

# Border Crossings

By Todd Lillethun

Once in a while, a group of films suddenly arrive all sharing the same topic. Though film distributors try to prevent this at all costs, when it happens, the audience has a rare chance to see an issue addressed from different

## In This World

Directed by Michael Winterbottom

## Spare Parts

Directed by Damjan Kozole

## Distant Lights

Directed by Hans-Christian Schmid

## Beyond Borders

Directed by Martin Campbell

angles. Refugees are the focus of four films released this year: *In This World* from the United Kingdom, *Spare Parts* from Slovenia, *Distant Lights* from Germany, and *Beyond Borders* from the United States. Each features harrowing trials of displaced persons and the quixotic lifestyles they adopt in order to survive. Starvation, terror, sickness and death are commonplace, and the refugees entrust their destinies, sometimes fatally, to the hands of strangers. By the end of each of these movies, a feeling of isolation sets in for the audience, making "home" seem like an island of safety amidst a vast, ominous planet.

The films portray refugees in varying ways: as resilient survivors, helpless victims and even scheming opportunists. Similarly, the people who help them are shown as heroes, exploiters or simple working-class citizens. In one film the refugees occupy the foreground as main characters, in another they are part of an ensemble, and in two they are relegated to the background, having only a handful of lines. Although these films do not share country of origin or destination, they all portray the plight of refugees as part of a pervasive world crisis.

## In This World

Michael Winterbottom is an accomplished director whose style and focus change according to his subject. His film uses a *cinema verité* documentary style in

following two young Afghan refugees on their journey to London. Though the story is fictional, it is based on true events. The actors, refugees themselves, improvise throughout the film; Winterbottom captures their reactions as they are led into one situation after another, some pre-planned and some not.

The style of the film is so brisk that the logic and meaning in any given scene are often not apparent until after the scene has ended. We are hurtled along the Silk Road into an unforgiving terrain that often goes unexplained and unguided. Tourist signposts are gone, and culture shock reigns for an hour and a half before the enormity of

favors, and often end up killing their charges by packing them too tightly in car trunks.

Such occupational hazards are presented as par for the course; still, the men see themselves as angels in disguise. Ludvik, the lead smuggler, is a widower and alcoholic. He becomes a father figure to Rudi, a young protégé who idolized him in his former racing life. Their difficult relationship manages to squeak a few bright moments out of the sad landscape. Krsko, the town where the film takes place, is home to the only nuclear power plant in the former Yugoslavia. Impotence and cancer run high among the locals, and Ludvik drinks his own piss to get his cancer under control. He grooms Rudi to take over "the business," and in the end Ludvik's protégé must decide for himself how much of the job's burden and ethics are his own.



In *Spare Parts*, smugglers trade sexual favors, swindle and even kill their charges.

the journey becomes clear. The film itself is a marvel of circumstance. The crew often shot guerrilla-style without permits and under the radar of government sanction in Iran, Italy, Pakistan and Turkey.

## Spare Parts

Director Damjan Kozole is a veteran punk rocker from Slovenia whose film focuses on drunk, corrupt and depressed smugglers who reminisce about their former lives as race car drivers as they ferry terrified human cargo across the Croatian border to Italy. They swindle refugees out of their money (charging \$50 for a pizza), sexually exploit women in exchange for

## Distant Lights

In Hans-Christian Schmid's film, the Oder River between Frankfurt, Germany and Sublice, Poland is the featured border, the division between the prosperous west and the impoverished east. As in *Spare Parts*, the ferrymen here are unscrupulous, charging inordinate sums for tremendous danger and no guarantees that refugees will arrive safely.

*Distant Lights* interweaves eight narratives that reference border-crossing figuratively or metaphorically. One storyline follows a Ukrainian couple attempting to cross over. Creeping through the woods along the river's edge, they follow a group

of other refugees into a botched defection scheme and narrowly escape capture. A poor local man desperate for money hides them in his garage without his wife's knowledge and agrees to help the couple, though he is neither savvy nor skillful enough to take such a risk. Meanwhile, a fellow refugee is captured but finds luck at the Border Patrol Interrogation Office when his interpreter takes pity on him and eventually agrees to help.

In both of these stories, the relationship between helper and traveler is compromised. Mercy and ruthlessness change hands, guilt and innocence are a matter of chance, and freedom comes in varying shades of gray.

### **Beyond Borders**

In stark contrast to these films comes this stateside tale of a wealthy society woman



Hans-Christian Schmid's *Distant Lights* ties the plight of refugees to the lives of natural citizens.

who is transformed into a humanitarian aid worker. Sara Jordan (Angelina Jolie) is a pampered, insular American who makes her home in London. While on a relief mission in Ethiopia in 1985, she picks up an emaciated boy lying on the roadside and begs Nick Callahan (Clive Owen), a bitter activist doctor, to save him. Callahan snubs her at first, saying the boy is practically dead already. She pleads, he relents, and the boy's recovery is the romantic glue that bonds.

