

# **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 a 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 most potent 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 constitute a window to myriads of perspectives on conflict resolution through a collective exercise in analysis of difference and diversity. This article highlights the role that an International Film Festival can play in the inner dialogue of communities and for that purpose it refers to the particular context of the International Film Festival of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. The Canary Islands are a peripheral European frontier and a strategic gate to three continents: Africa, America, and Europe. The flow of African populations migrating to Europe in the last fifteen years has become a considerable point of conflict in the social map of the region and the presence of the film festival in the islands has had its own role in changing perceptions of a situation that ultimately impacts on the whole European continent.

**Keywords:** Film festivals and community, cinema and social function, film and migration, the Canary Islands, cinematic events, social conflict resolution

## Introduction: Background and Context

In the complex global crossroads of twenty-first-century societies, heavily marked by social restlessness, severe inequality, cultural crossings as well as many forms of conflict and violence across the globe, the international academic community should certainly feel the ethical commitment to study, explore, analyse and revise the current state of social and human sciences; but, above all, it should also feel the moral need to think social change proactively and to participate in that change by contributing engaging projects and research activities that bring significant changes for both the local and the global communities. Focusing on the audiovisual media, with particular attention to cinema and film-related events, this article highlights the significance that film festivals, and cinema events in general, can have for the development of local communities, particularly through their partial contribution to conflict resolution.

While the relation between film and cultural communities has been widely researched, practically since the onset of Film Studies as a scholarly discipline, attention to the impact of film festivals and similar cinematic events has been somewhat neglected in the literature of urban studies, social sciences, cultural studies or sociology, to name a few. Nonetheless, with the turn of the twentieth century, characterised by the development of a culture heavily focused on consumption and leisure activities, a number of authors turned their attention to shaping innovative perspectives on “the power” of cinema, the interaction between cinema-going and community, and/or the community of cinema and film screenings as indicators of urban vitality. Forsher (2003) pointed out the strong relationship between film theatres and our contemporary definition of public space, and reviewed different attempts to define community and place, from Rousseau (1968) and Tocqueville (1971) to Habermas (1974) and Arendt (1979); attempts which have been historically linked to such terms as “public sectors” and “public realm” (Forsher 2).

Academic events like the *European Cinema Research Forum*, or the IAFOR *Eurofilm Conference*, among others, represent some of the international scholarly projects engaging with countless perspectives in an analysis of the concept of cinema and the community. The existence of these events ultimately answers the question posed by Maty Bâ and Ness in their editorial presentation of the special issue of *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* “Media(te) migrations, migrant(s’) disciplines: contrasting approaches to crossings”: “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?” (177). A question such as this is certainly worth asking when considering the role that filmic events can have within the community and how scholars can contribute their expertise to the community-shared act of searching for global solutions to points of cultural clash. By bringing together university scholars working throughout the globe and inviting all kinds of media professionals with the stated aim of becoming “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), a solid ground for discussion is established. This approach to the study of film is particularly enhanced by the lively representation of multiple disciplines, theories and practices within and outside the Euro-American sphere.

Media professionals, including film and documentary-makers, have long since 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. Of course, scholarly research has not ignored the study of cinema in relation to cultural clash, but further effort needs to be done to construct thought, reflections and analysis relevant to the twenty-first century context, as well as to contribute answers to the aforementioned questions. By analysing the role that the International Film Festival of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria plays within a local community that is highly polarised in its perception of illegal immigrants, the discussion presented in the following pages intends to draw general conclusions that can be universal interest to studies of migration, cinema and community.

The case of the Canary Islands, a peripheral European frontier territory where the massive flow of African population migrating to Europe in recent decades has certainly become a considerable point of conflict in the social map of the Islands, serves as one of the many cases we could have chosen to illustrate cinema's social function. 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 undergoing a transformation process which has seen the place change from a port of call to a major migration arrival point, receiving migrant flows from Latin America (mainly during the 1990s and early 2000s) and West Africa (from the 1990s until the present day). The presence of the audiovisual industry and of numerous film-related events including an International Film Festival in its biggest capital city, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, have played a role, not only in the ongoing transformation of its urban space, but also in a collective attitude and position towards a conflictual situation of cultural clash, one that is ultimately mirrored across the whole European continent.

