may also symbolise exclusion or integration, a barrier or an opportunity. Scott (2011) points out that a border may be each of these things. However, Dell’agnese (2005) and Dodds (2013) observe that the typical border film is set in the US-Mexico borderland, and belongs to the category of a western. However, border movies have been made across the world and they belong to various genres.

Dell'agnese (2005) uses Daniels's (1993) concept of landscapes which "*narrate the nation*". This is an interesting point, because the material border is an important element of any border film. She notes that the border is not a neutral space. US-Mexican border films therefore rely heavily on racialized stereotypes of evil Mexicans and good Americans. However, Power and Crampton (2005) observe that there is a close link between the Hollywood film industry and geopolitics. While Dell'agnese (2005), Dodds (2008), and Dittmer (2010) note that the cinema reproduces the contemporary geopolitical climate, Power and Crampton (2005) argue that certain Hollywood productions may even anticipate future events. It follows that the film is an important agent in the production of cultural identities, which become more pronounced when mixed with (nationalised) border themes.

It may be argued that border movies feature a number of recurring motifs directly associated with experiencing border crossings. Dodds (2013: 7) observes that "[s]et against the backdrop of the desert landscapes of the Southwest, the border was established as a geographical and social marker of difference". Dell'agnese (2005) also speaks of encountering difference, because the 'cinematic border' is where the Self meets the Other. The space where such encounters take place is also important. Majestic natural landscapes are at the same time beautiful and threatening. Harsh environmental conditions leave the border crossing migrants to fend for themselves. Dodds (2013) recalls Doty's (2011) warning that, should a migrant die, nobody will feel responsible. The seriousness of this risk is perhaps why the borderland is populated with what Dodds (2013) calls hyper-masculine characters. According to Dell'agnese (2005), typical female characters are limited to either *señoritas* romancing with manly Americans, or sexual objects populating the background.

It should not be surprising that a border town is as inhospitable as the landscape in which it is set. Dodds (2013: 7) observes "[t]he southern borderlands [in *Traffic* (2000)] remain toxic, they refuse to be cleansed [...]". Any attempts to improve the security of this place fail. Dell'agnese (2005: 217) speaks of borderlands as beautiful but thriving on "*crime and vice*" and as something that "*brings the worst in the two countries*". The border towns are full of drugs, criminals, corrupt officials, and dodgy night clubs. Indeed, this is a stark contrast to the stunning beauty of the natural landscapes that set the scene for what takes place on the border.

The border is a useful symbol of divisions and limits. Dell'agnese (2005) writes about the use of gender and ethnic stereotypes, which are represented as binary oppositions. This violently emphasises that there are two sides to the border,

and one's position on either side predetermines one's life, because border films rarely take up the subject of hybridisation and the state of in-betweenness. What stems from the duality of the border is the importance of perception. Because the film border rarely creates symmetrical spaces, the concept of flows and their directions must be considered. Dell'agnese's (2005) characterisation of US-Mexico border crossings allows the conclusion that the direction of the crossing determines the perception. The 'south of the border' journey is a romanticised adventure understood as a rite of passage. A white American hero sets out on an idealistic mission behind a 'magic curtain', understood as "[...] *the beginning of one sort of life and the ending of another*" (Torrans 2002: 9). He then falls in love with a local *señorita* and returns home a better person. On the contrary, the stories about the journey from south to north portray a more challenging border crossing marked with by illegal activities: irregular immigration, corruption, smuggling, and trafficking. They are unwanted flows that should be stopped. Torrans (2002) points out that the changing demand for smuggled goods from harmless to more illegal ones like drugs, and the subsequent development of border surveillance technologies, lead to the deconstruction of the romantic image of the border.

As earlier mentioned, the films set in the US-Mexico borderland comprise the classic core of the border film category. Films set in other borderlands borrow from this convention. Dodds (2013) refers to this border in analysing *Frozen River* (2008), set in the US-Canadian-Mohawk borderland. While the movie is not a calque of conventions present in a gloomy from south to north story, it features similar motifs: the border has a strong material presence; it is dangerous to cross; and marginalised characters are involved in illegal cross-border activities. The borders are racialized and, in spite of the fact that the protagonists are female, they have to take on masculine roles. Nevertheless, the US northern border seems to be a grey zone, where good and evil are less clearly defined, and the white American idealism therefore does not feature prominently. If one wants to survive in this hostile environment, one has to cross the boundary of prejudice: a white Anglo-American will cooperate with an indigenous American to traffic members of despised ethnicities across the border.

