*Borders in Globalization Review*
Volume 7, Issue 2 (Spring & Summer 2026): 143–145
https://doi.org/10.18357/big_r72202622736

FILM REVIEW

# Green Border: Taking a Stand in a Heated Political Debate

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***Green Border (Zielona Granica)***

Film (feature), 2023

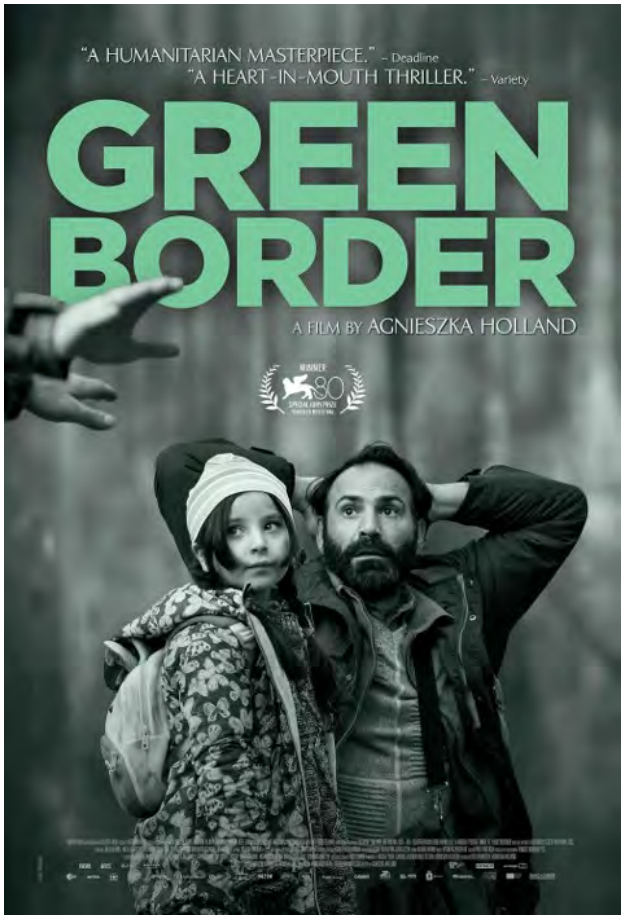
Directed by Agnieszka Holland

Run Time: 2 hours, 33 minutes

Original Language: Polish, Arabic, English, French

More Information at:

https://www.imdb.com/de/title/tt27722543/




*Green Border* entered Polish cinemas long before it was released in Germany. While spending a weekend on the German side of the Baltic Sea Coast, I made a short trip to Poland to see the film at a cinema in Świnoujście. I drove through the Polish–German border. It was as if there was no border. That was 2023. Three years later, controls at this border are back, and racial profiling is part of their strategy.

The full-length feature *Green Border*, directed by Agnieszka Holland, premiered at the 80th Venice International Film Festival in 2023, where it won the Special Jury Prize. Shot in black and white, the film addresses the ongoing humanitarian crisis at the border between Poland and Belarus, i.e. the eastern outer border of the European Union. It is a Polish–Czech–French-Belgian coproduction that did not get any public funding from the Polish Film Institute, as the message it puts across was not in line with the political agenda of the conservative right-wing government at the time.[1] The fact that *Green Border* became part of the political debate carried out in Poland at the time of the parliamentary elections in the Fall of 2023 showed a shift in the debate, as before its release cultural affairs and their financing had played a rather marginal role in the election campaign.

The humanitarian crisis depicted in the film started in 2021 and has since been instrumentalized by global political powers to advance their own interests and political agendas. It poses a challenge to the entire European Union but has largely remained a local issue in terms of media coverage (or lack of coverage) and the authorities' handling of it (or lack of handling), e.g., the absence of Frontex involvement in the first months of the crisis.[2]

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The film portrays Julia, a psychologist in her forties who lives in a house near the Białowieża Forest, one of the largest remaining parts of the primeval forest that once stretched across the European Plain. The green border between Poland and Belarus runs through this very forest. While Julia talks to her patients online through her Mac computer, refugees from various countries lured by the Belarusian authorities keep crossing the fortified green border to Poland in search of asylum in the European Union. The narrative lens focuses on a Syrian family and an Afghan woman who accompanies them after having met on the plane. The aim of the Syrian family is to join a relative in Sweden, and they are to cross the border with a whole group of refugees from different, mostly African, countries. Relatively early in the plot, the two worlds start to overlap when Julia joins an activist collective[3] that tries to help people stranded in the forest, risking legal persecution given that entering "the zone" is strictly forbidden and criminalized. Julia's bad conscience forces her out of the comfort zone of her idyllic house by the forest and brings her to the cruel and fortified wilderness where many people are left without help and die.

