

“Spanish Cinema: Meeting of Cultural Identities”

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Abstract

Contemporary Spanish Society, through a series of historically sustained negative stereotypes, has inherited a distorted opinion of the Arab world. This artificial conception, when reinforced by mass media, tends to create uncontrolled nationalistic fanaticism fed by fear: of another “invasion”, of an alteration of the national identity, of unemployment, of terrorism, etc. Spanish cinema, which has traditionally had a biased view about North African immigration, has been producing a substantial change to a new reality built on the harsh conditions of immigration. In this work we will explore the theme of immigration in Spain, making a brief path for the Spanish movies of the last years. We will center our analysis on two films that deal with the issue of North African immigration: Retorno a Hansasala and the short film El viaje de Said. Special attention will be given at the social discourse of immigration: exclusion, difference, national identity and racism. To understand the factors that connect immigration to negative concepts such as illegality, conflict, and delinquency, requires us to conduct an identity study. As a theoretical framework we will analyze the movies based on the term “reciprocity” given by Amín Maalouf in his book In the name of identity.

The current immigration debacle is a pressing social phenomenon that has unsettled Spanish society in recent decades. Immigration continues to be a recurring topic on newspaper headlines and political debates and incites the opinions of artists, sociologists, and various intellectuals.

On account of the migratory phenomenon, the word “multicultural” has gained popularity. The media organize numerous debates regarding immigration, a subject that affects our daily lives on the levels of interactions, differences, tolerance, and inflexibility.

To speak of multiculturalism is fashionable. Multiculturalism is part of our daily experience, affecting our professional and family lives through music, television, and other cultural media. Despite enjoying unprecedented global interconnectedness, however, we continue to witness dogmatic political debates, which tend to favor a vision of fear and rejection.

What hides behind this veil of fatalism? Is immigration really such a grave matter or is this an assertion accepted because of an overarching coercive presentation?

Bernabé López in ‘¿Ósmosis o barreras? Las responsabilidades de una Europa rica en tiempos de crisis’ answers the question affirming that:

Junto a los verdaderos problemas demográficos de producción y distribución de recursos, de movimientos humanos, de integración de las minorías, de violación de los derechos del hombre aparecen hoy un sinnúmero de falsos problemas que envenenan las relaciones entre los países o conjunto de ellos. Se fabrican entonces “peligros”, “fantasmas”, “desafíos” que acaban por convertirse en grandes problemas. (López, 1993, p.397)

These false problems recall the controversial hypothesis advanced by political scientist Samuel Huntington in ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’ He argued bluntly that “the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural”. (Huntington, 1997, p.22)

Huntington's thesis provoked an immediate reaction in the cultural sectors of the international community. In general, the thesis was perceived as an aggressive instrument tending to sow terror in the minds of citizens with designs on strengthening the hegemonic system based on Western superiority. One of the more compelling responses to Huntington was Edward Said's piece 'The Clash of Ignorance'. The root of Said's criticism revolves around the claim that something as valuable and enriching as culture cannot be considered the source of international conflict. There are other factors, political and economic, that cannot be ignored. Said suggests that identity and culture are complex entities, which require an ample and robust analysis. (Said, 2001)

In the current literary field we find recent publications that largely reproduce the vision expressed by Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations*. Titles like *España frente al Islam* (Spain against Islam, 2004) or *La quimera de al-Andalus* (The Chimera of Al-Andalus, 2004) openly express their antagonistic content. In *La sociedad multiétnica* (The Multiethnic Society, 2001) Giovanni Sartori sustains the thesis that there is a lack of will on the part of Muslim immigrants to integrate into the receiving society, which is why, according to Sartori, barriers to citizenship should be reinforced. In an interview titled 'La inmigración sin límites es una amenaza', Sartori affirmed sharply that "el Islam, que pasa ahora por un fuerte renacimiento, es, yo diría hoy que absolutamente, al cien por cien, incompatible con la sociedad pluralista y abierta de Occidente," and adds, "los principios de las dos culturas son antagónicos y son ellos los que nos consideran a nosotros los infieles aunque estén aquí, no nosotros a ellos". (*El País*, 8 April 2001)

