

FILM FESTIVAL YEARBOOK 2: Film Festivals and Imagined Communities



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A Cinematic Refuge in the Desert: The Sahara International Film Festival

Isabel Santaolalla and Stefan Simanowitz¹

During the 1960s, when decolonisation movements were sweeping the world, there was a joke that, after achieving independence, a country had to do three things: design a flag, launch an airline, and found a film festival (Rich 1999: 79). Western Sahara has a flag but no airline and, despite a struggle that has lasted over three decades, it has yet to achieve independence. The closest Western Sahara comes to its own film festival is the Festival Internacional de Cine del Sahara (FISahara, www.festivalsahara.com), a festival like no other that takes place in a refugee camp in the middle of the desert.

Around 165,000 Saharawi displaced from the Western Sahara live in refugee camps near Tindouf (South Western Algeria), awaiting a solution to a political dispute that has kept them in exile from their native land for over three decades. Western Sahara — effectively Africa's last colony — was divided between Morocco and Mauritania when Spain withdrew in 1976, following Morocco's 'Green March' into the territory that had until then been a Spanish 'province'. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Río de Oro (POLISARIO Front), Western Sahara's independence movement, declared the creation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), and a 15-year long war ensued with the Moroccan occupiers, the Mauriticians having withdrawn in 1979. In 1991 the fighting came to an end and, under the terms of a UN ceasefire agreement, a referendum for self-determination was promised. However, despite efforts by the international community, including over 100 UN resolutions, the referendum has been continually delayed by Morocco, which has remained in occupation of roughly

three quarters of Western Sahara. Over half the Saharawi population live in exile, inhabiting four large camps in the inhospitable Algerian desert, separated from their homeland by a 2,500 km fortified barrier known as 'the Berm'. The POLISARIO is Western Sahara's government in exile and is responsible for the running of the camps, which are referred to as wilayas (provinces) and named after the cities the refugees left behind in their homeland: Aoussert, El Aioun, Smara, and Dakhla.

It is against the backdrop of this political crisis and the resulting human suffering that FISahara takes place. Now in its sixth year, the festival was the brainchild of Javier Corcuera, a Peruvian documentary filmmaker resident in Spain who went to the region in 2002 and was moved to act by what he saw there. He had been invited to visit the camps by members of the Saharawi independent movement who, having seen his first film, *La espalda del mundo* (*The Back of the World*, Spain, 2000), asked him to make a documentary about the plight of the Saharawi.² Corcuera considered that a more effective way to support this forgotten people was to organise a film festival, thus combining a cultural service with international media exposure. He sought financial and logistical aid from a number of public and private organisations, and the festival has now become an annual fixture that usually takes place in the months of April or May. Corcuera himself was the festival's sole director until the edition of 2009, when he opted for a triple directorship.

FISahara is an extraordinary example of a film festival as an 'imagined community' in which hundreds of participants from around the world and thousands of Saharawi refugees live together during a week under the same roofs, eating the same food, watching the same films and participating together in workshops and other cultural and educational events, temporarily sharing a land that ultimately belongs to none of them, and to which none of them belongs.

The situation created by a film festival that is organised in a

refugee camp by outsiders inevitably raises questions about ownership and dependency. In the case of FISahara, a series of issues need to be considered. To what extent does the festival reflect the socio-cultural norms and the values and beliefs of the refugees? How do the expectations of audiences differ and how are they met? Where are the areas of synergy and how are potential conflicts of artistic and political difference dealt with? How does the festival resolve interrelated questions of post-colonality/neo-colonality and globalisation?

Whilst all festivals are somewhat peripatetic in nature — described by Elsaesser as ‘moveable fests and caravans of film cans’ (2005: 103) — this is even more the case for FISahara, which, in its first four editions, moved to a different camp each year. Although this nomadic structure might seem appropriate for the desert, it was decided for logistic and symbolic reasons that Dakhla, the most remote of the camps, situated 175 km away from the nearest city of Tindouf, should become the permanent site for the festival. Whilst transporting equipment so far into the desert is obviously more difficult, having a fixed site provides an organisational continuity that was lacking when the festival moved annually. Very little equipment used in the festival remains in Dakhla. Indeed, even the multiplex-sized screen, which is situated in an open-air spacious area in the centre of the camp attached to the side of an articulated lorry, is driven off soon after the festival’s closing ceremony.

