

Walls - The New Symbols of Culture Wars in Documentary Discourse

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Abstract

Reece Jones published an article titled Borders and Walls: Do Barriers Deter Unauthorized Migration?¹ in 2016 in which he argues that border walls have never been effective tools to prevent migration and can only serve as “symbols that demonstrate that politicians are doing something to address the perceived threats brought by unauthorized movement”. Walls as symbols became the centre point of political discourse in the western world particularly in Europe and the USA. They have become the symbols of shame and oppression in one interpretation and simultaneously the icons of patriotism and the manifestation of the right for self-defence in another context. The objective of this paper is to find answers to the question of how the symbol of walls in documentary films is used to build politically motivated messages and create the realm of subjective reality so characteristic of the postmodern era.

Keywords: walls, immigration, documentary film, political propaganda

Politicising the Walls

Border walls have become prominent symbols of ideological division offering a wide range of arguments for and against separation. Though the topics of border protection and national sovereignty have always been present in political discourse, recent developments in international migration placed them in focus. Representatives of the political Left, for example the European United Left and Nordic Green West European Parliamentary Group (2005), see border walls and fences as the physical manifestations of oppression and isolation and have adopted a vocabulary that portrays these structures as objects of shame in their publication *Lampedusa and Melilla: Southern Frontier of Fortress Europe*. The political Right, for instance Cohen (2019), on the other hand, voices an opposing standpoint and argues for the maintenance, expansion, and enforcement of border control facilities highlighting the security functions of the walls and the importance of border control in protecting national interests. A similar bipolarity is observable in the interpretation of the symbolic meaning of border control facilities when the standpoints of the citizens of the target countries and the views of the immigrants wishing to enter these target countries are contrasted.

The objective of this paper is not to take a political position about the question but to analyse the symbolic meanings of border-control facilities in the documentary film *Walls of Shame-Fortress Europe: The Spanish-Moroccan Border* (2007), which was the second episode of a four-part documentary series featuring old and new border walls in different places of the world. The film was produced by Al Jazeera, the Qatari state-funded broadcaster, and was first broadcast in 2007. This production offers an insight into the situation on the borders of Ceuta – the Spanish enclave on the African continent – using classical documentary and non-fiction elements. I will argue that by using classical documentary tools: authoritative voice-over, expert

opinions and authentic footage from the archives of different news agencies, it is possible to create a documentary film that will operate at the level of subjective reality and has the characteristics of a propaganda video. As Sklar (2016) points out, subjective reality and relative truth in documentary film production have been analysed at least since the 1930s and have become an integral part of the postmodern world view, philosophy and aesthetics.

The Phenomenon of Walls in Literature

Literature on the topic of borders and border control reflects the diversity of opinions about walls either as symbols of *global apartheid* in the work of Loyd, Mitchelson, and Andrew (2012) or depicting border protection facilities as parts of the project to build *fortress Europe* as Peter and Snyder (2000) argue. These views however all seem to revolve around one central problem, i.e. the walls are portrayed as the ultimate obstacles in the way of global unity; as Robertson defines it “[...] the crystallization of the entire world as a single place” (March 1987: 10). Many authors, for example Croucher (2004), support the idea that globalization has achieved a level at which besides the free movement of capital, products, and services, it is time to introduce the free movement of people too. The globalisation argument seems justifiable; however, it raises questions and requires a deeper analysis as free movement of people has considerably greater political, security, and cultural implications than free movement of capital, products, and services.

Societies and cultures are dynamic systems and as such have always been in perpetual transformation throughout the history of mankind. It is therefore natural and predictable that these changes provoke counter reactions and lead to justifiable protective measures when an influx of masses with considerably different culture, traditions, and value systems appear in a relatively stabilised society in greater numbers. Consequently, the right to protect the established value system in any society also appears as a natural demand. As Mittleman (1997: 10) points out

The manifestations of globalization [...] include the spatial reorganization of production, the interpretation of industries across borders, the spread of financial markets, the diffusion of identical consumer goods to distant countries, massive transfer of population within South as well as from the South and East to the West, resultant conflicts between immigrant and established communities in formerly tightknit neighbourhoods, and emerging world-wide preference for democracy.

Naturally, argumentation for or against the necessity of border control – notably the erection of walls – often depends on the actual preferences of the individuals in any society. As Heath (2019) shows, the citizens of the target countries mostly support extensive border control, however, ideological disputes are always perceivable. By growing migration pressures, a greater polarization of societies is possible.

