

***Showing Conflict on the Screen:
Film Festivals and Cinematic Events Bridging the Gap between the Individual and
the Community. Cinema and Social Function in Conflict Resolution***

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Abstract

Out of the many roles that a film festival and other forms of cinematic events can play within the community, that of mediating site for debate and reflection on conflict resolution is perhaps one of the most remarkable ones. Film as a medium of reflection on human nature is at its best when accompanied by a forum of debate that reaches the community broadly. A film showing situations of conflict and/or culture clash always involves an individual intellectual exercise for the viewer. A screening followed by a debate with the presence of some of the film agents and with wide media coverage means an even more intense intellectual exercise which usually involves a first step into the conflict resolution process: growing a collective awareness of the need for social reflection, as well as the identification of the causes of clash. The film festival can turn into a window to myriad perspectives on conflict resolution through a collective exercise of analysis of difference and diversity. As a case in point, this paper presents the particular context of the Film Festival and the audiovisual industry in the Canary Islands, a European frontier and a strategic gate to three continents: Africa, America, and Europe. The flow of African population migrating to Europe has become a considerable point of conflict in the social map of the region. This presentation discusses the role that an International Film Festival has played in the perception of a situation that impacts on the whole European continent.

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“What happens if one gathers scholars at crossroads of disciplines, theories, practices, methodologies and so on, in order to freely examine types of crossings – within or outside a Euro-American sphere- via inter –multi- and/or trans- approaches filtered through visual media?” (Maty, B., & Ness, I. 2012, p. 177).

This Eurofilm Conference forum (indeed a live representation of a crossroad of disciplines, theories and practices within and outside a Euro-American sphere in its approach to the study of film), bringing together University scholars working throughout the globe and inviting all forms of media professionals with a clear aspiration to become “a remarkable exercise in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary discussion, which encourages academics and scholars to meet and exchange ideas and views in a forum encouraging lively but respectful dialogue” (Eurofilm 2014 presentation and CFP website) is an answer to the question above, or at least one of the many possible forms of answering to that question posed by Maty Bâ and Ness (2012) in their editorial presentation of *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* Special Edition “Media(te) migrations, migrant(s’) disciplines: contrasting approaches to crossings” (Vol 3, N2, 2012), a question certainly worth asking when considering the role that filmic events can have on the community and how scholars can contribute their expertise to the community-shared act of searching for global solutions to points of culture clash.

All forms of media professionals, including film and documentary-makers, have long recognized cultural differences (ultimately, all ideologies have their root in cultural codes and values) as the inner cause of all forms of friction when they try to explain conflict through various narratives, as well as in their systematic exploration of ideas, words, and artistic expression. By proposing such a wide-ranging conference theme, we certainly have a golden opportunity here “to encourage exciting new avenues of research, inspire the creation of new explanatory concepts, and provide a context for academic and personal encounters.” (Eurofilm 2014 presentation and CFP website).

As a part of that partial answer to the introductory question above, comprehensively shared and represented in this Eurofilm Forum 2014, this paper intends to contribute some thoughts, reflections and analyses to that unlimited answer that the International Academia needs to keep building throughout this twenty-first century ahead of us. Due to obvious reasons of time and space restriction here, this paper focuses on an object of study precisely framed within one case in point. By attending to the role that the International Film Festival of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (European peripheral region in Spain, geographically located off the West African coast) and other audiovisual events play within a local community highly polarised in their perception of the regular arrival of illegal immigrants, the work here presented intends to draw general conclusions that can be extrapolated into a repeated universal pattern.

Out of the many roles that a film festival and other forms of cinematic events can play within the community –e.g. as a business, economic or educational platform, among others- that of mediating site for debate and reflection on conflict resolution is perhaps one of the most remarkable ones in terms of their social function. Film as a medium of reflection on human nature is at its best when accompanied by a forum of debate that reaches the community broadly. Watching a film showing situations of conflict and/or situations of culture clash is always an individual intellectual exercise for the viewer. A screening followed by a debate with the presence of some of the

film protagonists and creators, together with a wide mass media coverage means an even more intense, collective intellectual exercise which usually involves a first step into the always complex conflict resolution process: growing a collective awareness of the need for social reflection, as well as the identification of the real situation of clash. The film festival or film event usually turns into a window to myriad perspectives on conflict resolution through a collective exercise of analysis of difference, diversity and a whole universe of related subjects.