A desert refugee camp is perhaps the least likely setting for an international film festival and yet, for a week each year, Dakhla is transformed into a gala of screenings, workshops and concerts attended by camp dwellers and visitors, including an array of widely acclaimed actors and filmmakers. The festival’s programme has steadily expanded over the years. Fifteen films were screened at the first edition in 2003, whilst in 2009 there were over 30 films, including documentaries and animations. The number of workshops held during the festival has also risen, from five in 2003 to 12 in 2009.

Yet, though the festival has grown in scale and ambition, its aims have remained unchanged. These are not only cultural and educational but also humanitarian and political. Indeed the ultimate goal of FISahara is to bring about the circumstances where the festival itself becomes unnecessary: a solution to the refugee crisis and the creation of an independent Saharawi nation will obviate the need for the festival. In this respect FiSahara is — as repeatedly stated by Javier Corcuera — the only film festival in the world that is actively trying to bring about its own extinction.

Life in the refugee camps has deprived the Saharawi people of cultural as well as other opportunities and, even though the open-air screening projected on the side of a lorry cannot offer the perfect cinematic experience, Corcuera aims to recreate it as closely as possible: ‘Everybody should have the right to see cinema in its proper conditions, [and] this involves large screens and films on 35 mm’, he argues. Film screenings might be seen as an unusual luxury for refugees who are entirely dependent on external aid for most of their basic needs (including water, food and energy), but Danielle Smith, Director of the London-based cultural charity Sandblast, believes that culture is an important and often overlooked aspect of humanitarian aid: ‘[W]ithout the spirit which is tied to identity and culture, people have less will to survive’ (quoted in Newbery 2008: 14).

FISahara is a non-commercial, non-competitive³ festival and is organised through collaboration between external groups in Spain and an internal committee within the refugee camp. The POLISARIO is a key partner in the logistic planning of the festival. Indeed the Ministry of Culture of the SADR and the Saharawi Red Crescent (CRS) work closely with festival organisers in Spain, who themselves work in partnership with the National Federation of Associations of Friends of the Saharawi People (CEAS-Sahara). The festival’s budget of €300,000 (US\$425,000) is paid for through a mix of private funding and institutional sponsorship, above all from the

Spanish Cooperation Agency for International Development (AECID) and the Spanish Ministry of Culture, via the Cinematography and Audiovisuals Arts Institute (ICAA). Despite the institutional financial support, the festival is fiercely independent, and its directors and organising committee, as well as most of the collaborators, mainly of Spanish origin, work on a voluntary basis. This was always the case in the earlier editions, and only more recently, as the festival has grown in size, has it become necessary to hire some extra help for the three-to-six-month period preceding the festival.

The numerous practical and conceptual problems facing a festival of this kind include having to cater for two very distinct target groups: the displaced refugees and the international participants. While the programming of the screenings and workshops is organised with the Saharawi population in mind, other events are laid on specifically for the incoming visitors. But rather than competing or conflicting, the requirements and expectations of these two groups seem complementary, and the festival's aim is to provide a space for intercultural exchange. FISahara offers unique opportunities for interaction between the Saharawi and the incoming visitors. The latter, whose number has grown from around 250 in 2003 to nearly 500 in 2009, reside with Saharawi families in their tents or mud houses throughout the duration of the festival. The festival is open to anyone on a first-come-first-serve basis, and visitors are typically fairly politicised Spaniards and a limited number of individuals from other nationalities, most with a keen interest in film and visual arts.