Every culture is essentially multicultural; it is formed and nurtured through contact with different communities and lifestyles that shape our cultural environment. This aspect of culture is most adequately expressed by Américo Castro in his great work, *La realidad histórica de España* (The Historic Reality of Spain, 1966), wherein the idea of "españolidad" (spanishness) is defined as a dimension of the collective consciousness and isn't based on the biology or psychology of the individual. It is a Spaniard, Castro said, who still feels to be a Spaniard in the company of others, but he also is acknowledged as such by those who come into contact with him. (Castro, 1966) Contact with one's social environment, peer recognition, and a sense of belonging are the three fundamental building blocks in the formation of an individual's identity. According to Amin Maalouf, and explained in his book, *In the name of identity*, the keyword that defines the coming together in the spirit of mutual understanding is "reciprocity." Reciprocity is the mutual recognition of the values and positive aspects that both the migrant and the adopted country culturally possess. It implies the need of the migrant to feel connected to the greater community and for the nationals of the host country to provide a means for coexistence, which is based on the respect and pride that both sides possess. The unequivocal feeling of belonging not only will enable the mutual recognition of rights and obligations, but will also empower the abilities of both parties to issue and receive criticism constructively.

Maalouf asserts that the only constructive way for reciprocity to work is via the requisite adoption of a full commitment by both sides. Along those lines, the immigrant must be consistent in acknowledging the traditions, regulations, and customs of the host country. In tandem with that belief, the nationals of the host country must relax their stance against the immigrant and understand that there exists no page "written or printed" that would mandate the immigrant to conform entirely to the host country's system. Ultimately, it's about the need to expand our consciousness to an identity concept that's broader and more inclusive. The recognition of the variety and uniqueness of the culturally disparate identities among us would be idyllic. Continuing to adhere to the antiquated custom of accepting only a single identity type as a requisite for membership into our collective community will only bring us into conflict with one another. "The notion that reduces identity to only one allegiance or affiliation encourages people to adopt an attitude that is fragmented, sectarian, intolerant, domineering, sometimes suicidal, and frequently even changes them into killers or supporters of killers". (Maalouf, 31) The obstinacy of persisting to accept only a single identity (indigenous, local or national) will invariably cause us to reject the others and thereby transform them into strangers. The radicalism of this position will indubitably foster the "murderous identity".

Acknowledgment of the Other's culture and reciprocity as an ideal of respect and coexistence establishes the foundation for a more human, more tolerant society which is amply represented by Spanish immigration cinema of recent decades.

Generally speaking, Spanish cinema has always shown great interest in portraying human drama as it plays out in society. Specifically, in the past two decades, it has notably focused on the problem of migration. These films show us a variety of human situations in which the value of interculturality and tolerance is constantly present.

Spanish cinema, as a result of the migratory phenomena and the complexity of our multifaceted society, presents us with new concepts of both our individual and national identities. We no longer see just a concept of “us” and “them,” but rather one of collective identity: open, hybrid, tolerant, and inclusive. Spanish cinema, which has historically harbored biases against North African immigration, now contributes substantially to a new reality built on the harsh conditions of immigration.

The sensual, violent, and chauvinist stereotypes associated with North Africans are now replaced with complex, and in general, more positive images. In addition, upon closer examination, more recent Spanish films offer an edifying opportunity to reexamine ourselves. We see a departure from traditional stereotypes in films which makes us reflect on the human aspect of immigration, as well as Spanish society itself.

