

Revealing activist experiences through film-viewing: emotional geographies at the border of Ceuta and Melilla.

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Abstract

Ceuta and Melilla are considered exemplary models of the border spectacle. The fences of these cities typify the notion of “Fortress Europe” and impel the emotional engagement of the inhabitants with migration control policies. This article focuses on the experiences of local activists who have resisted migration containment policies. Through a close examination of the emotional geographies of activism in border areas, and the effect of migration policies on the everyday, this article aims to uncover the civic emotions underlying the lived realities of activists. Furthermore, by addressing the methodological challenges for investigating social emotions, this study integrates visual elicitation methods into ethnographic research. The evocative power of cinema allows films to act as visual stimuli that convey the intimate narratives of activists, which encompass compassion, outrage, or fatigue in the context of pro-migrant mobilization. By drawing on the mundane experiences of borders, this article delves into the intersection of emotions, activism, and borders to elucidate experiences against migration control.

Keywords: borders, activism, emotions, visual elicitation, Ceuta and Melilla

Révéler les expériences militantes à travers le visionnage de films : géographies émotionnelles aux frontières de Ceuta et Melilla.

Résumé

Ceuta et Melilla sont considérées comme deux modèles exemplaires du spectacle frontalier. Les clôtures de ces villes illustrent la notion d’« Europe forteresse » et façonnent une réalité émotionnelle propre à leurs habitants liée aux politiques de contrôle des migrations. Cet article se concentre sur les expériences des activistes locaux qui ont résisté aux politiques d’endiguement des migrations. En examinant les géographies émotionnelles de l’activisme aux frontières et l’effet des politiques migratoires sur leur quotidien, cet article vise à révéler les émotions civiques qui sous-tendent les réalités vécues par les activistes. En outre, en relevant les défis méthodologiques de l’enquête sur les émotions sociales, cette étude intègre les méthodes d’éllicitation visuelle dans la recherche ethnographique. Le pouvoir évocateur du cinéma permet aux films d’agir comme des stimuli visuels qui éveillent les récits intimes des militants, ainsi que la compassion, l’indignation ou la fatigue dans le contexte de la mobilisation pro-migrant. En s’inspirant d’expériences quotidiennes aux frontières, cet article se penche sur l’intersection des émotions, du militantisme et des frontières pour éclairer les expériences intimes contre le contrôle des migrations.

Mots clés : frontière, activisme, émotions, élicitation visuelle, Ceuta et Melilla

Revelando experiencias activistas a través de películas: geografías emocionales en las fronteras de Ceuta y Melilla

Resumen

Ceuta y Melilla se consideran modelos ejemplares del espectáculo fronterizo. Las vallas de estas ciudades tipifican la noción de “Fortaleza Europa” y conforman una realidad emocional propia en sus habitantes ligada a las políticas de control migratorio. Este artículo se centra en las experiencias de activistas locales que han resistido a las políticas de contención de la migración. Mediante un análisis de las geografías emocionales del activismo en las fronteras, y del efecto de las políticas migratorias en lo cotidiano, este artículo pretende mostrar las emociones cívicas que subyacen a las realidades vividas por los activistas. Además, al abordar los retos metodológicos de la investigación de las emociones sociales, este estudio integra métodos de elicitación visual en la investigación

etnográfica. El poder evocador del cine permite que las películas actúen como estímulos visuales que despiertan los relatos íntimos de los activistas, así como la compasión, la indignación o la fatiga en el contexto de la movilización pro-migrante. Recurriendo a las experiencias cotidianas en las fronteras, este artículo profundiza en la intersección de emociones, activismo y fronteras para iluminar las experiencias íntimas contra el control migratorio.

Palabras clave: fronteras, activismo, emociones, elicitación visual, Ceuta y Melilla

Introduction

For decades, geographical research has focused on the study of emotions as a means of interpreting and understanding the self and others in a temporal and spatial context. Emotional geography has been concerned with the recognition of emotions as conscious and representable expressions, located within spatial bodies and contexts (Anderson & Smith, 2001). Borders, as geographical, political, and symbolic spaces, have an emotional meaning linked to cultural and social manifestations that are truly rooted in community relations (Dell'Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015). According to Svašek (2000), the different geopolitical situation of border areas influences the emotional life of their inhabitants, which conditions their daily experience and agency. From the perspective of emotional geography, the fences of Ceuta and Melilla – the Spanish enclaves in Morocco–, encapsulate the emotional landscape of Fortress Europe. Images of pushbacks, police abuses, and fatalities of individuals during attempted crossings constitute a performative representation of the macro-politics of borders. The visual imposition of fences – and the spectacle that accompanies them (De Genova, 2012) –materialises border politics and migration control (Van Houtum, 2010; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), which have also acquired emotional meaning for those who have been moved by geopolitical anxieties (Dodds, 2021) provoked by the violent response of state border management.

