

At the Heart of the Border, or on the Perpetual Infinitude of Limits

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The border as a geographical space is an osmotic and porous place that defines the identities of the people and culture it delimits. It is a very interesting place in terms of the development of artistic and ideological currents and, generally, of hybrid phenomena. The Tarifa African Film Festival features many of the contemporary characteristics that the perpetual changes in borders and limits produce in cultures, their people, performers, representatives and related ideas, as revealed by Eva de Andrés Castro's study *Una alfombra roja para África. Etnicidad y espectáculo en un festival de cine*, published by CSIC in 2022. It questions many of the stories that are intertwined in the festival and explores several related lines of analysis.

When we speak of borders, we usually think of geographical spaces of division and exchange, places that, without an identity of their own, define the identities of the people and cultures they delimit. This is how, among cultural and natural changes throughout the planet, the internal borders that delimit some differences and the external contours that share, at the very least, spaces and, very often, cultures and lifestyles have historically been forged. The border is always osmotic, filtering between the sides some of its more or less exclusive characteristics and is, therefore, porous, absorbing part of what passes through it and making it its own, in a diverse and unique mixture on each occasion. Therefore, borders are places of special interest in the development of artistic and ideological currents, of new approaches to old problems and hybrid phenomena in general.

In this way, and for the purposes of this discourse, we will regard the border as a significant conceptual place in itself, an expression that goes beyond what it demarcates, a crossroads and an ideational structure representative of mixing and hybridisation. The border as a limit, as a margin that lends meaning to what is outside its existence and nature, what surrounds it. The border as a place of transit and reflection.

The philosopher Eugenio Trías tells us in his work of the concept of limit as a place from where we experience the vertigo of the beyond, of the contour, an intersectional, intermingled, space with its own rules different from those that exist beyond its boundaries. In *Los límites del mundo* (1985), the author explored the ontology of the limit; and a few years later, dealt with the bordering arts – music and architecture – as formalisers of human space and time in *La lógica*

del límite (1991). Finally, in *La razón fronteriza* (1999), Trías explained the colonisation and appropriation of the domains in which the “being of the limit” develops. In many of his discourses, Trías realised that, to some extent, the limits of the world are the limits of humans; human beings are not only inhabitants of the border but a border in themselves. Ultimately, in the game of representations, identities and differences, the paradoxes of the limits and borders take on a more central role than we usually think. A good example of this is the role of cultural ethnography in the contemporary world as a translator of exogenous elements for a delocalised public eager for re-localisations. Ethnography as a limit and interpenetrated border.

Any ethnographic work is a porous limit between cultural events and their interpretations, and, after some time, very often we see that ethnography updates itself depending on its questions, publics and the situations explored for research and cultural explanation. Ethnography is as mobile and shifting as the objects and subjects it looks at. The scenarios, the actions and the protagonists change, the gazes of the observers, the ethnographers, change, as do the power relations between all those elements that can be taken into account.

Since the 1960s, one of the most significant advances in the development of cultural ethnography has been the consideration of what it means to observe, translate, narrate and be an intermediary between actors and audiences in perpetual change, and also of changing as an authorised “expert”, voice. This fruitful reflection led to major classics: *The Interpretation of Cultures*, by Clifford Geertz (1974), *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, by Paul Rabinow (1977) and *Other Tribes, Other Scribes*, by James A. Boon (1983). And, with the boom in cultural curiosity, many of the limits that existed in terms of the lack of a common territory to tell our story to others and to tell stories about others, the proposals, solutions, paradoxes

and complications increased greatly. Among the many examples we can mention as reflexive ethnographies, some of them take on challenges that seem to offer greater paradoxes.

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There is a film festival – and here we can see cinema as another bordering art, in which space and time intertwine with sound – that brings together many of the contemporary characteristics that the perpetual changes in borders and limits produce in cultures, their people, performers, representatives and related ideas: the Tarifa African Film Festival. A book entitled *Una alfombra roja para África. Etnicidad y espectáculo en un festival de cine*, by Eva de Andrés Castro (CSIC, 2022), examines it and interprets its many paradoxes. In this study, many of the stories that intersect in the festival are questioned, shaping it as a Gordian Knot of the multiplicity of limits that can be superimposed on a single cultural event that, very appropriately, also takes place on a geographical border. The main lines of analysis explore the festival as a market – an example of a fragmented and commodified culture –, the concept of Africanness and its spokespersons and, finally, the geographical and symbolic spaces of Tarifa and the festival as generators of new cultural metaphors.

Andrés’ gaze crosses administrative borders – Tarifa is in Spain, although the festival covers African cinema –, identity concepts – “what actually is African cinema?” –, relevant figures – the “expert” as a translator that navigates between concepts but does not necessarily participate in their development –, and paradoxes produced out of historical contacts – such as the

problems associated with authorship, authenticity or legitimacy, or hybrid filming locations (Africans in Europe, Europeans in Africa and other international settings). But if we can extract something from this volume, along with all the very relevant information about the development of African cinema, and this festival – and its new challenges in recent decades –, it is its attribute as study, paradoxically related to a limit: cultural interpretation.

The festival described and analysed is a limit in itself, between Africa and Europe, with mixed protagonists who come from places that are not always representative of Africanness, and cultural logics that succumb to its intermediate situation. It is in a no man's land: it comes from an entire continent that painfully exports its inhabitants out of necessity and thus takes its fertile cultures to travel the world; it arrives at a continental extreme of passage, a scarce and border southern point, with extensive history, through which people and ideas have been exchanged for as long as we can remember. It represents the culture of no one: Africans

are only one section of the protagonists, since European perspectives on the continent or the stories of emigration and immigration are also included, and the experts they interact with are not necessarily representative of the Africanness that the festival is supposed to exude. They are the paradoxes of limits and borders.

However, as a shore in itself, the festival can also be characterised as a phenomenal enterprise of cultural exchange, a gateway for sensibilities that share space but are different from each other, a source of inspiration for the interpretation of cultures and their hybridisations, an exception to the standard of homogeneity that is supposed to inhabit its margins, a source of eternal dialogues about difference and its highly recognisable implications on the global stage.

As a final paradox, this liminal scenario, with this border festival and this singular book that studies it, go on adding new layers of cultural responses to the perpetual demarcations that are constructed in each cultural interaction. At the heart of the border, the limits are multiplied to infinity with each gaze and each contact.