All in all, the border film is traditionally associated with the US-Mexico border. It appears that this cinematic border has been reproduced through the consistent use of stereotypes. However, the change of focus to a different border allows the genre to develop complexity. Furthermore, the dominance of American popular culture results in the borrowing of classic border themes by foreign productions. Nevertheless, other film borders need to be analysed if it is to be

determined whether the border film is a genre in its own right. Below two Polish border movies which contain some echoes of American films will be presented.

### ***Yuma* – plot summary**

*Yuma* is a grim drama set at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s in a dilapidated small town near the Polish-German border. The movie deals with the birth of the infamous stereotype of the Polish thief in Germany. The title is a reference to the slang word *juma*: 'the act of stealing in German border towns, understood as a Robin Hood-style redistribution of goods'. However, the association with classic westerns is also justified, because the film openly refers to cowboy poetics.

Piotr Mularuk's movie tells a story of a group of friends who lack perspectives. Surprisingly, living in an impoverished area brings greater morality: in the opening scene Zyga, the protagonist, selflessly helps a GDR citizen reach the West German Embassy and turns his back on a friend who has swindled a prostitute. The plot thickens when Zyga is humiliated by a man who refuses to sell him a pair of fenced Adidas shoes. Zyga realises he has to act if he wants to live the dream, so he joins a cigarette smuggling network run by his entrepreneurial Aunt Halina and crosses the border to Germany, where he is immediately seduced by the accessibility of goods. But his greed leads to his downfall: German shop owners invest in security measures, while the local mafia boss begins to see Zyga as a threat. A tragedy is necessary to fix this corrupt world ruled by money, envy, and double standards.

In the closing scenes of the film two great fires destroy the smugglers' meeting places. The town is reborn. Although still shabby, small businesses, boarded up at the beginning of the movie, are now reopening. Finally, the town becomes colourful and the viewer is led to believe that the filth which filled this borderland has been cleansed.

### ***In Heaven as it is on Earth* – plot summary**

The second movie, *In Heaven as it is on Earth* (hereafter abbreviated to *Heaven*) is a romanticised satire about the north-eastern borderlands of Poland. Like *Yuma*, the movie is set in a provincial border town in the early 1990s, but the landscapes in Jacek Bromski's movie are not depressing, even if the town looks impoverished. Instead, isolation and backwardness are what make this place free from modern corruption.

The plot of *Heaven* is the story of Marusia, a young Russian girl who travels to a Polish border town to trade at a local market. When the bus is stopped by a

Russian-speaking gang who offer ‘security services’, she refuses to pay. The criminals then steal her money and leave her in the woods. The girl reports the theft to the police but they are reluctant to help. There is an unwritten rule that states that as long as ‘they’ stay away from ‘us’, no one is interested in their activities. However, that rule has been broken. As a result, the police cannot ignore the girl. It turns out that the incident has far-reaching social consequences which put the mayor’s position at risk. To protect the honour and moral values of his people, the local parish priest takes over the investigation. Thanks to his superior sense of justice, the story has a happy ending. He also recognises Marusia’s good heart, which grants her admission to this closed community.

### **Materiality of borders**

Klaus Dodds (2013) argues that “[...] *more attention needs to be given to the lively geographies that make and remake borders*”. In *Frozen River* (2008) the use of landscape makes the border a strong and tangible presence. The motifs of the river, snow, and ice are important constituents of the dramatic expression. The role of landscape in narrating the nation has already been mentioned, and in this section the role of geography in the two Polish movies will be examined.