As mentioned above, the case in point illustrating this social function refers to the Film Festival and the audiovisual industry in the Canary Islands, a peripheral European frontier territory where the recent massive flow of African population migrating into Europe has certainly become a considerable point of conflict in the social map of the Islands. In that permanent system of cultural exchanges that the Atlantic has been for centuries, the Canary Islands -a strategic gate to three continents: Africa, America, and Europe, as well as a historical witness to the Atlantic diasporas- are suffering an undergoing transformation process which has seen the place change from a port of call to an arrival point receiving migration flows from Latin America and West Africa. The audiovisual and film-related events existing in the region, including an International Film Festival, have played a role in a collective position towards a situation of culture clash that ultimately impacts on the whole European continent.

Over the centuries, Spain has been a country of emigrants, particularly during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, due to the political and economic instability of the nation in these last two centuries. From the 1940s onwards the country became a nation of emigrants and exiles too. Therefore, seen from a historical perspective, the transformation of Spain as a nation of emigration and exile into a nation receiving immigration happened in an extremely brief lapse of time, we can affirm that a significant affluence of immigration has only been appreciated in the last fifteen years approximately, or hardly two decades. Contemporary local culture and society are still adapting to the new social patterns and the new human geography brought by this phenomenon. The impact of these rapid changes in the socio-political and cultural context is openly reflected and variedly represented in all current forms of representation in film, media and the arts, and that includes forums of debate at cinema-related events.

In the formulation of his theory of inner exile, Paul Ilie (1981) presented Spain as a country with a history and tradition of migration and exile over the centuries, and claimed this as an inherent condition to the Spanish centenary culture. He even illustrated this historical phenomenon with a lexical and semantic exploration of the presence of migration and exile in the Spanish language, which has imprinted endless terms to express these conditions: “*desterrados, exiliados, emigrados, transterrados, peregrinos, despatriados, y transplantados*” (Ilie, 1981, p. 17).¹ At that time, it would have been totally unconceivable that only some twenty years later we would be

¹ “Exiles, emigrants, pilgrims, expelled, transplanted”. Note that the semantic field for this concept in English is shorter than in Spanish and, therefore, the Spanish vocabulary expressing these and other related notions contains a longer list of words than that of the vocabulary existing in English.

talking about Spain as a country receiving immigration and making out of it one of the most current subjects of preoccupation and debate.

Recent theories of multiculturalism coincide in remarking that current societies (Western world societies in particular) are characterised by their heterogeneity and by having lost the traditionally innocent homogeneity they used to have in the past, an innocent homogeneity which also used to ignore difference, plurality and diversity within one same culture (Innerarity, 2001). In a way, the new theories are nothing but the development and reaffirmation of earlier departing ones, such as Julia Kristeva's thoughts in her *Stranges to Ourselves* (1989), which represents a landmark in the theoretical formulations of ethnicity and gender both in cultural and literary studies. According to her psychoanalytical critical approach, Kristeva was the first theorist postulating that the ethical and political implications of the social relation are interior to the psyche. Again, as far back as the late 1980s, multiple attempts to draw a theoretical frame for studies of ethnicity, migration and the "otherness" were born, with more or less success. It certainly was, and still is, a daunting task, as the literature on these subjects has been an overwhelming production since the late 1960s and early 1970s and the study of these topics involve too many secondary implications.

Ethnicity and anthropology, political interpretations, cultural translation, "otherness" and "foreignness", migration and diaspora, inner and outer exile, and many other interrelated concepts have all been framed under theoretical approaches which converge in twenty-first-century readings of the multicultural societies and their current expanding globalisation. Their interpretation basically comes to the recognition of an essential premise: the discovery of pluralism within what we used to consider as a homogeneous, compact social cluster. Put in other words, this means blurring or fading the line between what we consider as ours and what we consider as stranger, between what we think as familiar and what we think as unfamiliar. In a way, this means, then, a more sophisticated re-elaboration of Kristeva's departing point: becoming strangers to ourselves.

Representations of foreignness and otherness are naturally present in all artistic forms and they permanently seek for innovation in their representations and this is, of course, the case of Spanish film, media and the arts. Although Spain was living practically unaware of all these theories and debates while they were common debates in most Western nations, the importance of such discussions has become a sudden priority in recent years and we can affirm that this nation is now living what Britain and Europe lived at the times of their first generations of immigrants.