After a few weeks she returns to her prosaic life in London, but the plight of the starving and sick haunts her, and she starts a job with the United Nations High

## **Mercy and ruthlessness change hands, guilt and innocence are a matter of chance, and freedom comes in varying shades of gray.**

Commissioner for Refugees. Her work reunites her with Callahan in Cambodia in 1989, where after a harrowing episode with the Khmer Rouge, they declare their love but realize the impossibility of it surviving amidst all the tragedy. Six years later, Callahan goes missing in Chechnya, and Sara sets out to find him.

By far the most widely seen of the four films, *Beyond Borders* was a financial and

all their sincerity, undermined an honest portrayal of the world's disenfranchised, especially when one has played Lara Croft twice, and the other has the looks and charisma of James Bond. It doesn't help that director Martin Campbell retains his feel for globetrotting action films in every scene (his previous films include *The Mask of Zorro*, *GoldenEye* and *No Escape*).

Still, for all the studio trappings, it is difficult to argue with the film's good intentions. Without getting into geopolitics, it presents an unflinchingly detailed account of starvation and death that in most instances overwhelms the romance. The characters' love for each other and love for their mission are explicitly connected, and while that may smack of narrative gamesmanship on the studio's part, it may have been considered a means to sell a very bleak movie to a mass audience.

The problem is not the romance, but that Hollywood does not trust its audience enough to make a film about real refugees, to present them as people in specific contexts and not just as victims. Instead, Hollywood settles for self-serving stories about conflicted humanitarians who nurse the national image of the United States as world benefactor. When Callahan crashes a charity ball that Sara attends and accuses its sponsor of corporate greed and racism, the corporation in question is British, and the danger of the film invoking anti-Americanism is conveniently sidestepped.

The chance that *Beyond Borders* might spur interest in the other three films is remote. It's the most depressing of the bunch. Even as bleak as *Spare Parts* is, the end of that film works up to some kind of hope. *In This World* and *Distant Lights* are, as their titles suggest, circular in their conclusion that the destination never really comes and people forever wander the globe without settling.

The film that stands out from all four, however, is *Distant Lights*. By effectively tying the plight of refugees to the daily lives of natural citizens, Schmid leaves us with a less isolated sense of "home" and a more personal connection to the characters. The film presents all the stories and characters so evenhandedly that easy choices of whose side to take are difficult to make. In the end we empathize with everyone. ■

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critical failure. It grossed only \$4.4 million domestically and closed within a month. Most reviewers compared it unfavorably to *In This World*, which earned only \$84,000 in the United States (in limited release—it took in much more overseas) despite winning the Golden Bear Award for Best Film at the Berlin Film Festival. *Spare Parts* and *Distant Lights* do not yet have U.S. distributors, but also have garnered accolades overseas and were produced on limited budgets.

The studio machine behind *Beyond Borders* might have been, in part, what doomed the film. Hiring beautiful stars like Angelina Jolie and Clive Owen, for

Byrd's book (14 bound speeches) is urgently worth reading. But if, at the end of his funeral oration for Roman self-government, the interested citizen remains unmoved—unconvinced that the American republic is threatened by incipient tyranny—he might be fortunate enough to be persuaded in person by the 86-year-old Democrat in his spacious Capitol office. Which is where I found Byrd in late October, fresh from another in a yearlong series of utterly remarkable speeches denouncing the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq and an ongoing "policy based largely on propaganda, hype and prevarication."

Addressing his colleagues on October 17, Byrd outdid himself rhetorically—and came as close to losing his temper as his deeply engrained courtliness will permit. Railing against the \$87 billion supplemental appropriations bill for occupation and "reconstruction" in Iraq, the dean of the Senate reprised the fairy tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes," to illustrate how the country was marched into war by a Praetorian guard of confidence men egged on by a president's vanity—and how the con game persists.

"We were frightened with visions of mushroom clouds, but they turned out to be only vapors of the mind," Byrd thundered. "We were told that major combat was over, but 101 [179 as of Nov. 20] Americans have died in combat since that proclamation from the deck of an aircraft carrier by our very own emperor in his new clothes. Our emperor says that we are not occupiers, yet we show no inclination to relinquish the country of Iraq to its people."

Byrd has been speaking since September last year to a largely empty chamber, ignored by his war-fevered Republican colleagues and most of his "sheep-like" Democratic ones, as well as their handmaidens in the media. But this time his scathing eloquence hit home, provoking a rejoinder—at once nasty and ignorant—from Sen. Ted Stevens, Republican chairman of the Appropriations Committee.

