

# Meetings and Collaboration: Outlining Creative Paths in the Mediterranean

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*Our “us” is full of others.*

Franco Cassano

The territory of creativity has huge potential and great responsibility in the construction of bridges between cultures. Given that in the global world culture and art are running the risk of falling into standardisation processes, it is necessary to look at and contemplate the Mediterranean region not only in its macro-extension but also its diverse, heterogeneous, rich and inspiring micro-realities. Art and creativity provide us with the imagination, experiences and tools necessary to build thousands of small bridges between these micro-realities with different materials, formats and aesthetics, in the framework of a region whose sea clearly feeds the notion of meeting, relations, contact, fluidity and multiplicity. In this respect, it is important to create spaces to establish links with the different dimensions of society, question the public space, and cooperate, exchange and co-create.

## **Journeys and Bridges of Dialogue**

The 21st century is about to reach its first quarter, history continues on its unstoppable advance – with its unpredictable paths and transformations – and the diverse regions of the planet are still oscillating between historical cycles crossed by moments of light and periods of shadow. The Mediterranean area is not free of these fluctuations of history: in its wide territory ongoing sociocultural transformations are always taking place. As is well known, the essence of the multiple

metaphors of the Mediterranean often revolve around the idea of a “space of meetings and disagreements”, the image of a crossroads and bridge between cultures and peoples, or rather, on the other side of this image, a place of clash and conflict.

On this unstoppable wheel of historical cycles – permanently trapped between old and new challenges, conflicts, pandemics, uprisings, climate crises, mass migrations and other changes difficult to foresee –, the search for intercultural dialogue continues to be an urgent and present need.

The context of art and culture offers us ideas, visions and examples in order to analyse and question this path towards intercultural dialogue, as well as to explore in depth – from and through practice – this symbolic image of the bridge. In the territory of creativity there is an increasingly more conscious need to discover and create spaces of meeting and collaboration.

The journey – in its practice, vision and metaphor – is, undoubtedly, the great driving force of the meeting. After having travelled around the world, the great Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuscinsky began to reflect on the issue of the meeting with the Other and, in his words, “so the three possibilities I have mentioned always stood before man whenever he has encountered an Other: he could choose war, he could fence himself in behind a wall, or he could start up a dialogue” (Kapuscinsky, 2007: 82).

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In this crossing of meetings and clashes between different cultures and identities, the importance of dialogue is key for two reasons. In the first place, because it provides value to one’s own identity, as Kapuscinski states: “He paid a high price for breaking away from his own culture. That is why it is so important to have one’s own, distinct identity, a sense of its strength, value and maturity. Only then can a man boldly confront another culture” (Kapuscinsky, 2007: 22). In the second place, dialogue values the other visions without imposing its own, as Agustín González explains: “The exclusion of the Other, the exploitation of the Other, the demonisation of the Other and – to express it with a term that since World War II has had a very precise meaning – xenophobia

have their origin in the desire to impose private identity as public identity, with the aim of imposing the individual morale as a social ethic, trying to capitalise society in favour of a group or a given conception of such society” (in Bilbeny, 2002: 51).

The relationship, meeting and dialogue with the Other provide, as interdisciplinary philosophers, anthropologists and thinkers define, the foundation for knowing ourselves. In *The Philosophy of Drama*, Józef Tischner wrote the following passage: “At the start of the origin of the self lies the presence of you, and perhaps even the presence of a more general we. Only in dialogue, in argument, in opposition, and also aspiring towards a new community is my self created, as a self-contained being, separate from another. I know that I am, because I know another is” (in Kapuscinsky, 2009).

There is an extensive literature on the meeting with the Other, ranging from the philosophical theories of Emmanuel Levinas on otherness and intersubjective relations to diffusionist anthropologists – as Marvin Harris points out, “diffusion designates the transmission of cultural features from one culture and society to another different. This process is so frequent that we might argue that most of the features found in any society have originated in another” (Harris, 1998: 24)–; from the increasingly more recognised travel literature to studies on interculturalism, and so on. *Orientalism* by Edward Said, written in 1978, gave us the first tools to reflect on the real existence of a behaviour, in this case Western, that pursues the creation of an Other different from us, of an Other set against the self and an attitude that develops, thanks to various forms of prejudice, the construction of one’s own identity (supposedly superior) faced with another (supposedly inferior). Such a mechanism only creates confusion and falsehood, entails a loss of the vision of reality and strengthens an imaginary of clashes



Southmed CV, Madrassa Project, 2017.

and conflicts. Along with Said's discourse, it is necessary to look at and assess the reflections that the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor expressed in his text *The Politics of Recognition* (2001). Taylor advocates, in opposition to the system of standardisation and equality, the policy of differences and the recognition of the Other. Recognising the identity of the Other means recognising one's own and vice versa, beyond fictitious constructions and apparent oppositions.