In both films borders are presented as material, and the surrounding landscape lends its characteristic features to the border. *Yuma* resembles *Frozen River* in a number of respects. First, a river marks the border. However, the River Oder in *Yuma* is a mere brook compared to the St Lawrence in *Frozen River*. A person trying to cross the Oder might not risk drowning, but the main challenge is getting close to it, as the barren German side is patrolled by invisible armed guards. Second, the border in *Yuma* is grim and depressing, just like the snowless winter landscape around it. The lack of snow makes the place appear hostile. It is not just an economically deprived territory. It is, in fact, a desert deprived of everything. This border is a land of absolute nothingness to which the power of the state does not extend. Unlike *Frozen River*, it is not specified where the boundary of lawlessness lies, but wherever it is this place seems to be at its heart.

The border in *Heaven* is more arbitrary. There is no natural boundary, like a river or a mountain range. The state border is marked with a fence, barriers, and a sign reading Belarus in Cyrillic. However, the actual border is much more complex. The lush green woods and seemingly large distances are also an inseparable part of this border. The isolation appears to work as a wall, but it is not the same kind of wall found in militarised borderlands, which divides the space in half. It is more like a fortress, which creates a closed space within its walls, but leaves the outside

territory only vaguely delimited. Brunet-Jailly (2005) points out that this type of territorial governance is characteristic of the medieval borderlands before the development of cartography brought about the notion of the contemporary boundary. In *Yuma* the borderland feels exposed, vulnerable, and deserted; here everything is hidden and secure. Furthermore, the aim of the physical border in Bromski's film is not to divide two sovereign territories, but to enclose a community in a bubble. *Heaven* depicts an enclave whose existence is hidden behind luscious green foliage. This border functions as a representation of the semiotic boundary (Lotman 1990).

Dodds (2013: 16) claims that the border in *Frozen River* "exerts a seductive charm". However, in the Polish movies there is nothing seductive about the border itself. In *Heaven* the border deters rather than allures. Wanderlust is seen as a flight of fancy for youth who know nothing about life. However, more specifically, nobody in these movies (except the asylum seeker from the GDR) has to cross the border illegally, which in this sense means elsewhere than through an official crossing. Zyga travels freely to the other side to satisfy his need for material goods, but it is the act of stealing that is seductive. The crossing of the state border itself is not exciting, even though official procedures are not observed. The traders from Bromski's movie do not find crossing the border particularly adventurous either, because it is an established routine, even if the border personnel have to be bribed. The state borders in the two Polish movies are relatively open in that the state sovereign regime seems unable to control the flows. There is no need to risk life by crossing illegally: the regulatory function of the border has been lost because of the border guards' opportunism.

To conclude the discussion about the materiality of borders, it should be noted that this point is not problem-free, although it does not affect this analysis. The framework starts from the simplest element (the physical border) and gradually proceeds to more complex ones. However, this approach limits the category of a border film to the narratives which are set on the border or in its vicinity. Nevertheless, there are culturally important films which feature themes of border crossings without directly referring to them. The James Bond series is an example of such a globalised outlook on border cinema.

### **Different aspects of border crossings**

In border movies the representation of the border is more sophisticated than a simple demarcation symbol borrowed from cartography. According to Dodds (2012) and Shapiro (2005), film borders comprise a number of elements: characters, practices, objects, landscapes, and past experiences. Likewise, the authors of *Yuma*

and *Heaven* use the motif of a state border crossing as a background for other types of border crossings.

First, both movies deal with certain social boundaries. The social boundaries refer for the most part to encounters between people from both sides of the border. However, the movies imply such encounters are rare. The Russian-speakers in *Heaven* regularly cross the border, but from the perspective of the townspeople they are hardly visible. The interaction between the two is limited to the marketplace, where goods are sold, and the night club, where women in skimpy outfits offer a particular kind of service. Apart from this, there is an unwritten rule that one group must not interfere with the other's business. As long as this norm is respected, the migrants remain invisible, even if they are involved in criminal activities. The townspeople construct a barrier of contempt by referring to them as *Russkies*. The migrants do not openly contest this positioning, but repay it tit for tat. The sales strategy the traders adopt exposes the hypocrisy of the Poles. The barrier between the locals and the smugglers is not the only social barrier, however. The characters stay away from the Poles who live in the region, not to mention those who inhabit the rest of the country. Their otherness is marked, for example, by the use of a regional dialect. While they live on the margins, the community still considers itself as a model of Polish-ness.