According to Pile (2010), emotional geography shares a default methodology, ethnography. However, studies on emotions have often encountered methodological challenges when attempting to establish knowledge about emotional expressions as relevant data for research (Flam, 2015). According to Illouz et al. (2014), emotions “*per se*” are not available for empirical observation, but researchers might observe the social expressions or performances of emotions. In a context influenced by border spectacle, conducting ethnographic research focusing on emotions requires sensitive strategies through field devices (Estalella & Criado, 2023). Artifacts such as films could be valuable to elicit complex and obscured emotional dynamics. Film powerfully appeals to certain emotions and enables viewers to identify situations by configuring a complex emotional web of various feelings, such as empathy, fear, and joy. According to Tan (2013), film evokes emotions tied to events that are relevant to the subject. Cinematic representations of political issues are a form of storytelling that facilitates identification with specific individuals and their situations (Bleiker, 2018) as well as a connection with personal experiences, and memories linked to the reality of the film.

By focusing on everyday experiences of borders and their resistance, this article proposes the use of film as a methodological tool to understand the emotional resonances of borders in pro-migration activists. According to Rose (2016), images are seen differently depending on the context; likewise, perceptions of borders are dependent on the concrete historical processes surrounding them. The distinctiveness of state borders and aggressive migration control policies influence the social interactions and socialization processes of those who “live, draw meaning from and give meaning to borders” (Ballinger, 2012, p. 390). This article explores the intersection between emotions, activism, and borders to examine how contexts marked by border spectacle shape emotional experiences of mobilization. It argues that, on the one hand, and empirically, the dynamics of border policies in both Ceuta and Melilla create an emotional landscape in which emotions, such as compassion, mobilize individuals to participate and engage in pro-migration activism; and on the other hand, methodologically, the relationship between popular geopolitics and emotional geography contribute to reformulate an ethnographic approach through the use of visual elicitation in border areas.

Emotional geographies of borders: activism engagement

According to Anderson and Smith (2001), emotions must be understood in relation to the form of sociability in which they occur. Since the emotional turn in social and cultural geography (Bondi, 2005), researchers have highlighted the embedded location of emotions as an integral part of understanding how they are shaped and expressed within specific cultural and social contexts (Davidson & Milligan, 2004). In these inquiries, the distinction between affect, “as a precognitive circulation of bodily energies and intensities”, and emotion, “as a subjective embodiment and culturally specific representation of affective experience” (Williams & Boyce, 2013, p. 896), are always discussed. However, other studies also distinguish a more communal component by categorizing certain emotions as civic. According to Jasper (1998) and Nussbaum (1996), civic emotions encompass feelings of approval and disapproval based on moral intuitions and principles (e.g., compassion, empathy, indignation). Feelings linked to outrage, loyalty, respect, and disgust persist through cognitive mechanisms that are relevant for understanding social mobilization processes and their relationship to civic emotions (Kleres, 2017).

In this regard, in border studies, there is a growing recognition of how civic emotions intersect with ethical perspectives on the violent manifestations of necropolitical border regimes (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). The spectacle of the border fulfills this purpose through state actions to control migration and the “fetishized image of a ‘crisis’ of border ‘invasion’” (De Genova, 2012, p. 499). In the context of Fortress Europe, the dynamics of border towns have been disrupted by the logic of securitization. The fences erected to control migration have completely distorted the reality of these places through the application of controls and the weakening of contact between the two sides. In this sense, as Svašek (2000) highlights border regions as sites of everyday violence can arouse people’s emotions and compel them to take concrete political actions.

According to Nayak and Suchland (2006), borders are also spaces for radical political subjectivity. The wake of solidarity in Europe in 2015 opened up reflection on the emotions underlying political mobilization (della Porta, 2018). Kleres (2017) highlighted the emotional underpinnings of civic solidarity actions in support of migrants and their multifaceted emotional regime, considering how feelings of compassion, and pity drive people to mobilize. Following Karakayali (2017), these feelings are also connected with the capacity of volunteers to forge social bonds between collectivities and migrants. Similarly, Maestri and Monforte (2020) suggest that compassion, as an emotion that guides social relations based on a moral evaluation process, is crucial to understand the motivation of different actors to participate in civic society actions related to migration. Assessing how the individuals “compassionate” respond to solidarity activities and the main dilemmas they face related to worthiness of migrants to help, enables to understand the guiding emotions that leads their actions. In line with their research, Milan (2023) encourages an understanding of the different emotional phases of mobilization in solidarity events in favor of refugees. From reactive emotions such as joy and exhaustion in the short term to moral emotions such as “doing the right thing” (p. 814) in the long term of their participation, she observes the emotional changes during actions and engagements.