Throughout this complex process, the journey appears as a necessary tool to reach knowledge: "Herodotus was aware of man's sedentary nature and realised that to get to

know others you must set off on a journey, go to them and show a desire to know them; so he kept travelling [...], he wanted to know them because he understood that to meet ourselves better we have to understand Others" (Kapusinski, 2007: 19).

The writer and sociologist Fatima Mernissi strengthens this idea of the journey as a source of richness, recalling the words of 9th century travellers, writers and poets: "For Jahiz, the Adab strategy, to empower oneself by 'adding the stranger's brain to one's own', implies that you avoid getting stuck in your hometown and force yourself to travel: 'Staying too long at home is one of the causes of poverty. Movement

creates prosperity,<sup>7</sup> he recommends in his *Book of Metropolises and Wonders of the World* (Kitab al Amsar wa 'ajaib al buldan). It is this key idea of Jahiz's Adab strategy, of travelling far to communicate with the stranger and make yourself useful to him by exchanging goods, which was celebrated by poets of the Abbasid court like Syrian-born Abu Tammam (804-846 AD/188-231 AH) 'Travel! It is the only way to renew yourself!' he chanted in Baghdad streets" (Mernissi, 2008: 100).

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Exchange, the relationship with the Other, dialogue, are elements necessary for personal and collective growth. The search for bridges, the confrontation with diversity and otherness, the fact of sharing, this process of absorption and return – call it intercultural dialogue or social sense, as Marc Augé notes – emerge as essential mechanisms for social and cultural development. According to Marc Augé's words, "the ideology of the global system is also an ideology of the present. We speak of the end of the great narratives, of the narratives of the future and of the end of history, but the problem is that people, first and foremost, need two things: a real possibility of thinking about their relationships with the others and, consequently, a real possibility of expressing this relationship within a time perspective. I will call this relationship meaning: social meaning. The meaning is not the metaphysical meaning, is not a reference to any transcendence but the representation of the relationship or relationships with the

others" (Augé, 2005: 17). On this path of the journey towards the Other and intercultural dialogue there is the space of meeting, as well as the presence of the frontier.

## Spaces of Collaboration – Spaces of Frontier

The visionary contribution of creativity and the stimulation of collaboration are key elements for the development of shared social values. The cultural programmes and artistic projects that we will explore next seek to expand the view beyond individual artistic expression, involve and reflect on their geographical territory of action, establish links with the different dimensions of society, challenge the public space, and cooperate, exchange and co-create.

The programme Med Culture,<sup>1</sup> funded by the European Union within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, focused for five years (2014-2019) on the possibility of creating and promoting a regional platform of meeting, debate, training and development of cultural policies in nine Southern Mediterranean countries. Issues such as the status of the artist, artistic training in the education sector, the presence and impact of art in peripheral areas or cultural mobility marked the programme's agenda, whose main objectives include strengthening cooperation and creating networks, as well as supporting exchange and intercultural dialogue. The vision and artistic practice have been paramount in the process of crosscutting cultural cooperation and in this respect the programme SouthMed CV,<sup>2</sup> derived from Med Culture, is a good example. With an approach to the public value of culture in the Southern Mediterranean, SouthMed CV – a consortium comprising

1. [www.medculture.net](http://www.medculture.net) [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

2. [www.smedcv.net](http://www.smedcv.net) [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

Interarts (Spain), BAC Art Center (Tunisia), Gudran for Art and Development (Egypt), Khayal Arts & Education (Lebanon), National Centre for Culture & Arts (Jordan) and the German Commission for UNESCO – has funded many creative projects that “focus on critical issues that use art and culture to drive societies’ sustainable development” (Cots et al., 2018: 8).