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, etc. – that of mediating site for debate and reflection on conflict resolution is perhaps one of the most remarkable ones in terms of its social function. Film as a medium of reflection on human nature is at its most potent when accompanied by a forum of debate that reaches the community broadly. Watching a film that represents situations of conflict and/or situations of cultural clash is always an individual intellectual exercise for the viewer. A screening followed by a debate with the presence of some of the film's protagonists and creators, together with wide mass media coverage implies an even more intense, collective intellectual exercise. This often involves taking a first step into the always-complex process of conflict resolution: a collective awareness of the need for social reflection as well as the identification of the situation's underlying problems. The film festival or film event is usually a window to myriads of perspectives on conflict resolution

through a collective exercise of analysis of difference, diversity and a whole universe of related subjects.

Clear examples of this function can be observed in film festivals with a particular focus on conflict, such as those promoting human rights (see [www.humanrightsfilmnetwork.org](http://www.humanrightsfilmnetwork.org)). However, the participation in conflict resolutions is not an exclusive function of such festivals, as we will see in the case of the International Film Festival of Las Palmas. The trajectory of this film festival, in its seventeenth run in 2016, has moved in many different directions and while none of them aimed explicitly at dealing with the theme of migration in a major form, the festival has undoubtedly had an imprint on the development of the urban and cultural spaces in the city, as well as constituting a massive exercise in hosting and welcoming. The birth of the festival, moreover, coincided with the beginning of an unprecedented level of immigration, both in the islands and mainland Spain.

Spain has traditionally seen more emigration than immigration, particularly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to the political and economic instability of the nation. The three-year bloody civil war of the 1940s and the four decades of severe, fascist dictatorship likewise led to exiling and large-scale. Seen from a historical perspective, therefore, the transformation of Spain from a nation of emigration and exile into a nation receiving immigrants happened during an extremely brief period of time, essentially the past two decades. Contemporary local culture and society are still adapting to the new social patterns and the human geography brought about by this phenomenon. The significance of these rapid changes in the socio-political and cultural context is openly reflected and represented in a variety of current forms of representation in film, media and the arts; including forums of debate at cinema-related events.

Ilie (1981) referred to Spain as a country with a deeply-rooted tradition of migration and exile, claiming 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: 17).<sup>1</sup> At the time of the formulation of his theory of inner exile, it would have been totally unconceivable that only some twenty years later, Spain would become a host country and an arrival point for thousands of both legal and illegal immigrants.

Western societies at the turn of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first century are characterised by their heterogeneity and by having lost their traditionally “innocent homogeneity” (Innerarity 2001), a term used to explain how cultures come to ignore difference, plurality and diversity within themselves. In a way, the new theories of multiculturalism are

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<sup>1</sup> “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.

nothing but the development and reaffirmation of the previous ones, such as Julia Kristeva's thoughts in her *Strangers 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 to postulate 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 forge a theoretical framework for studies of ethnicity, migration and "otherness" were born, with varying degrees of success. It certainly was, and still is, a daunting task, as the literature on these subjects has been produced in overwhelming quantities since the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the study of these topics involves many secondary factors.

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 society in an increasingly globalised world. These theories generally share the same essential premise: the discovery of pluralism within what we used to consider as a homogeneous, compact social cluster. In other words, this means blurring the line between what we consider as ours and what we consider as foreign, between what we think of as familiar and what we think of as unfamiliar. In this sense, these theories offer a more sophisticated reworking of Kristeva's departure point, that we are strangers to ourselves.