What is striking in *Yuma* is the lack of interaction between people from both banks of the Oder. The only people with whom Zyga has any contact on the German side are the asylum seeker and a Silesian shop owner. As the story unfolds, the viewer observes that there is an invisible wall between the Poles and the Germans. At first, the characters feel solidarity towards the GDR Germans. However, when Germany is unified, the western bank of the Oder starts flourishing, but the eastern side falls into an even greater state of disrepair. This process is a side effect of the EU's policy of internal integration and external exclusion (Haase and Wust 2004). The people on the Polish side see this process as an injustice, which reawakens the anti-German sentiment of the Second World War. When Zyga drives to the border for the first time, the Polish border guard tells him, "*The German [border guard] is also human.*" The ambiguity of this statement is an apt summary of the misconceptions about the people living on the other side. Human does not mean ordinary, just like any of us; here, it only means as corrupt as we are.

Second, it is obvious in both movies that neither side of the border wishes to cooperate with the other. Rosière and Jones (2012) claim that the main trend in border studies during the 1990s was the notion of globalisation, or the opening up of



borders. Although characters in both movies are allowed to move relatively freely across the border, globalisation as classically understood seems an irrelevant term in this context. While the state border is open, this is not the result of a government order, but because the state has no real power over the border. Nevertheless, in the absence of a well-managed state border people construct their own barriers to regain a sense of security. According to Newman (2011), those other barriers, which he describes as cultural, are much more difficult to cross. However, it is possible that these social barriers may be gradually deconstructed, if the atmosphere of cooperation is facilitated. According to a study conducted roughly ten years after the events shown in both films, the authorities in the Polish eastern borderland speak favourably of cross-border cooperation. Haase and Wust (2004: 89) argue that:

*In their [experts from both sides of the border] view, cross-border contacts can considerably contribute to normalizing the relations between neighbors, including in terms of ethnic and religious understanding. Cross-border exchange harbors various ways of coping with problems occurring on both sides. Local stakeholders in the border regions regard this issue as an increasingly important instrument for supporting decision-making processes. Moreover, more or less frequent meetings persuade people from the neighboring regions to regard each other as partners sharing similar interests, rather than as rivals or even hostile strangers.*

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that the process of normalising relations takes time and energy. The borders in *Heaven* and *Yuma* are marked by prejudice and mutual reluctance, and it is naïve to believe that they will simply disappear overnight. *Yuma* ends with the suggestion that the rule of crime is over. Perhaps this means the beginning of healthy cross-border relations. However, *Heaven* seems to suggest that cross-border cooperation results in more harm than good. (Here it must be pointed out that *Heaven* was followed by two sequels released in 2007 and 2009. Neither directly addresses the issue of the eastern border.)

### **Governance issues**

The issues connected with governance and the “*micro-geographies of sovereignty*” (Dodds 2013: 11) in *Yuma* and in *Heaven* should be examined. It was mentioned in the previous section that the state appears to have no real control over its borders in the movies. However, the absence of state power does not mean that nobody has any authority over the given territories. The parish priest represents a rather successful and independent micro-regime in *Heaven*. In *Yuma* power is held by a network of several actors who cooperate with each other. Zyga believes that he

is an architect of his own destiny, but he fails to understand local power relations. Because the mafia is a powerful local actor, the ethics of crime permeates everyday life. The authorities and the police do not consider *juma* illegal. The word “theft” is avoided; instead the act is referred to as “the transfer of undersupplied goods”. Not only do officials turn a blind eye to audacious thefts, but they openly support it. Even the local priest has no scruples in blessing numerous stolen cars parked outside the church. All in all, the so called microgeography of sovereignty in *Yuma* is much more obscure.