In the period of hardly over one decade, the Canaries have seen their social scenario totally subverted: a population which has massively emigrated to Latin America in the past two centuries, mainly to Cuba and Venezuela, is now receiving significant numbers of migrants from those two countries and from all over Central and South America. But it is the massive African affluence that has become the socio-cultural and political phenomenon of the moment. The desperate situation of emergency in Sub Saharan Africa and in some areas of the Maghreb, the unsolved process of decolonisation of the Western Sahara and the considerable level of development that the Canaries had achieved precisely in the Spain of the pre-crisis scenario ironically gave the islands the status of unexpected host to "the new slaves of the 21st century",

as the African immigrants arriving in precarious, crowded, rustic boats have often been defined by the mass media in Spain. Ironically too, after having passively observed the slave trade over centuries, in a past which nowadays seems so distant, the Canaries cannot elude taking an active role in managing one of the world's biggest diasporas at present.

Obviously saving all distances, it would not be excessive to claim that the Canaries are now experiencing a similar situation to that of the London of the time when the commodities of the empire were unloaded at the Canary Wharf, named after the islands at the request of the British trade making companies bringing fruit and wine (amongst other Canarian goods) during the golden years of the English liners. However, on a sudden unexpected turn of the screw, the financial collapse of Spain - nowadays a bankrupt country as a result of the financial crisis- the Canaries, always behind the level of development with reference to that of the mainland territory, currently hold the gloomy score of being one of the top poorest regions in Europe, registering an alarming record of unemployment (34,1% and up to 65,3% in the case of the young population, source: *El País*, 15 April 2014); poverty (39,3% of the population live under the threshold of poverty, source: *El País*, 16 May 2014); and also the worrying top figure of school failure in Europe (28,3%, source: Europa Press, 14 July 2014) and alarming levels of uneducated population for European regular standards. This sudden collapse of a society in an even shorter period of time has turned what seemed to be a thriving road to the building of an exciting new melting pot in the Atlantic, based to a great extent in a reshaping of the concept of insular identity, into an uncertain path to an uncertain social result of the socio-cultural changes to be expected in the insular identity of the Canaries due to the new population sector represented by the immigrant citizens. A point of friction and conflict between the local and the immigrant community, the hardly-existing job market, and the dramatic drop in levels of development which have suddenly brought the region decades back in time (some local and national media have compared this retrogression to the backward region of a pre-democracy/post-dictatorship economic scenario).

Current discourses on these modern Atlantic transnational migrations can be read and analysed in images disclosing features of conflict presented at cinema events; images in which the community can see itself reflected on and that can turn into a departing point towards conflict resolution by debating how the individual relates to that point of conflict in the community/with the community. The discourse analysis can be done in a double direction: on the one hand, by paying attention to the transformation of the human and socio-cultural map of the Canaries. This represents a challenge for both governmental institutions and scholars and other social researchers too. The government institutions have the duty of managing all possible situations of conflict from a local, regional, national, as well as an international approach, since part of the migrants arriving today in London, Paris, and other European capitals and cities come from Africa via Spain: usually, African migrants of the twenty-first century reach European territory through a first stop in this Atlantic archipelago in their route to the Continent. On the other hand, academics and social researchers in general have in this case of transnational and transcontinental migration a clear case for exploring a situation of identity re-shaping and transformation, and an indispensable reference point for studying changes in cultural identities.

The attention to analyses and reflections on how collective forums of debate in cinema-related events can help as a part of a process of transformation at a major scale, that is to say, within the context of the major agents involved, indicates that from very many perspectives, this situation of culture clash, and often of conflict seen from a section of the public perspective, has been present in different cinematic events in the capital city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. The international Film Festival appears as a frame of debate and discussion which indeed has quite a remarkable repercussion and impact on the local media. Whether attracted by the presence of international celebrities, or by the interest in the event itself, the public gets enthusiastically involved in the Festival and it is undoubted that the massive media coverage has helped in this public involvement and participation. Presentations and debates by film makers, producers, or performing protagonists have been systematically fully booked (or nearly fully booked) throughout the 13 editions (details consulted with the Film Festival organisation in personal communication, as well as contrasted with the publications catalogue resulting from the Festival, held at the Canarian Film Archives).

Coincidentally, there has been no special edition of the festival exclusively devoted to the illegal migration phenomenon in the region, and it is the thesis of this paper that, precisely the defocalization or decentralisation of this subject has perhaps helped to debate the issue of conflict (that is, the conflict of local population rejecting illegal migrants with xenophobic connotations) from a different perspective from that traditionally shown on the canonical bulleting news editions by the established mass media (systematically presented as conflict and controversy only).