Borderlands shape a particular mobilization regime that does not always bring together actions and engagements with migrants. According to Williams and Boyce (2013) the everyday realities of some border area residents with the militarization of the US-Mexico border has brought to the surface emotionally charged discourses of threat and insecurity, shaping policies explicitly designed to circulate feelings of fear against migrant populations. In this context, Agudo (2023) explores how pro-migration activists manage civic emotions and contradictions in terms of protest containment due to the necessary dialogue with public authorities and community signaling. In this sense, activism in border areas involves a delicate balance between the political and moral values of local activists and the need to address and transform the border realities where they live. However, these efforts are often complicated by opposition from other community members who adopt narratives of fear and insecurity. This is also commonplace in European borderlands where different discourses have been spread to consolidate feelings of insecurity.

The case of Ceuta and Melilla

The Spanish enclaves in Morocco consists of Ceuta and Melilla and currently possesses the only territorial border of the European Union with the African continent. The end of the colonization of Morocco in 1956 substantially

changed the meaning of the cities and their borders (Saddiki, 2012). Ceuta and Melilla remained under Spanish sovereignty, and the Spanish Constitution of 1978 established a political autonomy for both. Following the Schengen Agreement and the politics of border securitization, fences modify the border landscape not only visually but also in functional and ethical regards (Ferrer-Gallardo & Planet, 2012). The construction of the fences in 1995 altered the reality of both cities by enclosing them and reducing daily contact with “the other side.” Lately, the cities have also been characterized by bordering. Thus, Spain and Morocco converge on the global dynamics of migration control and cooperate in border fortification efforts even though Morocco does not consider them legitimate (Saddiki, 2012). In both cities, the excess and overreach of migration control can be clearly observed in serious episodes of police violence, such as the tragedy of the Tarajal on February 6, 2014, the Morocco–Spain border incident on May 17, 2021, and the massacre of Melilla on June 24, 2022.

The fortification of Ceuta and Melilla has had a profound impact on the daily life due to the perception of the “other”. As Queirolo (2019) explains, the porosity of the border was altered due to its fortification, which generated a greater division between the population of peninsular origin and that of Moroccan origin. The access to Spanish citizenship by people of Moroccan origin due to the 1986 mobilisations marked the beginning of alarmist media reports showing “the growing Moroccanization of a society that previously was and imagined itself only white and Catholic” (Queirolo, 2019, p. 70). Such media representation has increased racist discourses linked to extreme-right political parties (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022). Moreover, a rise in migration flows from parts of sub-Saharan Africa has contributed to the designation of another, mostly black-skinned “other” (Queirolo, 2021). Media coverage of entries through the fence has placed these cities not only under the global lens of media interest but also in the spotlight of discourses of securitization. According to Gabrielli (2022), the hypervisibility of border crossings in the media have portrayed migrants as violent criminals or as helpless victims which has had an impact on borderlanders.

While this development has prompted racist attacks, it has also spawned demonstrations in support of migrants and subsequent efforts to challenge these narratives. Civil society organizations have also been working to raise awareness of the realities of migration through local associations and individual initiatives. Thus, the border control has generated an activist component that responds to a local concern of not consolidating logics based on securitization (Aris, 2022) but also to the need to strengthen the local community’s capacities to defend the rights of migrants. However, for Alcalde and Portos (2018) activists in both enclaves face a strong institutional blockade and opposition from much of local society, not only because of strained relations with the police, but also because of the dominant conservative political forces. Alcalde and Portos (2018) highlight the fact that local population has long witnessed the arrival of migrants, but their mobilization against the use of force by the police at the fence is not transformed into solidarity. Recently, police persecution of some activists has also added another layer of complexity to the protest itself (Marconi, 2023). This situation has given rise to a complex emotional context in which the attraction of funds, and the guarantee of the reproducibility of an economic model whose main source is essentially migration, clash with a context of constant questioning of migration policies by certain activists (Queirolo, 2021).

Methodology

A growing number of scholars in the field of popular geopolitics suggest that there is a compelling need to employ film as a methodological tool to investigate the interconnections between everyday geographical experiences and their emotional resonances (Sharp & Lukinbeal, 2015). Geography's engagement with non-representational theories seeks to redirect the attention from cultural products to cultural practices, affects, emotions and the body (Dittmer & Gray, 2010). According to Förster (2019), by visualizing the border experience – and therefore focusing on its emotional geographies– images become sites of knowledge production that support a deeper understanding of what borders do and how they affect the people living in and around them. Recent studies have referred to border aesthetics (Espíñeira, 2015; Horsti, 2019; Nyman and Schimanski, 2021) as a socio-spatial expression of borders in connection with how borders are perceived, felt, and sensed. In other words, a border is not a border unless it is sensed by someone or something (Larsen, 2007). Methodologically, this statement requires creative approaches to unveil emotional expressions and analyze the intricate links between daily geographical experiences and their emotional ramifications.