The 51st Annual St. Sebastian's Film Festival opened up with special attention to Africa. A considerable number of films on the Maghreb region were presented, with one section of the festival entitled “Among Friends and Neighbors”. These films made an important contribution to cinematic themes which we almost always overlook: emigration, the plight of the woman, as well as religious, traditional and cultural issues. In these immigration films we see various human archetypes endowed with markers of their own identities – they speak another language, have a distinct cuisine, different mores and folkways, and practice another religion – subjected to strenuous working and living conditions. Yet these are also films which humanize the immigrant's very condition: they give a voice to the human aspects of immigration, and show its capacity for organization and resistance. Most importantly, the cultural aspects specific to each ethnicity are highlighted and valued as enriching cultural elements.

The films which we will now analyze emphasize two fundamental aspects which I consider essential to foster an understanding as well as mutual respect between different cultures. On the one hand, they lead us to recall that in a still very nearpast we Spaniards found ourselves forced to migrate in search of a better future. These films cause us to reflect on and to question our own identities and cause us to see that the immigrant's condition also forms part of his or her identity. On the other hand, upon approaching their culture and their traditions, we see a cinema which promotes hospitable encounters between peoples. Yet these are also films which show us that there remains among the Spanish a great quantity of ignorance toward our Moroccan neighbors, that is to say, ignorance perpetuated by lack of awareness, the negative representation perpetuated by the media, and by fear itself.

In *El viaje de Said* (*Said's journey*, 2006) the director Coke Rioboo presents a Moroccan child, Said, who throws himself into an adventure to cross the Estrecho, with dreams of reaching a wonderful world full of opportunities and fun. When Said arrives in Spain, he soon finds that the reality is not as beautiful as he was told. The “mundo de color” that he thought he was going to find, suddenly transforms into a reality of intolerance and racist prejudice. The first thing he finds is an enormous enclosure of iron that symbolizes the entrance to the fortress of Europe, with a poster that shows the word “Welcome”. At this moment a little bull dressed as a bullfighter, a representative of Spain's folklorism, appears and sings, and Said loves the fun song giving him welcome to what promised to be a big party of fun and color. “*déjate llevar/ vamos a jugar/ olvida tu miseria/ bienvenido a esta feria/ todo lo que quieras/ dulces caramelos/ y miles de juegos/ un mundo de color/ un país con sabor/ una hermosa ciudad/ es tu oportunidad/ es tu oportunidad*”. (*El viaje de Said*)

Little by little, Said realizes that everything is not as he had dreamed. Soon enough he finds xenophobic speeches, full of disapproval and intolerance. Once he enters the fair, he finds the bureaucratic barriers, “*A ver, tienes permiso de residencia, algún contrato temporal/ no te puedo ayudar/ tienes que esperar cola en la ventanilla dos*”; and opportunism and labor exploitation, “*Mira chaval, yo sin papeles no te puedo contratar, me la juego ¿entiendes?, bueno se podría apañar, cobras un poquito menor y si viene algún inspector te escondes*”; and the intolerance and racial prejudice, “*Yo no tengo nada contra vosotros, no soy racista, sólo digo una cosa me parece super mal que siempre estéis con mafias y trapicheos, así nunca vais a integraros*,” and the political power, “*mire usted, nosotros no podemos dejar las puertas abiertas señores, mire usted, sería un caos, una irresponsabilidad señores. Hay que ser serios*”. This last speech is given by a man who, we can tell from his physical characteristics and from the content of his speech, represents the former president of Spain government Jose María Aznar.

The speeches reflect the real opinion of a part of the Spanish population, and it shows a negative stereotype of immigration. The presence of the former president is very significant, not only for the approval of a very restrictive immigration policy, but also as for a controversial speech, given at the North American University of Georgetown, which confirmed that “El problema actual de terrorismo en España no empezó con la crisis de Irak, sino en el siglo VIII, cuando España recibió en vadía por los moros, rechazó convertirse en una pieza más del mundo islámico”. (*El Mundo*, 2004)