The image of the Polish borders is very different from what Rossiter (2011: 118) calls “*a space of no exceptions [emphasis mine]*”. The legitimate border bureaucracy has been replaced by a system of bribery. However, the acceptance of bribes means that the border is turned into “*a space of ultimate exceptions*”, because all objects brought across the border lose their geopolitical connotations. Not even the strangest circumstances change this situation: the border guards do not stop a car whose boot is full of expensive jewellery, even though they know there has been a burglary. A border guard might demand that duty should be paid, but one should not be misled into thinking that this official speaks the legitimate jargon. A space of no exceptions is also mentioned in *Heaven*. It appears that border guards on the eastern border occasionally confiscate contraband, although there are reasons to suspect that this is not because they are suddenly obeying state law, but because bribes have not been paid. Smuggling is therefore risky, and the smugglers look for ways to cut their losses. These ways may be controversial, however. A fellow passenger ambiguously tells Marusia why she became a prostitute: “[...] *I carry my stock with me. The customs can't seize it. There's a green light. Do you understand now?*” While Dodds (2013) notes that the American border guard is a super-masculine type, a superhero, Polish border guards are reduced to greedy opportunists.

Having mentioned the figures of the border guard and the customs officer, the focus will now be moved to other representatives of sovereign institutions: civil servants and the police. As before, nobody who holds a public function in the films actually represents the interest of the state. The mayor and the police chief in *Heaven* keep up the appearance of their authority in front of ordinary citizens, while accepting the supremacy of the parish priest. Their counterparts in *Yuma* openly support the thefts, but officially do not recognise anyone's authority. In a well-managed state public officials have to put the interest of the state before the interest of individuals, whereas in both films the interest of individuals is the most important value.

At this point the question about the consequences of a defunct sovereign regime needs to be asked. It appears that the system based on the supremacy of the Catholic priest created in Bromski's movie is more successful than the secular regime, because state law seems easily disputable when compared with canon law. However, the priest's interpretation of canon law is not flawless. There is some controversy over equality and who can obtain forgiveness. Thus, the police chief who was involved in a shooting has to atone for his wrongdoing, even though the man he shot at was a wanted criminal. On the other hand, the mayor's daughter is exempt from wearing a shameful blue dress on her wedding day, even though her pregnancy was an excuse to get married before her sisters. However, the authority based on the Christian sense of justice guarantees order, even though it does not extend to the state border itself. In Mularuk's movie the social norms are based on a reverse understanding of good and evil. *Juma* is not a theft, but an act of justice; it is a form of compensation for the damage of the Second World War. The observance of state law does not make one righteous. The boundary between good and evil has disappeared and the two have become unrecognisable. As a result, there are no objectively good guys in *Yuma*.

The issue of biopolitics also deserves some attention. It has already been mentioned that the film borders are relatively open, but that not everyone can cross them. Rosière and Jones (2012: 218) use the term 'preferred travellers', that is those individuals whose freedom to move has not been restricted by the process of border hardening. In the realities of the films there are grounds to suspect that almost anyone can cross state borders. The only requirements are appropriate social networks, and/or bribes. Indeed, none of the travellers is ever shown carrying a passport. However, because the state border is a symbol of the state, which has no real power over it, the regulatory function is shifted. The social and mental borders in both movies are much more difficult to cross. It is not the state's role to decide who can cross the border, although the necessity to have the right connections is a form of external control. The decision is for the potential travellers themselves. Those who live on the 'better side' remain immobile, as do those who do not want to involve themselves in bribery. The border space can therefore be described as asymmetric in terms of flows of people. This also proves that the border consists of many elements, and its geopolitical component is probably its weakest part.

Finally, the treatment of the category of citizenship in the movies is striking. Paasi (2011) argues that citizenship is inextricably linked to borders. However, the movie borders appear special. Citizenship as a criterion which determines whether or not one is admitted to the other side therefore does not apply. Indeed, the category

of citizenship becomes irrelevant. The representatives of the criminal world in Bromski's and Mularuk's stories come from foreign, further unspecified, Russian-speaking countries. When Marusia reports the theft of her money to the police their reaction is one of complete indifference, because the thief is a foreigner. Marusia thinks of citizenship as ethnolinguistic: the thief's nickname *Georgian* makes no sense because he speaks a Ukrainian dialect. Strangely enough, the police, who after all represent the sovereign regime, identify the man as a *Russky*. It is indeed paradoxical that state representatives do not think of the suspect in terms of citizenship. The border in this film is thus not a national construct: it does not mark the end of one sovereign regime and the beginning of another. Instead, it resembles the American western frontier, although in this case pushing at its limits is not a goal. This is a border between 'us', representing the civilisation of morality, and 'them', the hordes of barbarians, collectively labelled as "Russkies".