This article is the result of a short-term ethnography carried out in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla over a two-month period from October to December 2022. To take up the methodological challenge of investigating emotional geographies, the ethnographic encounter involved a planned interaction through a field device (Estalella & Criado, 2023) with that of cineforum, a participatory film elicitation technique that uses film to discover latent realities and attitudes that are present among a group or projected in society (Almenara-Niebla & Smets, 2024). As an emotional artifact, reactions to films are rooted on idiosyncratic sensitivities such as memories and experiences lived by the viewer (Tan, 2013). In this sense, cineforum values the group's ability to reflect on the events presented in the film and how they relate the film to their own personal experiences. Drawing from the visual sociological tradition (Pauwels, 2019) of using visual/sensorial stimuli to elicit verbal responses, the present research did not intend to focus on the films themselves but rather aimed to engage the participants through a sensory stimulus to "trigger partly unanticipated factual information and projective comments" (Kudžmaitė & Pauwels, 2022, p. 262).

During the ethnographic period, five cineforums with an average of six participants each were conducted in Spanish with activists who were part of local associations and NGOs focused on supporting migrants and raising awareness of the reality of migration, as well as with activists who support migrants on a more individual basis without being part of a specific initiative. In this border context, we assume a broad definition of "activist" that does not center on individual self-recognition as such but on spaces for action and grassroots practices for alter-geopolitics (Koopman, 2011). A variety of pseudonyms have been applied to reflect the diversity of the population in both cities. The average age of the participants was 40 years, and the youngest and oldest participants were 20 and 76 years old, respectively. A significant number of participants were not born in either city but had been living there for years. Nineteen participants identified as female, while eight identified as male. Although the sample size is small, this participant profile could reflect the feminization of mobilization in both cities, like in other border contexts where women are connected to ethics of care around migration (Maestri & Monforte, 2020).

In each cineforum session, the group collectively chose one film from a list of six pre-selected options in our project database (Reel Borders, 2021). The selection of the films was based on different criteria such as: the background of the participants and their language (the pre-selected films were in Spanish or had Spanish subtitles), the diversity of genres (fiction and documentary), the access to the copy of the film via online platforms or producers, and the themes. As for the latter, the selection of films addresses various perspectives of the concept of borders, as geographical representations of the nation-state or markers of division in cultural and social construction. The final selection consisted of 6 films that address the border as a site of migration control in *A este lado del mundo* (Trueba, 2021) and *Adú* (Calvo, 2020), an expression of the politics of belonging in *Connected Walls* (Gutiérrez & Drissi, 2015) and *Waiting for Barcelona* (Tanskanen, 2018), and a tragic intimate experience in *14 kilómetros* (Olivares, 2007) and *Retorno a Hansala* (Gutiérrez, 2008). In all of them, Ceuta and Melilla are presented in a different light or mentioned as a transit route to reach Europe. One group selected *A este lado del mundo*, one group chose *Retorno a Hansala*, and the rest opted for *Waiting for Barcelona*. They made their decisions based on whether any group members had already seen the film and how interested they were in the part of the film that was shown as a preview by the researcher.

After the screening, the group engaged in discussion about the film without addressing any predetermined questions. The researcher only moderated and encouraged the debate. This approach assumes an "expert role" of the participants by reversing the typical hierarchy of roles in research (Pauwels, 2019). The analysis did not focus on the group's interpretation of the film itself but rather on the memories and narratives that the film evoked in relation to the participants' personal experiences, ideas, and knowledge of the situation presented. The analysis codified ideas about daily life in Ceuta and Melilla and the border, reasons for action, and the values and emotions that shape the experience of activism. In this sense, the discussion of the data presented in the following section is driven by the two major blocks of themes – compassion and fatigue – that emerged from the emotions and experiences elicited by the chosen films. According to Pauwels (2019), participants tend to feel less intimidated by the inquiry setting when they can discuss images instead of being posed a series of prefabricated questions. Thus, cineforum engages participants in conversation about their immediate context and its emotional aspects. Since films also shape social reality, the storytelling reflected in them are also mediated by the circulation of ideas and symbols about migration and borders. In this sense, I am aware of the question of the emotional mediation of

films and the methodological limitations this poses in the cineforums, as the aesthetic and narrative configuration of the films also conditions the emotional responses collected during the discussion. Still, the cineforum is an opportunity to attract participants to participate in a more horizontal and participatory way. While visual elicitation makes participants more open to engagement because they share experiences that are reflected to some extent in the films, it can also distort perspectives or emphasise them too one-sidedly, as is also the case in the focus group dynamics themselves. Furthermore, steering the conversation towards aspects related to emotions and activist experiences was complex in some sessions due to the challenge for certain people to express their feelings openly inside the group. My role as an outsider put me in a flexible position in these cases as I could always stimulate the interaction of certain people within the group with the intention of getting to know other points of view and understand what they consider relevant.