While this is a cohesive attempt by the film to ask the big moral questions of our times related to social justice, human rights, and the meaning of the fortification of European borders, the really interesting character who embodies the internal struggle related to the mentioned points is Jan, a young Polish border guard. It is this character who undergoes a fundamental change that is shown in the film in small doses: from an obedient servant of the border patrol fulfilling his duties wrapped up in a patriotic pseudo-agenda to an accomplice who lets a car pass a checkpoint knowing that there are people hidden in it to whom Poland would not grant asylum. It is through this character's development that the film raises the question of the nature of otherness and how we—regardless of how this pronoun is defined—construct our understanding of strangers. While many of the impulses toward otherness can be provided from above, e.g., through effective propaganda serving a ruling manipulative strategy, there are still the foundational elements of universal human experience that can trespass the binaries "us vs. them" or "European vs. non-European," which like all binaries, indicate a relation of power (Derrida 1972). Some of the experiences that the film makes use of are pregnancy and parenthood, illness and death. Jan is a character who is torn between agendas imposed on him (e.g., orders from his uniformed supervisors or the social norms provided by the conservative Polish Catholic Church) but, despite the difficulties and inconsistencies, manages to find a clear line in the blurriness of moral chaos. The physical border, fortified with barbed wire entanglement but also guarded by a natural environment that is hostile to people, the last bastion of European wilderness, serves in the film as a gate to essential questions about the price of European freedoms and who is being made to pay this price. Additionally, the film makes a bitter point when it refers to a culture vs. nature distinction as being a part of a "racialized discourse" (Hall 1997, 243) in which the mostly non-white refugees are assigned to the wilderness of the forest and the white border guards meant to keep them there in an act of protecting civilized Europe.

In the epilogue, Jan is sent to yet another border, the one between Poland and Ukraine. The refugees fleeing Ukraine due to the full-scale Russian invasion of February 2022 are welcomed in Poland with open arms, symbolically portrayed as Jan's arms. With that last scene, the viewer is left with an uncanny feeling of hypocrisy and a quite uncomfortable binary between "good" vs. "bad" refugees.

According to Stuart Hall (1997), the way we construct our strangers or "others" is based on subjectivity and hence always has something to do with ourselves. In other words, every stranger contains something of the dominant culture that created them, and that serves to define its own identity and legitimize its actions. Strangers are needed to construct identity-shaping narratives, and dominant cultures do exactly that, e.g., by representing marginalized groups (such as immigrants) as fundamentally different or "other."

When the film was shown in 2025 in Berlin as part of a two-day program "Polish Perspectives," organized by the Berlin Academy of the Arts and the Polish Institute Berlin, it caught the attention of the Polish right-wing press, which attacked the organizers for promoting a "shameful side" of Polish culture. The tension accompanying this reaction was surprising, taking into consideration that two years had passed since the release of the film, but it also showed how heated the debate was and still is. *Green Border* was shot and released in the midst of the crisis and immediately became part of the public debate. While not all attempts at presenting the situation of people seeking asylum are successful, e.g., there is one scene that shows a happy arrival of young refugees at a Polish family that is more reminiscent of an Erasmus exchange, it is an important voice in a highly polarized discussion, and nothing legitimizes right-wing attacks surrounding the production. Making the film at that time was a deliberate stand in a difficult political debate. It has to be seen as an act of bravery and an instance of social activism, given everything it involves.

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## Endnotes

1 Both Andrzej Duda, Polish president at the time, and Zbigniew Ziobro, Poland's Minister of Justice until 2023, compared the film to Nazi propaganda and used the slogan "Tylko świnie siedzą w kinie" ("Only pigs sit in the cinema"). They publicly accused the film of being anti-Polish and of slandering Polish border guards by portraying them as sadists and barbarians while performing the so-called pushbacks, which were legalized by the Polish government in October 2023, as Dróżdż and Chołodowski reported for the Polish daily Gazeta Wyborcza, respectively, on 5 September and 26 October 2023.

2 The origin of the political mechanisms fueling the ongoing critical situation have been thoroughly summarized by Elizabeth Flock (2026).

3 While the name of the activist group is not mentioned in the film, it clearly alludes to "Grupa Granica," a bottom-up initiative formed in 2021 to oppose the humanitarian crises at the Polish-Belarussian border (https://www.sklepbezgranic.pl/en_US/index).