Obviously, the possibility that FISahara may be viewed by some as a means of sampling a safe dose of exoticism cannot be fully dismissed. After all, most international participants come from Western societies where ethnically-marked materials and individuals are systematically being fetishised, labelled as 'authentic' and marketed for public consumption (Santaolalla 2000: 10). But FISahara's active promotion of a two-way exchange between locals

and outsiders is designed to counter the likelihood of such attitudes, as well as the reasonable misgiving that a festival of this kind could be perpetuating cultural dependency of the Saharawi on the Western organisers. In fact, despite the undeniable imbalance in the material circumstances of the refugees and their temporary visitors, the relationship between them during the festival comes close to one of interdependence and exchange. Indeed, the international participants are entirely reliant on the warmth and hospitality of their Saharawi hosts for accommodation, food and transport, as well as for the richness of their cultural and educational experience during their stay in the camps. As part of the festival's programme, a series of visits to hospitals, schools and other official institutions are arranged for the outsiders, offering them the chance to appreciate the ways in which the wilaya is structured and run. Further cultural activities and entertainment include a live-music concert in the moonlit dunes, a camel race, an 'international' football match and, above all, multiple opportunities for taking the almost mandatory leisurely cup of sweet Saharawi tea both with the families and in the main festival arena, where a showcase of traditional Saharawi culture is set up during the week-long event. This display — referred to as *Le Frig* — consists of various *jaimas* (traditional tents), each representing a different *daira* (district) of the wilaya, and each concentrating on specific aspects of the culture, such as traditional clothing, food, music and dance, and literary and religious lore. Its purpose is to give both the international visitors and, interestingly, also Saharawi youth, the opportunity of familiarity with progressively disappearing Saharawi traditions.

But the festival does not simply aim to impact on the Saharawi refugees and the few hundred individuals who travel to the camps. It also actively seeks to reach a wider audience through involvement of the international media, so that worldwide exposure of the plight of the Saharawi people increases pressure for political change. The support of high-profile figures such as Penélope Cruz and Pedro Almodóvar

has given the festival prominence, and each year dozens of — so far predominantly Spanish — actors and filmmakers attend the festival and lend their popularity to the cause. In 2008 Javier Bardem was the most well-known participant, and in 2009 guests included Elena Anaya (*Lucía y el sexo / Sex and Lucia*, Julio Medem, France/Spain, 2001) and Eduardo Noriega (*Vantage Point*, Pete Travis, U.S., 2008), as well as the Oscar-nominated film director Javier Fesser. Famous musicians who have attended the festival include Manu Chao and Macaco. The publicity generated by the festival has helped campaigners in Spain to gather a quarter of a million signatories to petition the Spanish government to act in support of the Saharawi demand for self-determination (Simanowitz 2009b: 14).

The festival's actual choice of screenings and guests deserves consideration. Film selection is an ideologically loaded exercise, and the programming of a film festival both reflects and leads to understanding of the message that it is trying to convey. Cultural analysts such as Bourdieu (1984) have noted that cinema taste is rooted in economics, class, geography, education and language, and film programmers therefore need to be sensitive to the varying experiences and cultural competences of their intended public. Despite the fact that the FISahara Saharawi audience is arguably more homogeneous than that of most other film festivals, the organisers are aware that their local viewers are stratified across all ages and possess different levels of film understanding, all of which leads to diverse film viewing attitudes. Among other things, familiarity with one or more languages besides the native Hassaniya and disparate experiences of schooling or work abroad bring considerable variety to individual cinematic expectations and responses.

According to the FISahara organisers, there are no rigid criteria for the selection of films, and chosen titles vary from pure entertainment to serious subjects. There is, nevertheless, a level of cultural and aesthetic policing or self-policing by the programmers,

where films are vetted to ensure that they are culturally appropriate for a Muslim audience of all ages. Films that contain sexually explicit scenes are avoided and, although certain issues are also viewed as inappropriate, there is a certain room for manoeuvre, as exemplified by the screening, at the 2007 festival, of *Fresa y chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Cuba/Mexico/Spain/U.S., 1994), a Cuban comedy drama centring on a homosexual character.

The FISahara festival organisers do not have to worry too much about attracting spectators. Indeed, the camp residents are almost literally a 'captive audience'. Still, a key question revolves around *what* the Saharawi audience wants: sameness, replication, reflection or difference? There is a tendency among festival programmers to assume that 'identification is the principal or only reason to choose a screening: people are interested only in seeing work about others like themselves' (Fung 1999: 91). The FISahara programmers, however, have a broader approach. Whilst films about the experience of the Saharawis are shown — indeed, some are made by Saharawi refugees themselves — the festival also aims to open a window to the experiences of others beyond the boundaries of the camps, and engender a sense of greater internationalism. Showing films about the struggle of other oppressed peoples in the world is intended to give the refugees hope and remind them that they are not alone.