Thus, projects such as Proposal for a Metropole,<sup>3</sup> Madrassa<sup>4</sup> and Kibrit<sup>5</sup> – among the 38 selected and backed by the programme – deploy a range of highly diverse artistic topics and practices, exploring issues such as urban development, transformations in the public space and social and collaborative artistic practices, and creating alliances between artistic venues and independent cultural organisations, from the Maghreb to the Mashreq, united thanks to a great spirit of collaboration.

Thus, the programme SouthMed CV has enabled the creation of specific spaces of action, as well as moving from imagination to practise struggling against many bureaucratic, social, economic and political obstacles that often prevent cooperation and meeting between cultural agents in the context of the southern Mediterranean. The stimulation of interaction and cooperation is among the foundations of the programme, and the projects selected become good practices to nourish, in a broad and crosscutting sense, a Mediterranean geography of cultural and artistic collaboration.

Although it is impossible to detail all the projects here, we can mention, for instance, the approach and cooperation established for the Madrassa project. The four participating organisations (Atelier de l’Observatoire, from Morocco [coordinator and initiator of the

project]; Spring Sessions, from Jordan; Mass Alexandria, from Egypt; and ARIA – Art Residency in Algiers, from Algeria) have designed a programme of curatorial research in contemporary art to explore socially-committed visual arts practices and promote cooperation projects and transnational exchanges. Through visits, talks and workshops in Amman, Casablanca, Alexandria and Algiers, participants in the project have explored the artistic and cultural ecosystems of the four cities involved, thereby acquiring the necessary knowledge to establish a regional exchange platform whose present and future scope goes beyond the programme supported by SouthMed CV.

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This cooperation and exchange approach is increasingly present in more projects throughout the fluid cartography of creativity in the Mediterranean. Artists’ residencies, exhibition projects and hybrid events where creation and reflection fuse, act with determination – despite the multiple socio-political fragmentations in this broad territory – to build bridges of dialogue and create exchange opportunities.

The programme Jiser<sup>6</sup> (bridge, in Arabic) links, through actions and projects, many artists, spaces and cities in different places of the

3. <http://www.smedcv.net/proposal-for-a-metropole/> [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

4. <http://www.smedcv.net/madrassa/> [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

5. <http://www.smedcv.net/kibrit/> [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

6. <https://www.jiser.org> [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

Mediterranean. Its core of action and exchange is mainly focused on the Barcelona-Tunis-Algiers triangle, united in a creative dialogue underway since 2010, through BCN>TNS creation residencies. Over the years, Jiser has enlarged its range of activities and, along with the residencies, organises spaces of reflection and discussion through radio programmes and exhibition programmes, bringing territories together and feeding a network of young artists in the Mediterranean.

On this itinerary of creative connections we could mention many projects of different dimensions, as well as a constellation of artists who contribute to building these bridges, each one from their place and their vision. Thus, we can mention artistic practices that cross borders and connect with artists and events by walking from Prespes<sup>7</sup> (Western Macedonia, Greece) to Portugal; projects focused on the notion of community in Malta or the approach to co-creation developed in Matera 2019,<sup>8</sup> European Capital of Culture; and artists or groups that reflect on the public space and climate crises or others that reflect on the multiple meanings of border.

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The bridge is of course a space of frontier, a space which from one side unites and, from the other, embodies separation and difference; a place of ongoing transition, contact and relation. The bridge symbolises this process of transformation, where the essence of knowl-

edge is challenged and other narratives, stories and knowledge are heard.

The creative work undertaken by Toni Serra (Abu Ali) (1960-2019) has visually and poetically addressed these issues and has opened deep folds of knowledge between different realities and worlds. His audiovisual creations – let us think, for instance, of *Fez, ciudad interior*, where the artist explains: “This is how I gradually entered a labyrinthine and complex city, a fascinating culture, made of layers of depth”<sup>9</sup> – are in themselves bridges, initiation journeys that enable us to reach the other culture walking along different paths, often concealed by the media and hegemonic narratives.