### **Border film conventions**

In the above sections the film borders of *Yuma* and *Heaven* have been analysed from the perspective of human geography. In this section the conventions of American border films will be discussed. It may be argued that both Polish movies comply with border film poetics, while adding to the genre's diversity, instead of simply copying its conventions.

Where *Yuma* is concerned, a comparison with the representations of the American southern border is unavoidable, because the movie openly borrows from the genre of the western. Zyga is a good-hearted young man who dreams of owning a pair of cowboy boots. He finally takes life in his hands and becomes a real man. Even the barren landscape echoes the American southwestern deserts. But the adventure goes wrong, and instead of becoming a better man, Zyga becomes a corrupt gangster. The story shape-shifts into a darker 'from south to north' narrative.

Many classic border film conventions have been maintained in Mularuk's work. The border separates 'us' from 'them'. The borderland is a space dominated by masculinity, even though Aunt Halina argues "*there are no real men here*". Likewise, women can only be girlfriends of handsome men, or prostitutes. The borderland overflows with crime and stereotypes. It is a despicable space. It needs to be destroyed in order to be rebuilt. But in shifting the focus from the cowboy's perspective the film also plays with classic border movie conventions. A local "señorita" who escapes with a German to the better side is punished as Nazi collaborators were half a century earlier. At the beginning of the film Zyga's character shares the essential superhero features described by Dittmer (2011) (apart

from supernatural powers and visual effects), but it turns out that disobeying the law for a greater good has tragic consequences, because good in this film is ambiguous. Thus, the film questions Polish exceptionalism and exposes a relationship with the German side based on an inferiority complex. It produces a grim narrative of the Polish-ness of the western borderlands.

Jacek Bromski's movie also has its own superhero. He is the priest. However, instead of a flamboyant costume he wears a modest cassock. His "superpower" is derived from his faith in the Virgin Mary, who he believes is his personal advisor and confidante. These slight deviations from the superhero standard apart, the priest's actions are quite typical. He places himself above the state (or rather state law) to protect the local community. In the dialogue below the priest and the local police chief negotiate the power structure:

Priest: *"Henryk, you know why I've summoned you here. Give back the badge! You shot at a man. Could have killed him!"*

Chief: *"I shot at a Russky bandit! In self-defence!"*

Priest: *"No one who shoots at another man can be my chief of police."*

Chief: *"What's wrong with you, Father? Only the regional commissioner can do that. And he gave me a reward!"*

Priest: *"I'm the commissioner here because the responsibility is mine. [...] Our Lord's the first, and then it's me [...]"*

Although *Heaven* does not openly refer to American border movie traditions, it features similar themes. The story is about a clash between the two sides of the border. The border space is ruled by clear-cut divisions: religious, ethnic, and gender. It is a story of good, though clumsy, local Poles and ruthless outsiders. Here as well, the border is masculine. Relationships with women (usually limited to sexual relationships) bring trouble. The border town seems idyllic, but its allure is superficial. The grey economy and crime are scarcely concealed by the veneer of perfection. No matter how hard one tries, no border can totally separate both sides, because of their associated ambiguities. This superficiality mocks the townspeople's sense of exceptionalism, for all that the film romanticises marginalisation. Marusia, the female protagonist, is portrayed in a positive light because her rite of passage is about staying the same. But the line between closed-mindedness and the need for stability in the film is thin.