But the FISahara organisers are also acutely aware of the refugees' wish for entertainment. What is mainstream in other parts of the world is novelty here. For that reason, big budget, commercial films are as welcome in the camps as the more socially committed films that often form the core of film festivals with agendas similar to FISahara's, such as those of the Southern Film Festivals Platform, which FISahara joined in 2009.⁴ Yet, even in the choice of commercially or critically successful films there is evidence of an underlying vein that seems to favour stories set against the backdrop of struggle and oppression. Proof of this is the fact that three films by British social

realist filmmaker Ken Loach have been screened in recent years, and that in 2008 his film *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (France/Germany/Ireland/ Italy/Spain/UK, 2006) won the festival's First Prize.

The predominance of films fully or partly produced in Spain is justified by the fact that the festival is a Spanish initiative and that Spanish is the second language in the camps (Arabic or Spanish subtitles are provided for all films, and the intention of the organisers is to provide some English subtitling in the future).⁵ Logically, also, many of the films screened have a Saharawi theme and, understandably, too, given the Saharawi's close connection with Cuba (thousands of refugees have benefitted from free university education in Cuba since the 1970s), Cuban or Cuban-themed films feature largely in the programme. Indeed, the 2009 Popular Jury Prize went to *Che: Part II* (Steven Soderbergh, France/Spain/U.S., 2008). Algeria is also a country very close to the Saharawi's heart, not only for having opened its borders and offered land to the Saharawi refugees in the 1970s but also for having supported the SADR's government in exile based in the camps and for having provided free education and work opportunities to many Saharawi over the years. FISahara 2009 acknowledged the indebtedness of the Saharawi people to Algeria by selecting it to inaugurate the new 'Guest Country' section of the festival: the standing ovation the Saharawi public attending the 2009 closing ceremony gave the Algerian representatives left no doubt about the extent to which the Saharawi are grateful for the hospitality afforded to them by this country.

There has been no scientific research into audience response to the films screened in FISahara, but anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that films reflecting the Saharawi experience are particularly popular. In his article on the 2009 edition of FISahara, Isaacson noted that '[s]creenings of foreign and Saharawi-made short films depicting refugee life evoked scenes from *Cinema Paradiso* [Giuseppe Tornatore, France/Italy, 1988] with enraptured audiences clapping to recognizable soundtracks and marvelling at the larger-

than-life portrayal of a familiar drama' (2009: AR9). Similarly, films with storylines that connect with the Saharawi lifestyle also have a big following. In an interview with a FIsahara 2008 Saharawi viewer, Beatrice Newbery was told: '[t]he Mongolian film was about some nomads, and we all loved it. There was a feeling in the audience of recognition, as we are traditionally a nomadic community. The film reinforced our common humanity' (2008: 15).

Over three decades of living a sedentary life in the camps have disrupted many of the rich traditions of this nomadic people descended from Bedouin Arabs who arrived in the Western Sahara in the thirteenth century and integrated with the Sanhaja population (Simanowitz 2009a: 299). The Saharawi are conscious of the progressive erosion of traditional life, as well as of the inexorable penetration of alien practices as a result of exile, emigration and the pressure of thousands of youths returning from their periods of study abroad. There is great interest among those living in the refugee camps in using audio-visual equipment to document their changing lives and traditions, as well as to give expression to their political demands.

Giving the Saharawi access to filmmaking equipment and training is integral to the festival's objectives, as this is considered an important means of empowerment. According to Omar Ahmed, a member of the festival's organisation, '[t]he Saharawi need to express their ideas from their point of view, not just from that of the Europeans that come to see us' (quoted in Isaacson 2009: AR9). As if taking cue from Benedict Anderson (1983), the Saharawi seem intent on constructing an imagined space based on a shared vision, memory or myth about their homeland. In tune with the contemporary ethos that 'sees nations as narrated' (Shohat and Stam 2003: 9), they are eager to take the lead in the writing of their nation's evolving narrative. And, although the Saharawi may be disinclined to see their border existence as one of communicative and intellectual empowerment, it is perhaps nevertheless possible to argue, with García Canclini,

that their experiences of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation may grant them a unique and distinctive perspective from which to engage in 'new symbolic productions' (1995: 261 and 239).