It is also important to underline that anti-immigrant and strong border control sentiments are not universal and there are strong power centres – pro-migration academic circles, NGOs and political parties – which openly support immigration and actively work on the integration of as many migrants in the different EU member states as possible. These groups have developed

strong arguments to support and justify their motivation and activities. The majority of the arguments used by the pro-immigration activist groups portray border control measures as shameful, unnecessary, and harmful steps of the nation states; interpret them as the manifestations of the revival of colonial attitudes and a re-emphasis of a racist culture which roots in the exploitative nature of neoliberal capitalism. As Loyd and Mitchelson (2015: 5) indicate in the Introduction of their volume “Walls and cages share common economic and political histories at the global scale” which has roots in oppression, exploitation and subordination of less developed territories of the world. These groups argue that migration belongs among the universally recognized human rights and the right of the individual to move across and into the territories of sovereign nation states is stronger than the right of the nation state to protect its own territory by legal regulations and by physical barriers.

Documentary Film and Subjective Truth

Documentary films, by their nature, must or at least should portray their subject objectively. Being a non-fiction genre, a child of realism, facts play a crucial role when documenting any event. As it is declared on the webpage of the American Society of Aesthetics by Walley (2011),

It might therefore seem that documentary could only be legible against the backdrop of the fictional narrative cinema, as an “alternative” defined less by its own inherent qualities than by its presumed differences from fictional cinema (differences that become value-laden: truth vs. illusion, social engagement vs. escapism, honesty vs. manipulation, etc.)

The postmodern interpretation of truth and reality has however considerably transformed our view about the world that surrounds us and has questioned the validity of any explanation which dared to usurp the right of being superior to alternative suppositions. Extensive application of technical innovations in documentary films, such as virtual reality, computer animations, and computer aided modelling – just to mention a few of the most influential ones – have multiplied doubts about the possibility to comprehensively depict reality. Digital technologies in parallel with the rapid spread of telecommunication gadgets have allowed the individual to create personal niches with personalized laws and rules of the game. This personalization of reality is acceptable in fiction films when, for instance, the trainman in the film of the Wachowski brothers *Matrix Revolutions* (2003) says, “Down here, I’m God!” but raises questions in documentary films. Thus, if reality – because of its relativistic character – cannot be fully depicted, it seems better to offer the viewer a personalized version of *truth*.

Documentary has also become a tool for influencing, and the turn of the twenty-first century has witnessed the return of propagandistic features mainly in politically biased documentary films. The popularity of the genre has contributed to the rapid spread of propaganda-like productions in this age of disinformation and fake news. Political and economic power centres have invested considerable energy and financial means to develop their own news agencies – such as Russia Today, Al Jazeera, CCTV, etc. – which have successfully contested the quasi monopoly of the Western-dominated world of news broadcast and documentary markets. Thus, audiences have witnessed the proliferation of alternative interpretations of reality and today, agencies compete not only in the speed of providing up-to-date information about the

key events in breaking news, but also in *designing truth* according to the expectations of the market they work for. The very same event, situation or process can be portrayed considerably differently in the news products, and the spectator receives news and documentaries as processed produce which already contains all the ingredients that the consumer prefers. The object of the following analysis from the Al Jazeera's *Walls of Shame* (2007) series is an excellent example of these processes and by implementing genuine documentary tools, is able to re-create the type of reality which best serves the needs of its target market. The following analysis is an effort to highlight the aesthetic and semiotic tools used by the producers of the film to achieve their goals.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Documentary Film

Walls of Shame – Fortress Europe: The Spanish Moroccan Border (2007) is the second from a four-part series of documentaries from the production of Al Jazeera which deals with the characteristics and effects of border control facilities in different parts of the world. The subject of this documentary film is the border wall and other border control facilities around Ceuta – the Spanish enclave which lies on the north-eastern peak of Morocco. The filmmakers' main purpose was to introduce the effects of strict border control and administrative restrictions to minimize illegal entry into the enclave which is politically a Spanish – thus also a European – territory. The filmmakers purpose is not only to present an objective analysis of the situation, but also to portray the border control zone as a terrible and inhuman complex that is in many aspects not only similar to, but in its nature identical with the border control fences used by the Nazi or Stalinist totalitarian regimes. The choice of the title of the documentary *Fortress Europe* is a direct reference to the Nazi *Festung Europa*, which was a widely used term during World War II by both the German and the Allied propaganda machinery and is well known in western culture with all its negative connotations.