Although Spain was largely unaware of all these theories and debates at a time that they were commonplace in most Western nations, such discussions have become of utmost importance in recent years. Spain is arguably experiencing, one century later, what Britain and Europe saw at the time of the first waves of mass immigration in the early twentieth century. The reversal of the immigration scenario is striking: in a little over a decade, the Canaries went from being a population that emigrated massively to Latin America, mainly to Cuba and Venezuela, to now receiving significant numbers of migrants from those two countries and from all over Central and South America. However, it is the massive African influx that has become the socio-cultural and political story of the moment. Given the desperate situation in Sub-Saharan Africa and in some areas of the Maghreb, the unsolved process of decolonisation in the Western Sahara, and the considerable level of development that the Canaries achieved in Spain prior to the financial crisis scenario, the islands ironically became the unexpected hosts to "the new slaves of the 21st century;" the term used by the Spanish mass media to denote African immigrants arriving in crowded, precarious wooden boats. It is equally ironic that, having passively observed the slave trade over centuries, the Canaries could not elude taking an active role in managing one of the world's biggest diasporas and, crucially, the most severe, humanitarian crisis in Europe since WWII.

Apart from the difference in scale, it is no exaggeration to claim that the Canaries are now experiencing a similar situation to that of the London at the time when the commodities of the empire were unloaded at Canary Wharf, named after the islands at the request of the British trade shipping companies bringing fruit and wine (among other Canarian goods) during the golden years of the English liners; or to the London of the arrival of the Caribbean migrants in

the 1950s. However, in a sudden unexpected twist of fate, after the financial collapse of Spain in the 2010s (with the resulting bankruptcies following the still unresolved, deep financial crisis), the Canaries – traditionally behind the level of development of the mainland territory – rapidly reverted to being one of the poorest regions in Europe. It registered an alarmingly-high record of unemployment (34.1% according to *El País* 15 April 2014, and up to 65.3% among the young population); poverty (39.3% of the population live under the threshold of poverty, *El País* 16 May 2014); and the highest school dropout rate in Europe (28.3% Europa Press, europapress.es accessed 14 July 2014), in addition to having a poorly-educated population in general by European standards. This sudden societal collapse thwarted what had previously seemed to be the creation of an exciting new melting pot in the Atlantic.

That emerging melting pot had been based to a great extent in a reconfiguring of the concept of insular identity into a new social map of intercultural coexistence, brought about by a new human geography, the migrants. Already a point of friction between the local and the immigrant community, the dramatic drop in levels of development suddenly heightened tensions and took the region, to all intents and purposes, back in time by decades. Some local and national media have compared this retrogression of the archipelago to the pre-democracy/post-dictatorship economic scenario. Data, such as the gap between the rich and the poor – which has risen 25% between 2007 and 2012 (*Consejo Económico y Social*, CES) and meaning that 0.2 % of the population owes 80% of the islands' wealth (*Agencia Tributaria*, Spanish Government) – are regularly published for social debate. Professor Martínez García (2015) from the University of La Laguna (Tenerife), sociologist, principal investigator and director of a national research and knowledge transfer project on the specific subjects of economy, inequality and social polarisation, highlights the current unprecedented levels of retrogression in the Canaries, unseen since the times of the Spanish Civil War (8).

### **The International Film Festival of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria**

Current discourses on modern Atlantic transnational migrations are often reflected in images of conflict presented at cinematic events; images in which the community can see itself reflected. The ensuing debate can prove to be a departure point towards conflict resolution by focussing on how the individual relates to that point of conflict in and with the local community. The theme of cultural clash viewed from the public perspective has been present in different cinematic events in the capital city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, with the International Film Festival having by far the biggest impact.

Founded in 1999, the International Film Festival of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria is the largest in the region, one of the biggest in Spain, and certainly an outstanding example of the evolution of a festival and how context and surrounding circumstances can determine and change a festival's direction. Whether attracted by the presence of international celebrities, the extensive media coverage or by the interest in the event itself, the public participates extremely enthusiastically in the festival. Presentations and debates by film-makers, producers, or performing artists have been systematically fully booked (or nearly fully booked) for the

previous fifteen festivals (information obtained from the Film Festival organisation in unpublished interviews and supported by the publications catalogue resulting from the Festival, held at the Canarian Film Archives).