Minor accounts can reveal profound stories, such as the work *Pietrapertosa* by Emily Jacir, a medallion made of *gorgoglione* (a kind of stone bearing the name of a town in Basilicata, Italy) which has the following inscription engraved in Italian and Arabic: “You’ve come amongst our people and your life is safe.” In an interview, the artist explains the story that the work represents, a story of cultural bridges, of meetings and hospitality: “I was walking through the Arabata quarter, conducting research into the town [Pietrapertosa] and its inhabitants, when some elderly residents of the neighbourhood saw us and invited us to come inside their house for a coffee or a tea – they said: ‘*Ahlan wa sahlán*.’ They explained to me, with such great pride, the importance of hospitality for the people of the town, and that their tradition of hospitality comes from their Arab heritage. I asked them what *Ahlan wa sahlán* means, and that’s how they translated it to me – that is literally their translation: ‘You’ve come amongst our people and your life is safe.’ In that moment, I felt

7. Walking Art Encounters: <http://icowaf.eetf.uowm.gr/> [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

8. See the “Manifesto della Partecipazione”, Matera 2019 – Capitale Europea della Cultura: <https://www.matera-basilicata2019.it/it/mettersi-in-gioco/manifesto-della-partecipazione.html> [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

9. Serra, T., “Fez, ciudad interior”, *Quaderns-e de l’Institut Català d’Antropologia* [online], no. 16 (1-2), 2011, pp. 231-46: <https://www.raco.cat/index.php/Quaderns/CA/article/view/247208> [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

at home. That moment can also explain what Pietrapertosa means and represents.”<sup>10</sup>

The lack of bridges and the symbolism of the sea border as a hostile place have also been approaches of many artists that seek to reflect mainly on the multiple dynamics and consequences of the migration crises. The video performance *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*,<sup>11</sup> a work by Francis Alÿs, symbolises a utopian construction of a human bridge between Spain and Morocco that reveals, among references to the children's games and the concept of challenge, the dramatic stories of migration.

## Conclusions

In the process of building bridges and reflection on their symbolism, the field of creativity has, of course, great potential and responsibility. Culture and art are running the risk of falling into standardisation processes, as well as of offering imposed and elitist perspectives that have little to do with the richness of the differences between cultures present in the Mediterranean, with a diversity of communities, lifestyles, rituals, visions, knowledge and practices that imbue the times and spaces of this mobile geography.

Reviewing the postmodern reflections on the macro-narratives and the micro-narratives, we could say that if the great narratives are over, we should also go beyond the search for great definitions or great networks and foster, instead, a constellation of micro-projects, micro-formats and micro-networks in which the specific contexts recover their profound

essence, characteristics and micro-narratives, instead of responding to this homogenising cloak of globalisation. We should look at and contemplate the Mediterranean not only in its macro-extension but also in its diverse, heterogeneous, rich and inspiring micro-realities. Beyond the great bridges, art and creativity provides us with the necessary imagination, experiences and tools to build thousands of small bridges – in this respect, the city of Venice would be a good visual metaphor – with different materials, formats and aesthetics.

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The sea between the lands clearly feeds this idea of meeting, relation, contact, fluidity and multiplicity, as we can find in the southern thought theorised by Professor Franco Cassano: “The southern thought is that thought that starts to be felt inside, there where the sea begins, when the shore interrupts the integrisms of the land (mainly those of the economy and development), when we find out that the border is not a place where the world ends but where the different elements touch each other and the game of the relationship with the Other becomes difficult and real. The southern thought, in fact, was born right in the Mediterranean, on the coasts of Greece, with the opening of the Greek culture to the contradictory discourses, to the *dissòi logoi*” (Cassano, 2007: 7).

The southern thought and the artistic and the aforementioned practices and cooperation

10. McNay, A., “Emily Jacir – Interview: ‘I wanted the locals to show me what was important for them, what they thought I should see, what they wanted to talk about’”, *Studio International* [online], 1 December 2020: <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/emily-jacir-pietrapertosa-gardentopia-project-matera-2019-fondazione-merz-turin-i-wanted-locals-to-show-me-what-was-important-for-them> [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

11. “When Francis Alÿs tried to build a bridge to Europe”, *Phaidon*: <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2019/july/30/when-francis-aly-s-tried-to-build-a-bridge-to-europe/> [last accessed: 20 January 2021].

projects put the Mediterranean at the centre of both their reflection and action, make us think about the value of meeting and the importance of the relationship with the others, show us the wideness of the horizon and suggest an openness towards the infinite journey embodied by life. Artistic expressions, finally, reveal to us multiple bridges of intercultural dialogue and invite us to walk along them, in search of transformative experiences.

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