

This report summarises the discussions which took place at the 2012 UCL Urban Migration Film Festival and Symposium. A gathering of participants from a range of backgrounds in academic and practice-related fields of migration and film studies as well as many students and the general public took part in the event on 15th February 2012. The festival was held in three sessions with a lunchtime screening of two complete films (see Appendix 1). Each session was followed by a panel of experts from anthropology, film studies, art history, migration studies and more (see Appendix 2). Migration film research was undertaken in preparation for the event by Laura Vaughan, Searle Kochberg, Rastko Novakovic and Sonia Arbaci for the UCL Environment Institute, who funded the event¹. The following report is a distillation of the day's discussions by the research team. It should not be read as necessarily replicating the views of the panellists.

Introduction

If you were to pick up any daily newspaper or indeed any academic paper on the subject of migration, you would be forgiven if you were to get the impression that migration is all about statistics, or perhaps policy – a subject to be dealt with by planners, politicians or administrators. And it is true to say that ultimately it is the decision makers of all sorts who shape the subject of migrants and the environment within which they live and work. And yet to really get to grips with this subject we need to disrupt the standard tracks of thinking and this is what this event is about.

We selected some of the most visually interesting, but also intellectually inspiring films to open up new questions about how migration and migrants shape and are shaped by their environment. The festival ostensibly focuses on representations of migrants: on images and narrative, on agency and on audience address. Equally its aim is that by using a different format than the maps, numbers and texts we academics are used to seeing in our everyday work, that we can open our minds - and eyes - to other aspects of this complex reality.

The traditional conception of migration is a linear process. The migrant (typically a single young man) gets up and moves elsewhere. Many times this is for economic reasons, sometimes bound up in escaping oppression in other cases part of a family strategy to spread out economic risk. A classic film of that ilk was shown during the lunchtime session - *Refuge England* (Robert Vas, 1959). The choice of films aimed to question this model and to propose that migration has many different stories and trajectories and drivers. In some cases migration is a story that ends with return home or movement onwards or the migrant never settles fully in their new place. In other instances the act of settlement leads to the shaping of the host country into a new form. Other trajectories might be those of people who remain in transit throughout their migratory experience either because their status is temporary and lacking in any kind of fixity in space or as part of a multi-step migratory strategy or indeed as part of a wider transnational community – as seen in *Lift* (Marc Isaacs, 2001). The migrant engages with their new environment in such a way that they shape it anew. Migration is an echo chamber of negotiations: through that come all sorts of revisions of how the migrant conceptualises themselves in place. Human interaction is a spatial as well as a temporal phenomenon – whether one means temporal as in shifting through the day and the week or whether one is building on family memories of journeys. It is about continuity and rupture.

¹ The event was organised under the [Migration and Settlement](#) research theme of the UCL Environment Institute, which is Co-Directed by Laura Vaughan. It was organised by Marianne Knight, Deputy Director of the Institute.

As soon as an individual shifts their location and starts to interact with it they start to build up new networks of movement, engagement and activity. All of these have a spatial as well as social aspect to them and it is vital to bear in mind how difficult it is to categorise any of the physical and human states that we see in any particular point in the migration trajectory. In her novel *City of the Mind*, Penelope Lively provides the perfect description of such a mental state: ... *you are stuck... with an invisible point of reference, known only to you, making you different... Sometimes when I walk about [London] I feel that one should see thousands of mirages – Caribbean islands and Indian villages and shimmering intense snatches of Turkey or Greece or Poland or wherever. The place is not just itself – it is a reflection of the rest of the globe.*²

John Akomfrah has said in an interview³ that one of the most memorable aspects for the Windrush generation was the lack of colour and the cold as well as the feeling out of place. He also emphasises though that migration was a *huge adventure*. Whilst migration is mostly presented as facts and figures it is important to remember that thousands of people go through a psychic experience which has a transformative effect on them when they migrate.