The festival's sound audience success and the community's enthusiasm has been more or less consistent. Admittedly the festival had a timid birth with a hesitant response from the public, but it rapidly attained significant success thanks to excellent organisation and large audiences. The deep financial crisis in the country led to a decline in the programming of events due to a lack of funds, but this was followed by a rebirth, renovation and recovery of its outstanding screening programme.

The 2016 edition of the festival attained a total of 14,549 spectators/participants: 10,722 people attended the screening of 68 feature films and 60 short films from across the globe, with 3,777 participating in parallel activities such as discussions with filmmakers, actors and producers presentations; workshops, lectures; concerts; Symposium/Journées; opening and closing ceremonies, and other such events (source of data: Ayuntamiento de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria official website; Las Palmas G.C. City Council online site, see bibliography). Other activities programmed during the festival include directors' retrospectives, tributes to directors and stars of classic cinema, special sections (of many different types), round tables, debates and the release of academic publications, among others. Carnero Rosell (2011) accounts for the crucial public response to the festival since its early beginnings:

Empezó titubeante, con una dispersión de las salas de proyección que hizo que el potencial espectador [...], quizás por pereza, quizás por desconocimiento, lo entendiera como una muestra más (una serie de proyecciones a lo largo de una semana, de películas más o menos interesantes).

En el momento en que el festival decidió contar con la sede de proyección única de los cines Monopol (uno de los cines más importantes por su aportación a la cultura audiovisual en Canarias) y a medida que va tomando forma el rumbo de su programación, el festival vive una nueva etapa de crecimiento. El espectador empieza a tomar conciencia de lo que significa tener un festival de estas características.

El festival se va enriqueciendo a través de actividades paralelas y de las publicaciones dedicadas al cine que cada año aportan análisis y reflexiones, creando una bibliografía única en la historia del cine en Canarias por su calidad y variedad. (Carnero Rosell 2011: 109)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [The festival] set off erratically, with scattered screenings across town that made the potential viewers – possibly out of idleness, possibly out of unawareness – believe the event to be just any other ordinary film exhibition (that is, just a series of more or less interesting film projections during one week). / As soon as the festival chose the emblematic Monopol Cinema (one of the most important cinemas in the Canary Islands for its contribution to the audiovisual culture in the region) as its only screening centre, and as the line ups gradually made their mark, a period of growth followed. Viewers became aware of the

The growth strategy for the festival was based on the combination of two crucial factors: on the one hand, an innovative, thought-provoking programme containing challenging content like auteur cinema, Southeast-Asian contemporary cinema, new filmic trends and languages. This programme gave the festival a unique profile and established it as one of Spain's most distinctive and prestigious. The annual presence of a prestigious jury made up of reputable names in both national and international cinema, including film stars Ed Harris, Susan Sarandon, Peter Coyote, Sofia Loren, Omar Sharif, Leslie Caron, Alberto Sordi, Manuel de Oliveira, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, among others, assured the overwhelming loyalty of the public. The festival rapidly turned into a platform for exhibiting challenging films inside and outside commercial screens and, most importantly, for dialogue and debate for the local community.

As previously stated, the festival has never had a special edition exclusively devoted to the illegal migration phenomenon in the region, and yet it is the contention of this paper that it is precisely the defocalisation and decentralisation of this subject matter that has helped to foreground and to diffuse the issue of conflict (that is, the conflict of local population rejecting illegal migrants due to xenophobic tendencies) from a different perspective than the one traditionally employed in canonical news editions by the established media (systematically presented in terms only of conflict and controversy). Indeed, among the many universal topics raised by the film exhibitions, the theme of the individual versus the community has been the most prevalent. The public participation in such a debate, from whichever of the unlimited perspectives it may take, inevitably invokes a reflection on clash and conflict. This debate is framed in such a way that does not differ much from the core of the discussion about the arrival of illegal immigration to the Canary Islands over the last two decades. These discussions constitute, therefore, one of the many chances afforded by the festival to bridge the gap between the individual and the community.