The FISahara festival, by now part of what Corcuera and the organisers refer to as their larger 'Cinema for the Saharawi People' project, is actively responding to the Saharawi's desire for increased access to the audiovisual medium and for the development of a film culture of their own that helps them in their nation-building process. From its earliest editions, FISahara has been scheduling a series of workshops run by instructors from international film schools, universities and NGOs, where various audio-visual skills are taught to the Saharawi. But beyond the yearly one-week workshops, the festival organisers are now also seeking to create more permanent opportunities for audiovisual training. Each camp is being equipped with DVD libraries, video projectors, sound equipment, screens and DVD recorders. Video technicians have been trained to look after each library, and a new Film School is due to open in a neighbouring camp (the 'February the 27th' camp) during the 2010 FISahara.

This project, in its threefold dimension—annual festival, camp-based film libraries and permanent Film School—is still managed by Javier Corcuera and the FISahara organisation. However, the objective, as the festival establishes itself, is for the Saharawi to gain greater control over it. With the development of a new Saharawi film culture emerging from the workshops and Film School, and with a programme increasingly listing more films made by Saharawi filmmakers, the balance of ownership of the festival should shift in the forthcoming years.

Through its strategic choices, FISahara seems to be not only offering entertainment, culture and solidarity to a community of displaced people but also facilitating the encounter of what Laura Marks calls 'different cultural organizations of knowledge', which is, she argues, 'one of the sources of intercultural cinema's synthesis

of new forms of expression and new kinds of knowledge' (2000: 6-7). Through artistic and political camaraderie, FISahara creates a platform for powerful intercultural exchange between the Saharawi and the external participants. It offers the Saharawi refugees some respite from their harsh daily routine and is a beacon of hope for the future, providing them with an imaginative space beyond their bleak desert horizons. The festival also plays an important role in increasing awareness of one of the world's longest-running and most forgotten conflicts. 'We don't want to stage a festival here', insists Javier Corcuera, Festival Director. 'We'd rather hold it in a free Sahara, beside the ocean. But until that day of freedom arrives, FISahara will continue every year in the refugee camps on the *hammada* plains of the Sahara desert'.

Notes

- ¹ We would like to express our warmest thanks to Irene León for her invaluable help in compiling, summarising and translating a large amount of press material on the festival; to Federico Olivieri for sharing with us his insights on the Festival de Cine Africano de Tarifa and for giving us access to the as yet unpublished manuscript of his MA thesis on the topic (2009); and to José Aparicio Mancheño, at Festival Internacional de Cine del Sahara (FISahara), for having patiently responded to all our questions and provided us with a large amount of material on the festival. Isabel Santaolalla is also grateful to Roehampton University for the grant received from the LTE Unit and to the British Academy for the Small Research Grant awarded in connection with this project.
- ² *The Back of the World* is a documentary that unflinchingly exposes and condemns worldwide injustice through the stories of a Peruvian child labourer, a Kurdish man living in exile in Sweden and a Texas death-row inmate. Corcuera's other films have continued

his politically-committed documentary filmmaking practice, as illustrated in, for example, *La guerrilla de la memoria* (*The Guerrilla of Memory*, Spain, 2002) and *Invierno en Bagdad* (*Winter in Baghdad*, Spain, 2005).

- ³ Although it defines itself as non-competitive, FISahara does award a prize to the film that has been most popular with audiences. The award is a (real) white camel — a symbol of the appreciation of the Saharawi people — that award winners graciously return to its Saharawi owners after the closing ceremony. In addition, films may be awarded the ‘Desert Rose’ honorary mention (for further information see www.festivalsahara.com).
- ⁴ The purpose of the platform is to facilitate the exchange of information and the development of collaborative efforts that further the objectives shared by all festivals of the South (14 so far), which are, essentially, to disseminate and promote the wealth and variety of films made in the countries of the so-called geopolitical South (for further information see www.southernfilmfestivals.com).
- ⁵ Despite this Spanish bias, participants from other nations are well catered for. Information and programmes are provided in English and a team of multilingual translators are at hand at all times during the festival.

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