Part 1: Journeys

Several themes came out from films clips shown in this session: differing depictions of space and time, movement and stasis reflect the different ways of representing migration. The storytelling format shifts between where the protagonist is shown in a new environment and the change is brought about by intervention. The predominant relationships are those of migrant and filmmaker and that of the migrant and host community. These varying depictions raised further questions on whether migrant/filmmaker and migrant/host community interactions themselves bring about different experiential outcomes.

The visual language used by the film-makers was one of the main topics of discussion. The way in which visual language was deployed to confirm hierarchies of power was one also a key point of discussion. The degree of interaction between film-maker and participant and the impact this has on the way in which migration is portrayed was another. One panellist commented that: *In Sudeuropa [Raphaël Cuomo and Maria Iorio, 2005-07] there is an overlap between the filmmaker and the migrant... no migrants are actually shown, so it is unclear... [whether] the narrative is the filmmaker's point of view or the migrants.*

Audience questions focused on the role of migrant as anthropologist and the consensus was that although there is a role for film to advocate for migrants and to influence policy, *by placing the immigrant in that role, you reproduce the notion that [they are] simply an informant for the benefit of the host society.* The problem is also that migration does not necessarily follow a dramatic arc: migration is on the whole prosaic, everyday and for long periods: static.

From the point of view of migrant space, it was striking to see the diversity of journeys portrayed and the way in which depictions of borders reflected differences between the political positions of the migrant in each geographical context.

Part 2: Transition

The films clips shown in this session raised issues of use of language and music in the film-making process; there was more human interaction and intervention by the filmmakers. Questions were also raised regarding the use of iconography: are icons readable cross-culturally? There is also the cinematic use of a combination of stillness and movement to reflect journeys. From the point of view of migrant space, it was striking to see in films such

² Lively, Penelope (1991) *City of the Mind*. London: Andrew Deutsch Limited. P. 176.

³ BBC Radio 4 (2012) *Midweek* with Libby Purves. Broadcast on 11/1/2012.

as *Odessa . . . Odessa!* (Michale Boganim, 2005) how the migrant community of Brighton Beach is portrayed as a community almost ring-fenced from within and without. This raises questions regarding how new means of cheap telecommunications influence relationships between migrants and their country of origin. Whereas in *News from Home* (Chantal Akerman, 1976), the read out letters form an essential auditory trope in portraying the disjuncture and distance between the protagonist and her mother back home, later films show how cheap telephone calls make communication more rapid and more immediate. Distance from home arguably fosters one mode of relationships with what has been left behind, whilst immediate communications create a disjuncture between physical distance and visual propinquity. Loss was another recurrent theme in this session. Whilst on the one hand there is a loss of national identity and personal relationships, migration can also be liberating in allowing the migrant to define new identities or to create a type of multiple identity. Indeed for the filmmaker herself, a multiple identity allows for an outsider's view to be shown and potentially for a critical perspective on the new environment - using ideas from the place of origin. The migrant can change their values away from the judgement of their home community: *you can become what you want to become – you're free to say what you want as you are an outsider*. However, transition can also lead to displacement and the stripping down of the individual's identity: you are no longer a complex being, but simply viewed as the 'Afghani' or the 'Romanian'.

Part 3: Negotiation

The final session highlighted the hybridity of the migrant experience. *It is the negotiation with the settlement, the experience and how you actually negotiate your way through the various elements that emerge and confront the migrant unexpectedly*. Various themes of language, accent of home and food emerged. The way in which the past and the present are negotiated was also commonly featured. Films repeatedly featured a portrayal of private vs. public space, demonstrating that the retention of culture of the past was most likely to take place in the home. The creation of a home-from-home to keep a *fragment of memory* of the past was another common theme as was a myth of return, despite the fact that inevitably the place of origin changes in the meantime. This can create a disruptive experience for the returning migrant who sees their place of origin through the lens of their new life: *it is like being a tourist in your own country*. Yet for many migrants a memory of home is retained throughout their lives (and to an extent after death if choosing it as a site of burial). The invisibility of many migrants in the modern city was apparent, particularly in *Trapped in Transition*, (Alexandra Urdea, et al, 2009), which highlighted how there are - in as sense – many different experiences of London, many of which hardly correspond in time and space.