Not only is it possible to change views and attitudes towards cultural clash without focusing directly on the subject of migration, but it is indeed also effective to do so from other topical perspectives. Philosopher Claudio Canaparo observes that political approaches to the issue of migration, such as the canonical media approaches, tend to adopt a conflictual 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

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importance of having an event of this kind. / The festival keeps expanding and enriching itself through its parallel activities and yearly publications dedicated to cinema studies. Through their quality and diversity, these publications offer analysis and reflection that has helped build a unique literature in the history of film in the Canary Islands.

social determinism justified by philosophical naturalism and/or by a financial form of capitalism. (Canaparo 2012: 195)

An event like a film festival can offer room to approach and present the issue of illegal migration outside of the canonical media and political forum. The organisation of parallel activities such as debates, round tables, lectures, talks, panels with the filmmakers (actors, directors, producers, and others), as is the case in the International Film Festival of Las Palmas, offers the public a multi-dimensional space characterised by varied perspectives; the kind of forum the established media canon usually prevents from taking place. The social function of activities like these allows for a collective reflection on an issue that the individual regularly tends to perceive only as conflictual in nature. Even if the discussion is not openly about migration, by debating the issue of the individual versus the community, prevailing doxas about immigration are indirectly challenged.

The festival-going public is also invited to read images in a way that is open to different perceptions and interpretations; not simply as controversy. This differs from the way the public is fed canonical media images, such as the thousands of dramatic images, repeatedly shown in Spanish media, of African immigrants arriving in rescue boat, or much worse, adrift in inhuman conditions. Unfortunately, on too many occasions, these images are accompanied by information that means spectators can only read them as a threat to the local population, a controversial issue, as one provoking dispute, and ultimately, as a form of conflict. However, dissenting voices have emerged from different social sectors strongly criticising this one-sided presentation of images and have long advocated a comprehensive, multi-perspective analysis encouraging debate among the local and national population. The academic community has been a particularly active sector of society in the discussion of African migration to Europe, as have many visual artists (often through film and documentary). An international voice representing both communities, Roshini Kempadoo, a media artist and a scholar at the University of East London, depicts the reality of this situation in this lucid reflection:

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 – discriminately 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 scull 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: 242)

Kempadoo’s observations about the images of the migrants in Spain and the reaction, or rather non-reaction, to such images, applies verbatim to the present-day massive refugee crisis in Europe, which follows on from the appalling immigration scenarios in the West African Atlantic and Mediterranean (Gibraltar Strait, Lampedusa, Greece and Turkey). Furthermore, there is an indubitable link between the indifference of European institutions and governments before a humanitarian emergency and the commodification of images, photographs, and documentaries by both institutions and the majority of the population. Disturbingly, this may only be the preface to an even worse scenario to come.

### **Demonstrating the Social Function of Cinema**

The thesis maintained in this paper concerning the role that a film festival can have in transforming the meaning of images distributed *en masse* within a community is supported by extended pedagogical observation and analysis. Throughout a seven-year period, samples of university students’ reactions towards the reading or watching of canonical pieces of news about illegal migration in the Canaries were collected and these reactions were later contrasted with more reactions by the same students after having attended film or documentary screening events followed by debates on a wide range of subjects and touching on individual versus collective identities.

The reactions (in written and spoken forms) to the media presentation of headlines picturing the arrival of illegal migrants were recorded at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, from local students enrolled in an English language and civilization course applied to translation studies with a major focus on cultural values and multiculturalism. The majority of these students manifested a perception of this subject as a problematic, controversial issue – and in a few extreme cases, students showed some alarming xenophobic tendencies, under no circumstances acceptable for any member of the higher education community. The overall evaluation is that students at higher education in the local community of the Canary Islands 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.

The same students then attended one or more of the varied types of cinematic events that the capital city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria offers; either a screening by the International Film Festival (a favourite choice among students) or the University Film Society, screenings 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), or similar. The common element to all the events was the presence of a debate between the audience and the filmmakers relating to the themes contained in the films. The number of students changing their attitude towards the illegal migration issue thereafter (either slightly or considerably) was striking and noteworthy.