Even more worrying are the statements given by those involved in Spanish education. The Deputy Minister of the Educación de la Comunidad de Madrid, spoke about this issue in an interview, published in the weekly journal *Magisterio*, saying that “el que ha cruzado en patera no ha venido a estudiar tercero de ESO. Además, a mí me crea un conflicto tener a ese niño en clase porque no quiere estar ahí”. (Pérez de Pablos, 2004) Instead of defending and promoting education, it seems that the Deputy Minister is defending the right to be ignorant. This kind of discourse has a negative impact in the construction that the Spanish imaginary processes about immigration. For that reason, it's important to question this manipulative maneuver that affects migratory issues. As Bernabé López says, “Contribuye al fomento del mito de la invasión, a generar racismo y xenofobia y a dificultar la recepción de minorías extranjeras en países receptores, y a negar la confianza a pueblos que padecieron de las colonizaciones y que hoy son “carne de inmigración”. (López, 1993, p.398)

Said does not take long to understand that Spain is not the colorful world he expected. Disappointed about his first experience, he leaves this attraction to go to the next one called “PATERA ADVENTURE”. This place is similar to a scary tunnel where one can hear voices of people who lost their lives in the attempt to get to Spain. The voices of the dead warn Said of the dangerous ocean and remind him that there are many possibilities that he can lose his life in the crossing. “Yo hice el viaje como tú a la tierra prometida, la luna estaba sin luz, el mar se tragó mi vida”; “Las esperanzas hundidas, los proyectos truncados, las ilusiones vencidas, todos los sueños ahogados”. (*El viaje de Said*)

These voices of the dead tell us of the human tragedy that is immigration, and reveal a reality that unfortunately occurs with a lot of frequency. It is difficult to grasp the concept of immigration. It has been converted into something so routine, so habitual in our lives, that we have become accustomed to landings, arrests, welcome centers, repatriations and burials. Meanwhile, the humane aspect of immigration tends to vanish in the foundations of oblivion.

In the summer of 2008 the journal *El País* informed us of a new tragedy of immigration on the coast of Andalucía. The news opened up with the title “Jamás habíamos encontrado una tragedia así”. In this fatal outcome, nine babies died along with six adults. The survivors said that the same occupants of the patera had to throw away the corpses of their 14 peers into the ocean; among them were their own children.

Retorno a Hansala (*Return to Hansala*, 2008) gives testimony to one of the tragedies occurring so frequently on the coast of Spain during the last decade. In the village of Hansala, an event occurred in 2001 that is very similar to the one that Chus Gutiérrez is telling us. At the beginning of this decade, on the south coast of Spain, the bodies of eleven young men washed up on the beach. Apparently, they had crossed the Strait of Gibraltar in a small boat with the intention of entering Spain in search of a better future. It was discovered by their clothing that they all belonged to the same village, Hansala.

The movie begins with crude images of young, lifeless bodies spread throughout the sand of the beach. Martin, the owner of a funeral business, is informed of the event and is immediately directed to the place of the tragedy to study the situation. Once at the beach, he realizes that one of the young men holds in his hand a piece of paper with a telephone number. This is how he met Leila, the sister of the dead young man who lives in Spain and who also crossed the Strait in a patera five years ago. After speaking on a couple of occasions, both Martin and Leila decide to repatriate the corpse of the youth to deliver him to his parents. They will embark together in an unexpected journey.

Leila feels a profound sadness when she discovers that her brother has died. At first she is afraid of the possible legal consequences and she lies to the police saying, “No, no conozco a nadie de mi familia que venga en una patera”. At the same time she feels guilty for having given her brother money to come to Spain, “nuncadebí haber ayudado a mi hermano a montarse en esa maldita patera”. (*Retorno a Hansala*)

Martín encounters a difficult situation, personally and financially. He is separated from his wife for more than a year, and the lack of money could cause him to lose his business (risking that they seize the funeral home from him). Under the circumstances Martín, initially, takes advantage of the situation and wants to make money off the tragedy by taking the bodies back to Hansala. “Bueno, pues esto se le puede quedar en unos 3.300€, pero todavía no sabemos los impuestos que hay que pagar allí”. (*Retorno a Hansala*)

During the trip, important events happen that cause Martín to begin to change his point of view and the perception of migrants that he has had. Upon arriving in Morocco, he experiences for himself the difficulty and impotence that follows when one doesn't have all the documents or necessary administrative procedures to be able to circulate freely. The Moroccan authorities stop Martín because he does not have the paper of exterior health, a document necessary to enter Morocco with a cadaver.