Evoked by film: civic emotions in pro-migration activism

In one of the cineforum sessions organized with members of different associations of Melilla, the participants selected the film *Waiting for Barcelona*, which portrays the story of a migrant whose undocumented status causes him to develop mental problems. In parallel, the film addresses the importance of pro-migrant associations and their capacity for action. After the screening, the group expressed that they were moved by the narrative because of its similarities to the stories of people they had supported in regularizing their situations. During the conversation, they also reflected on the border represented in the film. Damya, a 34-year-old woman who was a member of a sexual rights association, observed that the migration control system is a border itself, stating, "Borders are not just fences, as we have here. There are other borders, and some of them are harder." The participants also agreed on the relevance of human rights organizations to claim the reality of border exclusion. Lunja, a 24-year-old woman who was also a member of the aforementioned association, commented, "Thanks to pressure from people and associations, there is a very strong visibility of these situations." The participants discussed the relevance of their associations in Melilla but also acknowledged how migrants' human rights are continuously violated. Idir, a 57-year-old man who was part of an education association, then explained with an indignant tone,

We have seen that the fence does not stop growing. And I say, but what interest is there for this to continue growing? When they were building the fence, they contacted me because they needed a computer technician, and I said I'm not going to be part of building a cage against us. This fence – who are you building it against? I'm from Melilla; I'm not going to work on building a prison. Do you think the fence is going to stop these people? Because, really, if we look at the statistics, how many get through? I don't get it. Twenty-first century. Human rights.

While expressing his outrage about the violence related to the fence, Idir referred to the dynamics of the border spectacle while capturing the common feeling that Ceuta and Melilla are becoming "cages." Following Pile (2010), emotions that people feel for landscapes lie on genuine personal experiential geographies. The visual component of the fence, which surrounds the two cities, produces a complex emotional reality structured by a hierarchy as a reinterpretation of the "us-them" divide. The radical hostility imbued by the fence during its construction consolidated a form of border governance based on the isolation of the cities as exemplary models of migration containment. The relationship between people and landscapes implicitly mobilizes emotions that, in this case, relate to a feeling of outrage about being part of migration control measures. Indeed, the metaphor of the cage was mentioned by different participants. For Safia, a 25-year-old woman in an anti-border association, the cage illustrated the ignorance of part of Melilla's population in regard to migration:

Melilla is like a cage. When you put an animal in a cage, it has several options: either it tends to become aggressive, to behave in an indignant way, or the cage is ideal, and that absolutely nothing happens. So, I feel that those of us who are from here and who have grown up in this city, some of us have learned to a certain extent to normalize the situation we find ourselves in.

The metaphor of a cage evinces a clear sense of being confined and therefore bordered. According to Jones (2021), people deliberately ignore border violence because it is harder to confront difficult and complex questions about

power, justice, and exploitation than to leave things as they are. The kind of “border habitus” to which Safia referred relates to locals becoming accustomed to the situation of border control, which leads to a willingness to maintain the political order and to act, think, and feel in a given environment through the situated gazes of surveillance and belonging. As Dodds (2021) has noted, this reality permeates the population of these places, and inhabitants may adopt an attitude of indifference. Nevertheless, this context also inspires a response based on everyday life and a need to subvert and contest that reality.

Resisting border violence through compassion and mobilization

According to Debord (1955), a specific geographic environment organizes “the emotions and behaviors of individuals” (p. 5). In both cities, the border landscape shaped by the fence generates a particular emotional response. When I arrived in Ceuta from mainland Spain through the port and entered the city center, a large municipality canvas was covering part of the wall of the bridge Puente del Cristo. The canvas displayed the sentence, “Ceuta where emotions come together” (Figure 1). After one of the cineforum sessions, I also asked the local activists what the canvas meant to them. For Ahmed, a 46-year-old man linked to a local association supporting children’s human rights, most of the emotions of Ceuta related to the border. He explained, “The emotions here are harmful because of the violation of rights.” Likewise, for Susana, a 48-year-old woman activist and former volunteer for an association that provides Spanish lessons to migrants, “sadness and grief are the emotions converging in Ceuta which are related to the privilege of being on this side.” Following Low (2016), emotions are a key element in the creation, interpretation, and experience of space and are a constitutive component of place-making. Ceuta and Melilla have witnessed border violence that “does not hesitate to infringe people’s fundamental rights, including the one to live” (Soddu, 2006, p. 213). The local response to this situation encompasses the process of converting these emotions into collective action based on principles of solidarity.

(Figure 1 about here)

Figure 1. Canvas displayed in Ceuta “Ceuta where emotions come together” (Photo by S.Almenara-Niebla)

According to Nussbaum (1996), compassion is a powerful civic emotion that connects with our capacity to empathize with others as a bridge between the individual and the community. Furthermore, it relates to a sense of justice that it is within our capacity to act. In a cineforum session in Melilla, members of an association with the motto “No borders for human rights” selected the film *Retorno a Hansala*, which prompted a debate about the naturalization of dangerous entry routes to Europe. The film depicts a woman’s journey from Spain to Morocco to bury her brother, who died while attempting to cross into Spain. Once in Morocco, one of the village children asks a Spaniard for help crossing into Spain by hiding under his car, what is popularly known as “risky”. After the screening, the participants commented on this moment, which they linked to their testimonies about solidarity actions with children. Two women, 23-year-old Laia and 26-year-old Lucía, explained,

The film is old, but it’s something that hasn’t changed at all. It makes me think – when we’re in the square with the kids who say, “yes, I’m going to do ‘risky,’ see you later,” you know, maybe we see them, or maybe we don’t.