Audience discussions focused on migrant (and ethnic minority) identity in particular: asking whether multiculturalism is still relevant. It was clear that this is as much an issue for the indigenous people as for the migrant. Multiculturalism is term used for different ethnic and religious minorities living side by side and actually maintaining some sort of cultural identity. Where problems can emerge is when cultural difference is maintained at the expense of interaction with the rest of the community. Where it works is when multiple identities can be maintained; migrant identity within the home, cultural space and host culture identity in the public sphere.

Appendix 1

Full list of films and film clips screened

Journeys

[Chronicle of a Summer \(Jean Rouch, 1961\)](#)

[Crossroads at the Edge of Worlds \(Charles Heller, 2006\)](#)

[Encounters at the End of the World \(Werner Herzog, 2007\)](#)

[Sudeuropa \(Raphaël Cuomo and Maria Iorio, 2005-07\)](#)

[The Invisibles. A Hidden Journey across Mexico. \(Marc Silver & Gael García Bernal, 2010\)](#) [The Other Side \(work in progress, Eva Palacios, 2012\)](#)

Transition

[Statue of Liberty \(Ken Burns, 1985\)](#)

[Odessa . . . Odessa! \(Michale Boganim, 2005\)](#)

[News from Home \(Chantal Akerman, 1976\)](#)

[Kenedi Goes Back Home \(Zelimir Zilnik, 2003\)](#)

[Calais: the Last Border \(Marc Isaacs, 2003\)](#)

[Carmen Miranda: Bananas is My Business \(Helena Solberg, 1994\)](#)

Lunch Break

[Lift \(Marc Isaacs, 2001\)](#)

[Refuge England \(Robert Vas, 1959\).](#)

Negotiation

[West Indians \(Jack Gold, 1963\)](#)

[Handsworth Songs \(John Akomfrah, 1986\)](#)

[Trapped in Transition. \(Alexandra Urdea, Amy Greenbank, Lucrezia Barnes-Dacey, Roz Corbett, 2009\)](#)

[Little Georgia \(Manal Wicki, Laura Haapio-Kirk and Daria Prokhorova, 2010\)](#)

[L'Esprit de l'Escalier \(Searle Kochberg, 2010\)](#)

[Lisboetas \(Sérgio Tréfaut, 2004\)](#)

[Breaking the Plain \(Christy Johnson, 2009\)](#)

[Fragments from the past \(Julie Scott, 2008\)](#)

Photo-text screening

[The City That Exploded Slowly \(Leslie Hakim Dowek\)](#)

Appendix 2

List of panel participants

Sonia Arbaci, Lecturer in Spatial Planning at the [UCL Bartlett School of Planning](#)

Victor Buchli, Reader in Material Culture, [UCL Anthropology](#)

Tamar Garb, Durning-Lawrence Professor, [UCL History of Art](#)

Yohai Hakak, Senior Lecturer, School of Health Sciences and Social Work, [University of Portsmouth](#)

Leslie Hakim-Dowek, [Photographer](#) and Senior Lecturer in Photography, [School of Art, Design and Media, University of Portsmouth](#)

Marc Isaacs, Film maker <http://marcisaacsfilms.com/>

Christy Johnson, <http://www.christyjohnson.co.uk/>, [Associate Dean, University for the Creative Arts](#)

Anne Kershen, [Senior Research Fellow in the History of Migration](#), QMUL and Founder of the [Centre for the Study of Migration](#)

Searle Kochberg, Principal Lecturer in Creative Technologies, [University of Portsmouth](#)

Rastko Novakovic, <http://www.rastko.org.uk/>, [moving image artist and film curator](#)

Eva Palacios, Senior Lecturer in Creative Technologies, [University of Portsmouth](#)

Laura Vaughan, [Professor of Urban Form and Society](#) at the [UCL Bartlett School of Graduate Studies](#) and Co-Director on Migration and Settlement at the [UCL Environment Institute](#)