To conclude this discussion of conventions, both *Yuma* and *Heaven* share numerous features with American border films. There is a universal border narrative, but this narrative may be interpreted in many different ways. However, this small-scale analysis cannot provide an answer to the question of whether the universality of motifs stems from the specificity of borderlands alone, or from the worldwide popularity of American cinema.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has analysed the theme of the border in two Polish movies, *Yuma* and *Heaven*. Both movies are concerned with marginalised border towns. They mention such problems as economic underdevelopment, backwardness, lack of perspective, and certain forms of crime which all occur in border areas, as Opiola and Trzcielińska-Polus (2013) point out. Nevertheless, the movies offer an interpretation of border reality, rather than a documentary-like account. *Heaven* romanticises backwardness, whereas *Yuma* is a brutalised depiction of poverty and lack of perspectives. Still, both stories echo actual events. Kosowicz (2009) observes that during the 1990s smugglers from the former Soviet Union traded illegally in the eastern borderlands of Poland, thus providing a boost to the local economy. However, Haase and Wust (2004) add that the consequences of these grey economy activities were more complex and cannot be simply labelled as positive or negative. According to Scott and Collins (2011), the western border, in turn, was a significantly asymmetric space associated with illegal activity, prejudice, and huge differences in economic development.

The border images in the films by Bromski and Mularuk are complex constructs. First, the narratives begin by sketching an administrative demarcation line. This line is then developed into a more elaborate picture. To focus one's attention on the border itself, however, makes it impossible to ignore. The state border thus becomes a symbol of division even though it may be possible to cross from one side to the other. The characters of *Heaven* and *Yuma* live their lives in the shadow of a state border, which they imagine as a wall. This logic proves that those who contest the dividing power of borders have an arduous task.

Second, the surrounding landscape gives meaning to the border and determines how people perceive the borderlands, whether as a safe haven in the woods or a barren desert. This leads to the creation of more abstract social borders. The opposition of 'us' and 'them' is an obvious example. But this division extends to the community on the same side, between those who interact with 'others', and those who distance themselves from any contact. The social borders may produce

more meanings, elaborating the understanding of 'them' and resulting in 'them' being viewed increasingly negatively. Haase and Wust (2004) point out that the function of the border is specified by policies, which suggests that a border on its own has no meaning. Hence, it may be argued that a policy of neglect results in a metaphorical wall. Furthermore, the opposition of 'us' and 'them' results in the construction of good and evil borderlands, which resonates with the concept of the right and wrong side of the border (Dell'agnese 2005). Although the film depictions of the western and eastern borders do not differ greatly in terms of certain objective characteristics (like smuggling or economic underdevelopment), their perceptions are not the same.

Another point worth considering is the nature of film borders. On one hand, they show some characteristic features of globalisation, because travellers are allowed to cross without having to present documents. On the other, the characters isolate themselves from the outside world. Furthermore, the entire territory along the border gives the impression of a no-man's land not only because it is sparsely populated, but, more importantly, because state power in this space is only symbolic. These borders are therefore neither simply open nor properly closed. From the social perspective the borders resemble what Rosière and Jones (2012) call a *frontline*, but it has to be emphasised that the role of the military is taken over by feelings of contempt or reluctance. From the economic perspective the films draw attention to the hierarchy of flows that Rosière and Jones (2012) also outline. However, the much desired flow of (smuggled) goods is stimulated by the unwanted flow of people. This conflict is solved by the naïve philosophy that what one does not see does not exist. The border guards are not shown controlling documents, which should be their basic task. The flow of people is thus hidden.

The conclusions drawn from analysing *Yuma* and *Heaven* can be useful for border studies mostly because the movies narrate the everyday banal reality of the border. Paasi (2011) describes borders as elements of the local and the national. Because of this complexity, conflicts between the representatives of the two are likely: the state has different priorities, as do the ordinary inhabitants of borderlands. This raises the question of who should bear the costs of living on the border. However, this is not the only difficulty. When borderlands are considered, one should ask whether an ordinary borderland dweller should be taken into account in policy making. It could be argued that policy makers do not always succeed in addressing the complexity of borders. As Rossiter (2011) observes, the state's and the individual's priorities are often contradictory, and ethical issues are thus unlikely to disappear from the borderland discourse. The question is whether this conflict is

indeed unsolvable. In his theory of culture Lotman (1990) notes that what comes from the outside of the boundary appears threatening, but he also adds that the centre has no ability to innovate. Anything new may only originate from the outside, but when the innovation enters the mainstream it loses its alien status. While the cost of bringing down a border is high, this process is necessary to move forward, but the film characters seem unready to pay this price.

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