After the journey by ship, they begin the journey by car along a solitary highway that will carry them to Hansala. Halfway down the road, they are the victims of a robbery and the thieves take the car and everything that they have: their money, the clothes of the cadavers (which were necessary for the families in Hansala to be able to identify the dead), and even the lifeless body of Leila's brother. Fortunately, further on they find the car with the money, clothes, and the body of the young man. With this experience, Martín is able to understand how people like Leila's brother feel: they leave everything behind and with only the clothes on their backs they risk their lives in a small boat with the hope to find a better future in Spain.

One of the most greatly appreciated values of the Hansala culture is the solidarity of its people. Leila does not have all of the money to pay Martín, so she delivers a part and promises that the remainder of the money will be paid when they arrive at Hansala: “Mira Martín, cada familia pondrá su mitad y tendrás studinero. Aquí lagente se ayuda”. (*Retorno a Hansala*) Hansala is a place lost in the mountains: its inhabitants are Berbers, and they live in the most extreme poverty and institutional abandonment. They do not have electricity, water, or medicine, and the community has stayed alive thanks to solidarity and mutual support, sharing absolutely everything that they have. In the town they do not have anything that is nonessential for them to live. They are poor but the food is shared and the spaces are collective.

The contact with this form of simple life in Hansala causes Martín, little by little, to begin to appreciate aspects of Moroccan culture he did not know about until now: the respect for Ramadan, the value of the word, the amplified sense of hospitality and of solidarity, etc. When they arrive at Hansala, they are received by the entire family that waits for him at the entrance to the village. Leila's father receives Martín with the four characteristic kisses of the Moroccan greeting and thanks him sincerely for having helped Leila to bring home the body of his son. Martín does not understand what would compel a person to cross the Strait of Gibraltar and risk one's life. Instead of paying the three thousand euros that it costs to ride in a rowboat, he thinks that it would be better to start a business in Hansala; Leila informs him that there exist no opportunity for the youth there. “¿Un negocio en Hansala? No es tan fácil. La única solución que tienes es marchar a otro lugar, a otra tierra. Ya vas a ver”. (*Retorno a Hansala*)

During his stay in Hansala, Martín meets Said, a boy, the youngest of his family, who also dreams of crossing the Strait and arriving in Spain. The young boy shares his dreams with Martín. He speaks of his passion for soccer, and he proudly shows the jersey of his favorite team, Real Madrid. Said asks Martín if he would take him back with him to Spain and that he could hide between the wheels of Martín's car. Martín is annoyed with this presumptuous request and responds by saying that it would be impossible and that it would put him in a difficult situation, assuming they were caught. However, in spite of Martín's refusal, Said continues insisting and ultimately Martín realizes that Said is firm in his decision to go to Spain by rowboat.

One morning, Martín discovers that Said had left the day before in a rowboat, causing him deep sadness and great remorse. Martín thinks that he, by denying help to Said, has pushed him to leave on a rowboat risking his life. Leila consoles him recalling that it is not Said alone, but all the youth of the town who want to leave, that it is the only option for a future: “Es que no lo entiendes. Todos se quieren ir. ¡Nadie quiere vivir aquí, sin luz, sin agua, sin dinero... sin sueños!” The following day, Martín receives a call from Spain from his friend Antonio, who informs him that there has been another rowboat wreck, and on the edge of the beach, they have found eight bodies.