"Think of the young men and women in Iraq ... They get [your speech] on C-SPAN," Stevens growled. "Think of what they are thinking when a senator says they are over there because of a

falsehood, because the president of United States lied. ... Those who vote against this bill will be voting against supporting our men and women in the field." Unsurprisingly, Stevens expressed child-like faith in the president's fairy tale. Unsurprisingly, Byrd took umbrage at such a "canard."

"Let the record not stand with the senator's words ... that those who vote against this bill are voting against the troops," Byrd replied. "I defy that statement ... and hurl it back into the teeth of the senator from Alaska. ... There are millions of people out there ... there are many men and women in Iraq who believe that we who vote against this bill today speak for them. ... Yes, I voted against sending troops into Iraq. Yes, I am one of the 23. And if I had it to do over again, I would vote the same way again—10 times, 10 times a hundred against this doctrine of preemptive strikes. Fie on that doctrine! Fie on it!"

This time the senior senator from West Virginia was one of 12 to vote no. Two weeks later, on November 3, when the final version of the appropriation came to a voice vote, Byrd's was the only audible dissent heard in the Senate chamber. Classical to the end, he termed the bill's passage a "pyrrhic victory" for the administration.

A more sedate Byrd received me, but the anger still smoldered. The Senate "lost its way" when it passed the war authorization bill on October 11, 2002, in direct contravention of the intent of the "forefathers." S.J. Res. 46, as Byrd still refers to it, was unconstitutional because it handed over Congress' war-declaring power to the president, who henceforth became war legislator and war commander. "[This] pernicious doctrine of preemption cannot be constitutional because the framers thought it was wise to put the making of war and the declaring of war in different hands," he said. "Therefore, they put the power to declare war ... in the Congress, so that such a momentous decision could not be by one man but by many. We placed the declaring of war in the hands of one individual. Out of 275 million, one man was to declare war. ... The lives of untold thousands men and women were placed in that one man's hands. The framers would have been really disturbed if they'd have been here."

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And they would have been horrified by the Senate's decline as an institution. The passage of S.J. Res. 46 "represented more than just intimidation and fear of reprisal at the polls," he said. Senators had "lost this quality of pride and dedication—to something that's higher than politics, than Bush being elected and re-elected—the higher goal of service to the nation, the recognition of the Senate's place [as] the bedrock of the constitutional system."

By contrast, "Roman senators served without pay. They believed that service to the state was of the highest order" and they were deeply proud to be Roman citizens. Today's U.S. senators are no longer grounded in the classics of Greek and Roman literature, or even the Federalist Papers, and thus lack "a deeper feel of what makes the senator in the Senate."

"They're very bright, well read as to current events," Byrd said of the younger generation. "And they're quick on their toes—they come up with the 10-second sound bytes, whereas, it takes me several minutes to say howdy. I try to think before I speak."

Along with reflection, civility has declined. When the unprepossessing Byrd was sworn in to the "more genteel" Senate of 1959, "there was not so much the partisan bitterness, not so much the fighting, the slash and burn that you find today. Those senators were here because they wanted to be senators, not because they wanted to be president."

And they took more seriously the Senate's constitutional responsibility to debate (at length) and amend (at will) bills sent up from the House of Representatives. Byrd was outraged that the war resolution passed, not only with so little discussion but lacking a sunset provision that would have forced Bush to return to Congress for re-authorization. Byrd's 12-month sunset amendment garnered 31 votes: "That was absolutely amazing that senators, especially Democratic senators, would vote against sunseting the provision. I think [they] were intimidated by the false cry of being seen as unpatriotic."

Byrd understands the danger of open-ended war resolutions.

Having been misled into voting for Lyndon Johnson's fraudulent Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964, he wasn't going to be fooled again. S.J. Res. 46 was even worse, he said, because the Tonkin Gulf authorization specified Congress' right to terminate military action.

In all this fawning deference to Bush, Byrd sees "a kind of subliminal hero worship or feeling that the White House and the occupant thereof are clothed with the vestigial remnants of royalty." To Byrd, "the president is just another hired hand, like I am." Under the Constitution, "the Senate can send him packing, but the president cannot send the senators packing."

That's just what the tyrants Julius Caesar and Mark Antony did to the Roman Senate. And if the fall of republican Rome is any guide, then the American republic is in grave danger.

It's no coincidence that Byrd's rhetorical tour de force on Iraq bears a strong resemblance to the speeches of Cicero, who also viewed himself as the principal defender of the Senate as institutional bulwark against a military usurper. Eight days before Caesar crossed the Rubicon, Antony, as tribune, vetoed a proposal to declare Caesar a public enemy if he refused to disband his army. "You rejected all efforts to open negotiations with you about upholding the authority of the House," Cicero wrote in the most famous of his Philippics against Antony. "Yet the matter at stake was nothing less than your itch to plunge the whole country into anarchy and desolation. ... You, Antony, were the man who provided the pretext for this most catastrophic of wars."

