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| **Your article** |
| **Borderline (1930)** |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| An experimental production of an avant-garde collective of poets and artists known as the POOL group, Borderline is a key example of modernist montage techniques in the service of elusive subjective realities, and a fascinating, if frought, intertwining of sexual and racial politics in the interwar period. Written and directed by the Englishman Kenneth Macpherson, Borderline resulted from a collaboration between Macpherson, his wife Bryher (Winnifred Ellerman), and Bryher’s lesbian partner and celebrated imagist poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), with whom Macpherson was himself having an affair. As the POOL group, this romantically entangled trio operated as a publishing house for modernist and avant-garde artists and intellectuals associated with the landmark periodical Close-Up (1927-33), the first English journal devoted to the study of film as art. They also collaborated on three short experimental films in the late 1920s before embarking on Borderline, an ambitious, silent feature. Shot in Switzerland, where POOL was based, and funded by the Ellerman family fortune, Borderline stars a vamping H.D. as well as the legendary African American actor and activist Paul Robeson, in his second film role since his remarkable screen debut in Oscar Micheaux’s Body and Soul (1924). Set in and around a hotel in a small, European mountain village, the film’s fragmented narrative centers on a then-sensational topic—an interracial affair between Adah, played by Robeson’s own wife Eslanda, and Thorne, a neurotic white man. Borderline’s experimental editing patterns, which reflect the POOL group’s interest in Russian montage techniques and the psychic rhythms and ruptures of the Freudian unconscious, radically fragment temporal and special continuity to limn the emotional fallout of the affair on Thorne’s wife Astrid (H.D.) and Adah’s husband Pete (“A Negro,” as the script has it), played by Robeson. Within the film, Pete falls victim to the town’s climate of xenophobia and racism, which the film critiques, often by juxtaposing it with the queer cosmopolitanism and liberated eros of the hotel bar. Formally, however, Pete/Robeson is subjected to the filmmakers’ modernist primitivism, betrayed in compositions and framings that link him to sublime nature and stoic carnality, and differentiate him—as body— from the neurotic and hysterical white characters, whose mental life is the film’s chief concern. Borderline thus redraws as many boundaries as it seeks to transgress. |
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| Further reading:  (Brown)  (Friedberg)  (H.D.)  (Macpherson)  (McCabe)  (Walton) |