It goes without saying that the case of students’ attitudes and reactions here mentioned is not intended as a scientific research result at all. For this purpose, a sophisticated methodology of research, a wider spectrum of social sectors, as well as an in-depth exposition of the results and the corresponding discussion would be required. We have no samples of other sectors of the population to compare with, nor a socio-political in-depth reading of the case. Nevertheless, an extended observation over seven years of different student generations showing a consistent trend in the development of their views and positions towards a same circumstance and context can be legitimately used to support and argue that film festivals (and film events in general) fulfil an important social function.

The International Film Festival of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria is a case in point, as it has evidently played a significant role in the cultural development of the local community, not least by helping to bridge the gap between the individual and the community. In this sense, its ethos is perhaps captured in this aphorism from theorist Jacques Rancière, 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” (2011: 11).

## **Conclusions**

It is a statement of the obvious that action needs to be taken at an administrative, governmental and educational level against xenophobic representations of migration in the media. It is

equally clear that promoting cinema festivals, film screenings followed by debates in all local communities across Europe can contribute little – as a matter of fact, nothing immediate – to the unprecedented humanitarian refugee crisis. It is the moral and institutional responsibility of European governments, the European Union and other international governing bodies, such as the UN, to take emergency action and to assume, manage and solve the current humanitarian crisis. The institutional abandonment of the people and the failure of the European project generally are topics outside the scope of this article. Rather, this article upholds the need for events outside the educational, governmental, and economical institutions as essential additions to these major actions, as constituting agents for the awareness of conflict and cultural clash.

The analysis presented in this paper essentially draws the conclusion that cinema's primary social function remains unchanged since its inception, despite the profound sociocultural transformations and historical changes in civilization, as well the revolutionary changes to cinema's own forms of production and consumption. Forsher's (2003) description of the social function of cinema in the context of its early years in the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly in the context of New York, is perfectly applicable to the primary social functions fulfilled by the International Film Festival of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, albeit in a radically different time and place: "The community at large gathered and experienced a public space that represented a place that allowed various neighbourhoods, work places and cultures to interact. The common denominator was the civility of the gathering and the shared message that the films projected" (Forsher 2003: 4).

Forsher's (2003) study of the impact of leisure culture, particularly cinema, on the community is equally relevant: "The effects of culture and the development of community may be debatable in the philosophical sense, but the effects on society were profound" (17). The new socio-cultural map and human geography of the Canary Islands demands events bringing negotiation between individuals and the community as well as an awareness of changing cultural scenarios. Ideally, these events will proliferate and not disappear, as tends to be the case in post-financial crisis Spain. The strong presence of the audiovisual industry in the Canaries should be preserved, not merely on the grounds of its economic impact on the local community, but also in view of its paramount social function.

In this paper I have argued that it is through debating and reflecting publically with the community that we might further develop and map a response to xenophobia in popular imagery and in collective projections of foreignness by locals or "non-others." It is only by exploring social practices that we can rectify perceptions of difference as necessarily being a site of conflict. Furthermore, it is perhaps by directly addressing the real object of study, that is to say, by dealing with facts first, and relegating the theoretical, analytical framework to a later stage of the process, and not vice versa, that we can react to and intervene locally in instances of cultural clash. In this way, academics can contribute to the popular debate by making scholarly viewpoints on the illegal migration and asylum-seeking issue more explicit and accessible to the local community.

As a final point of reflection, we should note that our case in point, a society highly polarised by significant levels of migration, is representative of global patterns. Migration has become a massive twenty-first century phenomenon and is no foreign subject to any human community. All individuals, therefore, are able to debate and reflect on this subject within their own community. Such debates, through an act of collective thinking, should lead to heightened awareness and consideration: “speculating about experiences is not the same as *having* the experience” (Canaparo 2010: 196). The social function of cinematic and audiovisual events, identified in this case study, can play a key part in the process by acting as a bridging point between the individual and the community.

Twenty-first century humanity is a community in which all significant social issues affect the globality. As Canaparo observes:

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. (2010: 196)

The academic community must act according to the reality of the twenty-first century planetary environment. While we can agree that migration’s basic questions have not changed substantially since the nineteenth century, researchers should focus on analysing migration in relation to today’s radically different world, and avoid theoretical studies isolated from real contexts.

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