"Vote to save your country," Byrd exhorted his colleagues when he clashed with Stevens. "No commander in chief brought me here, and no commander in chief is going to send me home. My first and last stand by which I live and by which I hope to die is this Constitution of the United States."

Antony had Cicero murdered for his defiance. Byrd and his ilk are being killed by silence. ■

John R. MacArthur is the publisher of Harper's Magazine and author of *The Selling of Free Trade* (University of California, 2001).

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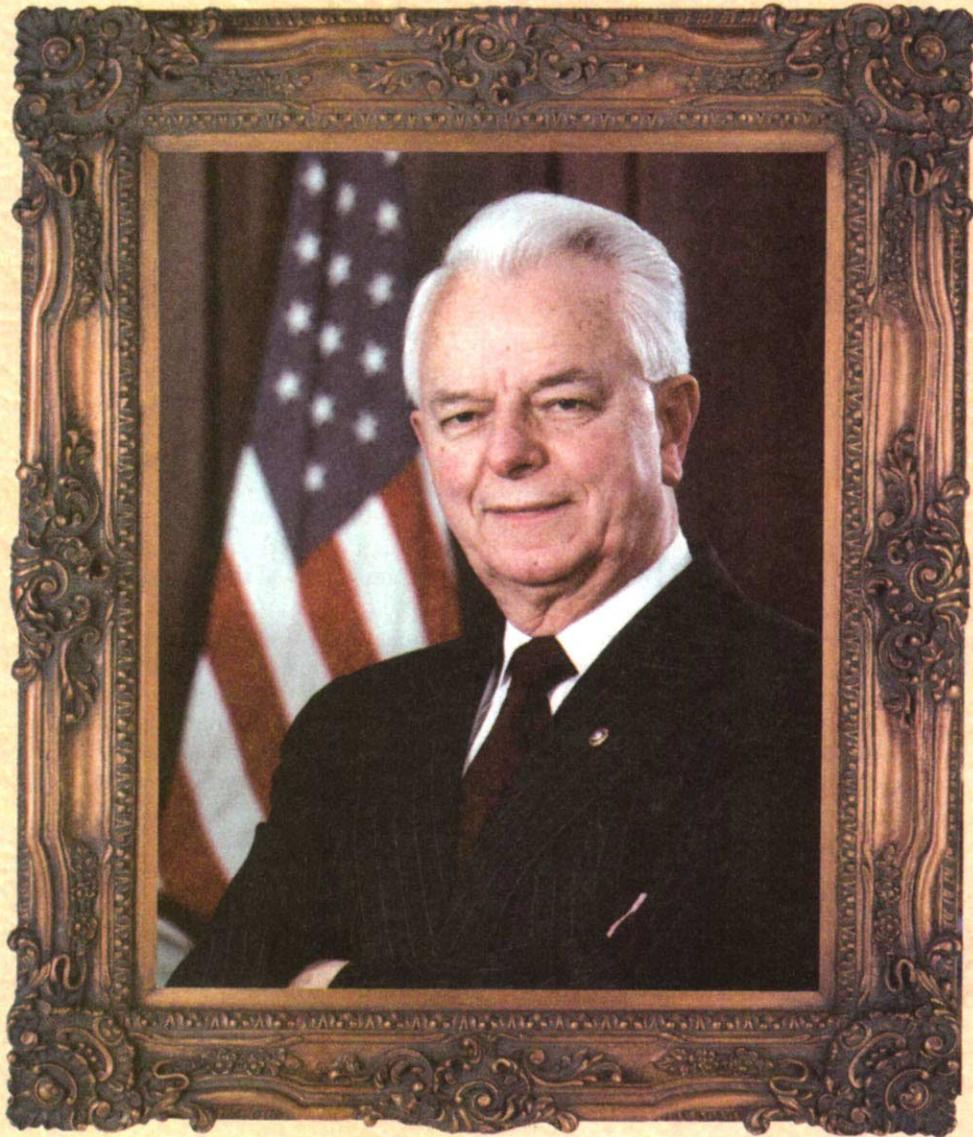
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# OF SENATORS & FRAMERS

By JOHN R. MACARTHUR

**T**he cramped gift shop on the Senate side of the U.S. Capitol sells only one book by a serving senator—a slim, red volume misleadingly titled *The Senate of the Roman Republic*. Misleading because its author, U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, composed it not as straightforward history but as a cautionary tale about the death of the Roman republic—a story of self-inflicted decline intended by Byrd to galvanize Americans into defending their constitutional treasures.

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