It is sad to see the fact that people have reached the point of normalizing this – of normalizing that a child sneaks into a boat or under a car or whatever, that they are risking their life. It is sad that maybe we see them, or maybe we don’t.

In her later work on compassion and spectators of tragedies, Nussbaum (2013) has spoken of compassion as a genuine emotion aroused in spectators when seeing the reality depicted. She has asserted that compassion materializes through empathy with the other upon seeing them as the one whose suffering has been fortuitous. Their reality becomes a plausible possibility for the spectators as well as for the suffering characters. In this sense, both Laia and Lucía related the film – and their role as spectators – with their own experiences of solidarity activities with homeless children who crossed from Morocco to Melilla. They are not mere spectators, but also participants of the reality shown in the film. With the word “sad,” Lucía communicated her despair about others’

lack of concern about the injustices of migratory routes, and she expressed compassion through her frustration toward those who do not feel the same sense of solidarity.

In this regard, the sustainability of border activism is deeply connected with life experiences that are conditioned by an awareness of the formation of a “cage” of border control as well as compassion for the circumstances of those on the other side. By relating with a film such as *Waiting for Barcelona*, activists could reflect on borders beyond fences through intimate relations built during collective actions. Paloma, a 74-year-old woman in one of Ceuta’s oldest associations in support of migrants, shared her experience during a cineforum session. The protagonist of the film reminded the whole group of a young man who had accessed support from their association but eventually died by suicide because he could not regularize his situation. Paloma commented,

I feel sorry for him – that this society leads people to death. That it really is one of annulment. These are moments that mark a lot...I have to say with regret that the situation has not improved but that we are still in this attitude of rejection – and a violent or aggressive rejection, which sometimes leads people to death.

Käpylä and Kennedy (2014) have argued that experiencing compassion is linked with the capacity to recognize oneself in a similar position as the object of compassion. The connection of the film with the participants’ personal experiences gave rise to memories of the emotional bonds they formed through daily life activities with migrants in their association. “Feeling sorry for him,” as Paloma phrased it, is intimately tied to a collective sense of border injustice resulting from a controlling attitude toward migration. Another example of feelings about the border addressed in the film was shared by María, a 40-year-old woman, who explained, “The border is pain and sadness; it’s injustice. I’ve even cried crossing the border, remembering moments, the stories that have happened.” Following Brown and Pickerill (2009), places can evoke certain emotions that fuel activism. María’s emotions about the border were sad, but they had conditioned her way of engaging in solidarity activities. To support others under diverse circumstances, people strive to foster a sense of shared solidarity by channeling powerful emotions, such as anger or outrage, into a feeling of “affective solidarity” (Juris, 2008, p. 65). In this cineforum, the film managed to evoke emotions among the participants who reflected on their own experiences in understanding the border not only as a fence, but as an emotionally tragic process that causes suffering to those it affects.

Goodwin et al. (2004) have posited that activists develop emotional connections to issues they perceive as unfair based on both moral convictions. During their discussion of the film *Waiting for Barcelona* in Melilla, the activists reflected on the latest episode of border violence in June 2022, when more than 24 people died after being beaten by Moroccan and Spanish police. For all of the participants in this cineforum, the film reminded them of some collective strategies they had developed to denounce border violence and generate greater empathy and compassion for those who suffer it. The activists highlighted the importance of recording human rights violations and how it can help with condemning border violence. As Idir explained,

It has happened here at a border in Europe. There has been a witness, and there have been recordings, and we have been there reporting things. And I do think that the complaint has been powerful enough to have crossed all borders, making people think about what happened here. Does that mean it won’t happen again? I’m afraid not, but at least people have seen what has happened and have reacted through demonstrations and protests all over Spain.

According to Jones (2021), the visibility of certain border incidents has paradoxically created thoughtlessness due to the magnitude of the problem as well as more political reactions to issues of compromised dignity and feelings of sympathy for the trauma of another’s experience.

Compassion fatigue: Between media exposure and intimate dilemmas

Even before the events of May 2021 in Ceuta, the war metaphors used by some media and politicians had managed to construct powerful frames that legitimized anti-migration discourse in both cities (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022). During fieldwork, several people from the two cities explained that they were tired of being on television

because of the fences, as they seemed to be the only image that outsiders had of Ceuta and Melilla. In this sense, the active role of a segment of inhabitants in deliberately ignoring the situation of migration control was also expressed as a lack of interest about these issues. At events organized by different associations, I observed that most of the attendees were always the same. In a film screening and debate of the movie *Tanger Gool* (Gautier, 2015), organized by a local NGO, the organizer mentioned me that most of the attendees of such activities are regulars, as for most part of the population there is a “fatigue” when they talked about the divided reality that the fence has produced.

