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Of Boats and Walls: Migrating Iconographies in John Lanchester's The Wall (2019)

The current debate about the fortification of European borders signals the return of the literal and symbolic wall in contemporary politics worldwide. Anxieties about changes instigated by the influx of migrants from the European continent into Britain in recent years played a major part in the Brexit referendum. It is in this context that John Lanchester's acclaimed dystopian vision of a world destroyed by climate change, *The Wall* (2019), investigates the power of iconographies connected to migration in an age of global anxieties, exploring the social and cultural implications of the wall and the boat as transnationally available symbolic currency and as materiality. Lanchester's futuristic vision of a wall around Britain to safeguard against intruders (arriving by boat) from the sea calls upon a historical and cultural network of walls and boats and points towards the relationality between the wall and the boat as complementary symbols of inside/outside divisions, which have been politically instrumentalised throughout history. The novel thereby draws on a rich intertextual web, not predominantly in terms of direct references, but more so by using triggers, such as images, symbols, narratives and genres, which are invested with a rich associative field in different cultural contexts. In this sense the novel critically engages with questions about universalizing the particular/individual by showing how the wall and the boat as images and materiality travel in memories and are translated into media. At the same time the novel also explores the limits of this physical and psychological control and the power of unforeseen situations generating possibilities and new associations. The novel thus presents a counter-narrative that – by exploring the complexities involved in processes of signifying and re-configuring the image of the wall and boat in national imaginaries – discusses how fiction is a critical tool to destabilize dominant cultural tropes.