Martín returns to Spain and is directed to the funeral home where they have the bodies of the youths. Anguished, Martín asks if any of the boys had a Real Madrid jersey and loses hope when they confirm that yes, one of the boys was wearing a jersey of Real Madrid. Martín, drowning in deep pain, discovers the cadaver of a boy and the expression on his face fills with happiness when he sees that the dead boy is not Said. His friend had been confused because the soccer jersey was not that of *Real Madrid*, rather one of *Atlético de Madrid*.

That same night, Said came to search for Martín since he knew exactly where to find him because Martín had previously explained to Said where his workplace was while they were both in Hansala together. Both displayed immense happiness upon seeing each other, and they embraced each other in friendship. Said hopes that his life in Spain will permit him to find work and earn enough money so that one day he can return home to Hansala with his arms full of gifts to offer to his family, but gifts of life and not of death as Martín tells him: “Algúndíavolveré en unafurgonetacomoésta. Llena de regalos. De ropa, pero no de ropa de muertos”. (*Retorno a Hansala*)

A significant aspect of *Retorno a Hansala* is the depressing reality in which the only way the families of Hansala are able to identify their deceased are by the clothes that they were wearing at the time of their deaths. In an interview with Chus Gutiérrez, the director confessed that the story of the clothes impacted her greatly, yet it's something that she never would've imagined being possible:

For me the story of the clothes (the drowned immigrants' clothes that were taken back so the dead could be identified) was very symbolic. This was the most telling detail, this was a resume of the situation. No one would recognize you by your shirt, because maybe you have 20 shirts like this, or 20 people have a similar shirt. Nobody would know you that way. But in this case, with one T-shirt I could recognize my brother, my husband, my father. (Walsh, 2008)

With *Retorno a Hansala*, Chus Gutiérrez introduces us to the human face of immigration and forces us to confront the personal stories that are almost always ignored due to the repetitive nature of the media. *Retorno a Hansala* speaks of the desperation of the people of the town whose only ambition is to escape their present realities and to immigrate to Spain, regardless of the risk of losing their life in the deep waters of the Strait of Gibraltar. This story also affords us the opportunity to experience a culture that maintains its values and virtues, such as solidarity, the value of a man's word, and the love for the simple life.

The journey to Hansala is also a metaphor for the internal journey that they travel through, in order to finally arrive at that place of meeting and cultural recognition that Maalouf proposes in his book *Identidades asesinas*. The contact with the culture of Hansala, knowing the people, their way of life, their dreams, and their sufferings, produces a profound change in Martín, adding to his existence a more humane dimension. At the end of the film, Martín and Leila find themselves gazing at the horizon that presents itself as an immense door full of hope and new possibilities. Here, Martín proposes to Leila that she should work with him on a future project: Martín wants to start a business that would ferry the bodies of the deceased back to Hansala, but in a more economical way, taking into account the limited possibilities of the people of the village.

Immigration grows day by day. It's becoming more urgent to find concrete solutions. The Moroccan culture is rich and vibrant, but there is very little motivation within our country to get to know it. A positive aspect of the analyzed films is the appearance of immigrants functioning as actors and directors who comprise a new multi-ethnic group that's reflective of the ever increasing minority growth within the country. Cinema, culture in general, (music festivals, publications of books and articles, exhibitions, and restaurant openings), are indicative of the constant contact of people and cultures that are continuously enriching the society in which we live. Knowing who we are and where we came from, delving into the mechanisms of the formation of our individual and collective identity, will assuredly leave us feeling broad, open, and inclusive; this is presented as the fundamental goal of understanding and accepting the multicultural reality in which we live. We must begin to understand ourselves as a pluralistic and multi-ethnic society and the Spanish cinema invites us to embark on that challenge.

The movies show us a variety of human situations wherein the value of multiculturalism and tolerance is constantly present. As director Christopher Barratier said, “¿Cómo puede contribuir un individuo a mejorar el mundo? Sé que el cine no puede cambiar las cosas, pero puede despertar las ganas de intentarlo”. (Barratier, cited in Pereira, 2011)

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