Not really differing from the real core of the discussion when rising points about the arrival of illegal immigration in different waves throughout the last decade, the many themes of debate in the film presentations with the public participation in the festival have dealt with universal themes with a prevailing reflection on the subject of the individual versus the community. The participation in a such a debate from whichever of the infinite perspectives it may take will always mean a reflection on clash and conflict and one of the many chances for individually and collectively working towards bridging the gap between the individual and the community.

Philosopher Claudio Canaparo (2012) observes that political approaches to the issue of migration, like the canonical media approaches, also tend to apply the conflict perspective:

“Traditional political approaches currently treat migration issues as a newspaper reporter carries out a criminal’s section of a Mediterranean media that is dealing with everyday social events or, alternatively, as part of the State’s policy making activities. Classical social approaches consider migration in relation to general categories like ‘society’, ‘culture’, ‘education’, etc. As standard analysis these approaches prevail within the majority of authors and are grounded in a sort of social determinism justified by philosophical naturalism and/or by a financial form of capitalism” (Canaparo, 2012, p. 195)

Alternatively to the common established norm, an event like a film festival can offer room for other approaches outside the canonical media and politics presentation of

illegal migration. The organisation of parallel activities such as debates, round tables, lectures, talks, presentations with the film agents (actors, directors, producers, and others), as is the case at the International Film Festival of Las Palmas, offers to the public that space of thought leading to an awareness of the many dimensions and varied perspectives of consideration that the established media canon usually prevent from discussing. The social function of activities like these allows for a collective reflection on an issue which the individual regularly perceives as conflict only or mainly. Thanks to the act of debating the issue of the individual versus the community, even if the debate is not openly held on migration, images like these two following below can be open to other perceptions and interpretations different from controversy. The images are licensed and published by Boston.com, both authors and agency are credited in the captions (as they appeared published):



Would-be immigrants sit on a fishing boat while arriving at Arguineguin port in the Spanish Canary Island of Gran Canaria, September 18, 2008. Some 86 hopeful immigrants were spotted five miles south of Gran Canaria island and towed into port on their way to reaching European soil from Africa, according to authorities. (REUTERS/Borja Suarez)



African immigrants wait to get off their rescue boat as they arrive to Los Cristianos port on Spain's Canary Island of Tenerife early September 30, 2008. Some 229 would-be immigrants were rescued by Spanish rescue workers after being intercepted aboard a fishing boat adrift some 60 miles (97 km) offshore. (REUTERS/Santiago Ferrero)

These are only two samples of the many millions of images repeatedly shown by the canonical media to Spanish viewers, who are made spectators of a show presented by information agencies as a controversial issue, as a provoking dispute, as a threat to the local population, ultimately, as one form of conflict. Dissenting voices have emerged from different social sectors strongly criticising this one-sided presentation and have long vindicated a comprehensive, multi-perspective analysis to be encouraged among the local and national populations. The Academia has been a particularly active sector of society in discussing the issue of African migration to Europe, and so have been visual artists (many of them through film and documentary). An international voice representing both social sectors at the same time, that of Roshini Kempadoo, a media artist and a scholar at the University of East London has clearly summarised the reality of this situation, as her words lucidly reflect on:

“By September 2010, agitated by the portrayal of ‘migrants arriving in Europe’ I became familiar and numbed to the way the ‘irregular African immigrant arriving in Europe’ had been visualised. Online, the result of keyword searches using Google’s image menu such as those found in the ‘inmigrantes en España’ section only confirmed the images seen in the popular press. Online these thousands of photographs appear on the screen as if little points of light overwhelming the monitor’s surface. Search engines truly make a mockery of differentiation between types of images - indiscriminately presenting photographs associated with the key words in the simplest and literal way. These photographs – as documentary ‘windows on the world’ range from the most technically sophisticated stock photographs for commercial use, through to photographs posted on personal blogs taken with a mobile phone by a tourist

whilst on their beach holiday caught up in the 'event' of a boat landing on a Spanish coast. Whilst the techniques, quality and composition of the photographs vary, I stare wearily and blankly at the view of the thousands of homogenized images that have somehow become endlessly repetitive, commonplace and normalized into our visual repertoire. There is a coherence and consistency of colour and shapes such as the bright red of the blankets, the danger flags, the Red Cross symbol, the black woollen skull caps worn by many of the African men as arrivants, or the bright orange paint of the 'official' vessels being deployed. What is most disturbing in these commonly made, now stereotypical and repetitive photographs of the 'boat people – the *cayuqueros*', is the portrayal of the African arrivants at the centre of the event. Like a distant echo to the cumulative photography and texts in the popular press that visualised black folk arriving from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom in the 1950s, the African and Arab in Europe is at the Centre of the social problem itself (Hall 1984). This journey is of a different and exhausting kind; an arrival that for many Europeans appears unexpected, and is occurring in response to an altogether different economic moment of global inequality. As African men appear to be subjected to being photographed and filmed, official processing, charitable assistance they are made to stoop, sit, crouch, clustered together as a mass of non-entities. And the visual event thus created of the 'migrants arriving in Europe', contains a look back from those in the image. It is a non-communicative presence with not the slightest flicker of response in the eyes or in body language. The question is why would we, as those sitting on the shore, somehow expect or long for something else, some dialogue?" (Kempadoo, 2012, p. 242).

