

# SPECTRES OF THE BORDER

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"[...] When they were building the walls, how could I not have noticed.

But I never heard the builders' thwack nor a sound.  
Imperceptibly they have blocked me off outside the world."  
(*'Walls'*, by C. P. Cavafy)

It was not long ago that more than 750 people died in the deep waters off the coast of Pylos, in one of the most devastating shipwrecks in recent European memory. They died seeking refuge—crossing not just a sea, but an imaginary, violently enforced border. The promised sanctuary of Europe was buried with them beneath the Mediterranean, a watery graveyard of geopolitical design.

The act was witnessed. The violence was visible. The Hellenic Coast Guard and Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency, initially observed, then intervened—only to tow and ultimately capsize the vessel. What unfolded was not a rescue, but a spectacle. A border performance. A deliberate and violent act of bordering. They drowned not just at sea, but in Europe's performance of borders. Watched, surveilled, tracked.

It is not that the EU border failed them. It functioned exactly as designed. Borders are not born in geography; they cannot be reduced to fixed or natural features. A border should be understood as an act of political will, rooted in the idealised image of a self-constructed nation—the *imagination*. And this imagination is made tangible through a diverse system of ordering components—policing, guarding, fences, barbed wire, propaganda, statistics, and maps—all separating the citizen from the 'stranger', the 'us' from the imagined, unwanted Other, together creating an act of *bordering, ordering, and othering*.

Crucially, borders are made visible not to understand them, but to justify them. The spectacle of the border is a *mise-en-scène*, a stage of sovereignty and choreography of control, legitimated by the state and reproduced by media loyal to or manipulated by nationalist-populist regimes. The state, like an actor, performs sovereignty through images of strength, control, and exclusion. The migrant Other, meanwhile, is cast as threat or helplessness—rarely as neighbour, rarely as equal. What we get to see is not innocent; it is an act of power and violent subordination. A moral hierarchy between human beings on the basis of descent. A global apartheid. Normalised.

The clearer the border performs itself for all to see, the easier it is to quietly accept what it claims to be necessary: to shut them out, the Others. To turn away, to deport, even to discard those cast as 'illegal'—as if to seek safety were a crime. As if those who arrive at our gates are not people, but threatening waves and arrows. Barbaric. Criminal. Invading. And in that lie, the border finds its cruelest power: not only to keep out, but to dehumanise.

Today, in the EU border regime, the Greek myth of the Panoptes—the one who sees with a hundred eyes—returns not as metaphor, but as machinery. The EU's moral hierarchy is protected through visa policies, biometrics, satellites, and databases. The European border surveils beyond its edges. Its gaze is planetary, post-territorial. The border no longer merely stops unwelcome migrants; it produces and predicts them. It categorises, filters, and anticipates. A digital Panopticon.

Behind the spectacle of the border lies what Derrida once called *the visible that must not be seen*. What the hidden camps, drones, and data show is carefully curated; what they obscure is responsibility. In that regard, what we are witnessing in Europe today is not only a spectacular militarisation of space, but, simultaneously an orchestrated invisibilisation of life itself. In hotspots and holding zones, refugees are made to wait indefinitely, caught in what Foucault described as a disciplinary architecture: surveilled, controlled, immobilised—and, importantly, invisibilised.

Yet this border's grand theatre—veiled in pageantry and rituals of control—cannot disguise the fundamental anxiety that defines its very function. Borders promise safety, but they are built from fear—fear of disorder, of the Other, of incompleteness. Lacan reminds us that our psychic lives are shaped by a desire for coherence and fulfilment we can never fully attain.

The border stages this desire as wall, gate, camp—as if enclosing the outside could resolve the inside. It is a fantasy made real.

The border is not there to protect; it is there to perform protection. The border guards a myth, not a threat. A myth of unity, purity, wholeness.

To photograph a border, then, is to risk participating in its spectacle. Not only because the camera inevitably frames and fabricates a reality, but more because what it captures is never just the border itself—only its prostheses, its masks. A wall, a checkpoint, a waiting room in a camp: these are the border's costumes. They act on behalf of an imagined line that has no body of its own.

This is why the border—the singular border—cannot be photographed. Not because it is hidden, but because it is too visible. Its image is overdetermined—already saturated by suspicion, nationalism, and fear. We have learned, as Clark taught us of painting, to look at these images without truly seeing them. Their meaning is pre-scripted.

We are all partakers in this *mise-en-scène* that is the border. Like those in Plato's cave, we watch the shadows—the barbed wire, the rescue boat, the thermal image of a crossing—mistaking them for truth. The photographers, the witnesses, the writers and the poets—they try to show us what lies behind the light. But it is hard to look directly. It is easier to stay seated and believe the spectacularised frame, cunningly constructed.

This book does not offer a fixed frame. It refuses the illusion of completeness, the urge to pin down what is, by nature, elusive. Instead, it invites a journey—through shadows, fragments, ruptures—into the fathomlessness of the Greek border. In these pages, we do not encounter the border, but a multitude of borderings—captured not as singular truth, but as splinters of experience, moments that resist easy seeing and clear categorisation. A border that is not one, but many. Not fixed, but perpetually shifting.

Each photograph lifts the veil of the spectacle, revealing stillness tinged with tension and a silent depth where the unseen carries equal weight with the seen. The camera listens to atmospheres, evoking thought instead of dictating meaning. This is a book of spectres and echoes—of lives interrupted or lost, gazes returned, troubled waters, scattered flags, border stones that tremble. It offers openings, not closure; fractures, not frames.

To fully capture the border would be to repeat its illusion—that it is knowable, nameable, graspable as a line. This book resists that. It reveals bordering as ongoing performance, bringing into view the tension between visibility and erasure, movement and stillness, control and care.

The photographic journey proposes that, to see the border differently, we must learn to embrace a fractured and fragmented frame. As the poet Dejan Stojanović put it:

*There are no clear borders,  
Only merging invisible to the sight.*  
— Dejan Stojanović

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# BORDERS

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