In a cineforum session discussing *Waiting for Barcelona*, activists from an international and independent movement supporting “people on the move” in Ceuta similarly explained the frustration they felt when thinking about the impact of such films with the impact of their own activities in support of migrants on the streets. Johanna, a 23-year-old woman volunteering at the association, commented,

It’s a pity, but these films just go to the people who think the same way. But I don’t know whether you call out the cinema or whatever you’re watching it, and then you say, “Oh yeah, I should do something to make this better,” or you just sit down the whole thing and then change topic for a beer, tapas, and you go home.

Through these observations, the group collectively reflected on a common theme that arose in other conversations I had with local activists. These activists had organized a range of activities to reach out to people and raise awareness of migration control. However, as they expressed regarding the film, the response from the general population was always the same: only those who were already concerned about these issues were the ones who participated. With the word “pity,” Johanna conveyed a certain frustration about the potential of film to elicit a more empathetic reaction from the audience and the need to present an active role in the situation. In this sense, Goodwin et al. (2004) have emphasized moral emotions, such as indignation or indifference, in relation to judgements about others’ actions, which result from “judgements about what is right or wrong, good or bad” (p. 422).

According to Maier (2015), people disengage with certain events and show less compassion when those events are geographically distant. However, in both cities, this idea was questionable because of the construction of hegemonic discourses attempting to demobilize compassion. In the film *A este lado del mundo*, an engineer travels to Melilla to reinforce the fence and the political and police structure behind it. During the cineforum session on this film, Nadila, a 26-year-old woman who volunteered with an intercultural association, reflected on how most films about Ceuta and Melilla are connected with migration: “We are like the forgotten ones, like the city of immigration and the fence.” Nuria, a 27-year-old woman who volunteered with a solidarity association in support of migrants, immediately replied,

This is related to the media. They influence a lot with the language in order to scare. I live near the border, and I remember in May 2021 when people entered, the media themselves warn...no, they do not warn, they sow panic among the people who live here. There were many people who wanted to help with sandwiches, with blankets, but the media then said, “No. All the stores closed as a precaution. Do not go out in the streets. The children do not go to school.” And people stopped helping because of fear.

According to Brown and Pickerill (2009), compassion fatigue relates to emotional exhaustion, which evolves into a gradual erosion of empathy due to continuous exposure to certain events. Nuria recalled, “People showed no interest in helping at all. The population ignored it, the population was...I could even say that they were disgusted. They felt hatred.” Such lack of involvement of the local people partly explains why many organizations have had to resort to international or national volunteer programs in which volunteers come to the cities and spend a few months participating in the organizations’ actions. Many of the activists who took part in this research had moved to Ceuta or Melilla from another country for volunteering or work. As noted by some senior members of different associations, this situation has produced a complex activist ecology wherein solidarity actions lack a constant link with society and therefore tend to fluctuate depending on the number of volunteers.

Among the cineforum group in Melilla who selected the film *Retorno a Hansala*, all participants except Safia had come to Melilla as part of a solidarity program. During the session, they reflected on the impact of the film on those not involved in migration activism. Gara, a 24-year-old woman who had moved to Melilla five months earlier to volunteer with the association, highlighted the influence of cinema as an art to denounce inequalities and the importance of making films that are more critical and do not simply present “the story of a super cool savior.” The conversation then immediately turned to participants’ own intimate dilemmas in terms of not falling into the white savior complex depicted in the film. Gara explained that her main daily goal was to contemplate how to not be welfarist and to create human relationships with migrant children in the street: “It’s a constant learning curve. We’re all building together and deconstructing together. Alone and together, observing each other; but in the end, that’s what it is. You don’t have a reference point of ‘when I get to this level, I’m no longer paternalistic.’” Joan, a 24-year-old man who was an activist in the same association, added,

I was thinking to myself for a long time, “Are you doing this for you? I mean, like, why are you doing it? Who are you spending these hours, these moments for?” Then you start to realize – also listening to your colleagues, also listening to what other people have to say, realizing the reality...I don’t know. Realizing that these people have made their whole migration journey before they met you, and they’re going to continue after they’ve left. You know, you’re just one more person who has found their life, and... giving him a sandwich doesn’t solve anything at all but sometimes is the only thing you can do.

Through these reflections on their role and the need to move beyond paternalistic modes of providing assistance, the activists also shared intimate experiences suggesting that the main benefit of compassion is often that the compassionate person feels better about being able to engage in apparently selfless actions (Jasper, 2011). Joan’s reflection revealed an interesting emotional dilemma in terms of the moral principles motivating their actions. After hearing his comment, Safia remarked on the importance of moving beyond the idea of “assistance” and its consequences in terms of emotional exhaustion. She explained,

I dedicated my whole life to street work. I literally got up at seven in the morning and went home at one, three in the morning, and the next morning the same. I was at the Foreign Office, at the skate park with the kids, at the delivery, doing interviews, or whatever. And it was like, okay, this day is over, and tomorrow it’s going to be the same. I managed that very badly. I’m totally aware, and the truth is that I regret it a lot, because I know that a big part of the fact that I got so burned and that I’m so hurt and that I haven’t finished healing is that I totally distanced myself from my daily life.