Under the same premises and reflections, the work presented here is framed within a much wider research project and this paper represents an early advance of the final results yet to be published at a later stage. Throughout a seven-year period, a sample of reactions towards the reading or watching of canonical pieces of news about illegal migration in the Canaries by students of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria has been collected and these have been contrasted with reactions by the same students attending cinematic events followed by a collective forum of debate on films and/or documentaries with a wide range of subjects involving thoughts and reflection on individual versus collective identities.

The reactions to the media presentation of headlines referring to the arrival of illegal migrants have been collected at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting from students enrolled for an English course applied to translation with a major focus on cultural values and multiculturalism. A majority of students manifested their perception of this subject as a problematic, controversial issue and in extreme cases, a significant number of them showed alarming xenophobic connotations, under no circumstances acceptable for any member of the higher education community. The overall evaluation is that students at higher education mostly perceive the issue of illegal migration as a situation of conflict and as a real threat to the normal functioning of the local community.

Once the same students have attended one or more of the varied types of cinematic events that the capital city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria offers, the International Film Festival, the Film Society activities at the University, events organised by the

regional centre for audiovisual arts –Gran Canaria Espacio Digital-, the Casa Africa (the national centre for international relations with Africa in Spain, located in Las Palmas), the *Filmoteca Canaria*, the Latin American Film Society which organises the *Ibértigo* Film Festival, among many others, the number of students changing from slightly to considerably their attitude towards the same issue was striking and worth of consideration and thought. The common element to all the events was the presence of a debate between the audience and the film agents on the themes contained in the films.

I argue that it is through debating and reflecting publically with the community that we might further develop and map a response to popular imagery and collective projections of foreignness by locals or “non-others”. It is through exploring and envisioning practices that can rectify conflictive popular definitions of situations of culture clash and conflict that we scholars can make more explicit the viewpoints, perspectives, perceptions and positions of all sides involved in the context of illegal migration.

The role that the International Film Festival of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria has for the cultural development of the community is evident in many other ways, and the function here asserted is that of helping to bridge the gap between the individual and the community on the grounds that “each intellectual act is a path traced between a form of ignorance and a form of knowledge, a path that constantly abolishes any fixity and hierarchy” (Rancière, 2011, p. 11). It is perhaps by directly addressing the real object of study, that is to say, dealing with facts first, and relegating the necessary theoretical frame of analysis to a later stage of the action to undertake against xenophobic perceptions of conflict by the community, and not viceversa, that we can react to and intervene locally in processes of cultural clash. Claiming the need to act at an administrative, governmental level and at educational institutions is stating the obvious. What this paper vindicates is the need to attend to all forms of events outside the educational, governmental, and economical institutions as necessary companions to these major actions in their condition of agents for awareness of conflict and culture clash.

The current socio-cultural map of the new human geography in the Canary Islands demands that events bringing negotiation between individuals and the community as well as awareness of changing cultural scenarios keep proliferating and not disappearing as it tends to happen due to the current financial crisis situation in Spain. As a final reflection, we should note that this case in point here considered represents a global pattern and so does the social function of cinematic and audiovisual events here identified as the bridging of the individual and the community. Ultimately, migration has become a massive global phenomenon in the twenty-first century and it is no foreign subject to any human community nowadays, therefore, all individuals are able to debate and reflect on this subject with their own community, a debate leading to further awareness through collective thinking and consideration: “speculating about experiences is not the same as *having* the experience” (Canaparo, 2010, p. 196).

The human kind of the twenty-first century is the human community in which one case in point represents the globality in most of the significant social issues.

“Finally, the question is not only about how far academic approaches to migration have changed or not, because it is more relevant to acknowledge that all elements related to human knowledge have radically changed in recent years. Migration’s basic questions may not have changed substantially since the nineteenth century [...], but the current planetary environment is substantially different –and we cannot think (about) migration outside of this environment or ecological immediacy” (Canaparo, 2010, p. 196).

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