These intimate dilemmas related to activism and the emotional consequences of these experiences have been recognized with the concept of emotional management (Juris, 2008), which assumes that some activists devote much of their personal time to their activism. The emotional aspects of burnout in activism frequently result from a strong emotional involvement and taking a stance of resistance to problems that are ignored by the rest of society (King, 2005). Due to society’s emotional dissonance with these problems, activists experience burn-out as a gradual erosion of empathy or loss of control in everyday life (Brown & Pickerill, 2009). In fact, the significant emotional cost of activism partly derives from the very structure of associations, as Ahmed suggested in the cineforum session. He explained his decision to stop participating in large organizations:

I left because I was fed up with organizations that have a lot of money in Europe, but then they don’t send anything here. They paid for our trips, they paid for our stay. But then after a while, you are doing voluntary work, solidarity work, but when you see that you never get paid...I don’t want to get paid, I understand everything, as I’m saying that they don’t get paid, that they don’t receive subsidies and so on, but what less than thinking about us from time to time – that we are also people, and we have children to support, we have a life to lead. I can’t just focus on activism.

While activism is tied to emotional triggers of injustice, dispossession, and place-based conflict (Woods et al., 2012), the material conditions of those who engage in certain actions can also lead to fatigue with the workload necessary to meet demands – especially in the two cities in this study, which have the highest unemployment rates in all of Spain. Ahmed’s experience was echoed by others during informal conversations about the possibilities

and differences they observed between bigger NGOs, such as Cruz Roja, and smaller associations that depend on local funding or donations to secure a space to meet or store food to deliver.

Another factor relevant to compassion fatigue among activists in both cities was that “many solidarity activists live in fear due to the threats of the authorities” (Queirolo, 2021, p. 8). Safia and other members of her association addressed this topic during their cineforum discussion of *Retorno a Hansala*. In the film, the protagonist suffers poor treatment by Guardia Civil agents. In their conversation, the participants described their own experiences of similar incidents with police. Safia and other members had to leave the association for a few months because of the emotional impact of a complaint filed by the police. Safia explained, “I experienced anxiety and fear. I thought that police were following me all the time, and I left Melilla for a few months.” All of these cases illustrate how compassion fatigue and burnout problems can relate to resisting violent ignorance on another level, such as political mobilization against human rights violations at the border.

Conclusions

According to Brambilla (2012), visualizing narratives such as those related to borderscapes can bring to light nonstate actors who are often underrepresented. This perspective could clarify what it means to experience the border in all of its complexities, diversities, and personal forms. The peculiarities of the two cities and the sense of being part of the border control have motivated a civic and moral response that emotionally links to a reaction of a part of the population to migration policies. As it has been analysed, compassion and its fatigue is made visible through intimate experiences linked to the political and contextual situation of the border. Since emotions are intensely political issues (Anderson & Smith, 2001), emotional responses are an intrinsic part of the geography of this border. This mix of anger and compassion has triggered anxiety about the escalating violence at the border and has prompted some people to respond by raising awareness and granting a more human face to this reality. However, they have contended with the challenges of maintaining personal boundaries to prevent burnout, evading persecution by police, and consolidating their own actions.

The emotional geography of migration control has consolidated collective actions based on principles of solidarity. The emotions experienced and expressed by activists through their intimate experiences of compassion and solidarity reveal the complexities of raising awareness about these issues in both cities and resisting the fatigue of anti-migration discourses. In Ceuta and Melilla, the social geography of the fences links the border experience itself to the emotional meaning they evoke. Thus, the border experience of activists implies a series of feelings socially organised around a moral dimension that is intimately linked to the geographical context in which border control is consolidated.

Understanding the emotional geographies of border activism poses complex ethnographic challenges. The engagement of geography with the opportunities of media formats, contexts, and methods (Dittmer & Gray, 2010) allows us to divert attention to the emotional practices of everyday life. In this sense, the use of film as a sensorial/visual field device has enriched our comprehension of the emotional geographies of borders for those who actively question them. A perspective focused on how film helps to motivate responses previously experienced by the viewer allowed us to better understand the interpretation of emotional events on the border. In essence, the images themselves became means to generate knowledge about the emotional geographies of border activism. By exploring emotional narratives through subjective representations, this study has contributed to a richer understanding of the impact of geopolitical contexts in everyday life. In this regard, this research has taken a different approach by emphasizing the emotions evoked by the images and their connection to personal narratives rather than dissecting the films themselves. Engaging participants in a thought-provoking experience that yielded unexpected insights demonstrated the potential of film, as an emotional and embodied experience, to stimulate memories and concrete lived experiences.

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