It is evident from the choice of the title that the filmmakers' primary intention was to argue against border control using emotionally biased terms. The authoritative voice-over during the first scene underlines this intention when states that “This is the southernmost outpost of fortress Europe” while a section of the historical *las Murallas Reales* – the Royal City Walls of medieval Ceuta – is shown. From the medieval city walls, the camera slowly moves to the modern border control facilities while the commentator continues in the presentation of Ceuta as “one of the last *vestiges* of Spanish rule in Northern Morocco” deliberately evoking anti-colonialist sentiments. Although the listener is informed in the second part of the introductory sentence that “it has been European for more than five-hundred years”, the fact that “Madrid insists it will *never* relinquish control” over the territory openly suggests that this land belongs to Morocco and for moral reasons should be given up by Spain. The filmmakers try to persuade the audience that the Spanish presence in the territory is an *anomaly* and thus everything that is connected with this anomaly is inherently immoral and unacceptable. Due to this biased interpretation, the audience is immediately confronted with the problem which was described by Sklar (2016: 727) as “Indeed the basic ambiguity in documentary lies in distinguishing the false from the true” and this seems to be in connection with the post-postmodern schizophrenia that if truth is relative, fact-based analysis cannot create usable outcomes. What Sklar (2016: 727)

describes as “[...] the two methods of documentary – the direct and the vicarious, the unmediated experience and the interpretative commentary – and often in simultaneous juxtaposition” is precisely reflected in the first scene. This bipolarity characterizes the whole film when it repeatedly depicts dualities that always represent a quasi-antagonistic system of the conquerors and conquered, the rich and the poor, the wealthy Christian Spaniards and the poor Muslims compatriots, the colonizers and the colonized, etc. As Buráková states, however, “[...] the end of postmodernism and its victimary discourse of history has shown that the binary understanding of the roles of victim and perpetrator is not sufficient for a full understanding of the atrocities of the twentieth century or the violence of the twenty-first century or even history as such” (2019: 97).

The film can be rather categorized as a propaganda product and not a real documentary for a series of reasons; one example of this is the evidently pro-Muslim anti-European attitude. An example of this biased representation is the highlighting – and in certain aspects – exaggerating the role of the medieval cartographer Al Idrisi, who was borne in the town of Ceuta in 1099. The narrator states that “Al Idrisi’s maps made possible the great voyages and discoveries, which subsequently led to colonization and as in the case of Ceuta the presence of Europe in Africa”. Highlighting Al Idrisi’s work as if it had been the only available source of geographical information for the colonizers is at least ambiguous and raises further questions about the genre of the analyzed work. Al Idrisi’s person is evidently not highlighted because of his work as cartographer but because his person highlights the pre-colonial status of the town.

In the following scene, the border fence and the *holding center* are depicted as symbols of a police state where immigrants are kept for months in a place which “is not a prison” but resembles one because “there are constraints”. On the other hand, thousands of *legal* visitors of Ceuta are allowed to enter the town on a daily basis to buy goods and then take these products to Morocco for resale. The visual presentation of the poor retailers who carry their bags of purchased goods in their hands walking from and to the town through a hole in a brick wall enforces the exploiter-exploited duality. The narrator’s comment that “Spanish authorities turn a blind eye – knowing how profitable this trade is to the city” underlines the propagandistic character of the depicted situation. If there had been a need for a non-biased portrayal of the situation, the filmmakers might have highlighted that such trade was profitable for the Moroccan retailers too.

A further – and maybe the most important – division line in Ceuta is described in the next scene when a representative of the Union of Ceuta’s Muslims, Muhammad Ali, is speaking about religious conflicts which spring from the Spanish intentions to create a European city out of Ceuta and their wish to Christianize it. If data are analyzed, it becomes evident that the majority of the population of Ceuta is Spanish Catholic: out of the total population of 85,000² approximately 36,000³ were Muslims in 2018 which is roughly 40% of the total population of the town and this ratio has been long lasting. Preserving a cultural heritage and maintaining a status-quo can hardly mean assimilation or forced conversion primarily because the town itself has been under Spanish administration for five-hundred years now. A relatively numerous and thriving community of Muslims on the contrary is rather the proof that this town has been able to provide freedom and prosperity for all of its citizens. This view is emphasized by Juan Luis Arostegui, the representative of the People’s Socialist Party of Ceuta, who emphasizes that the

Spanish population's main concern is not the Muslims in the city but the Moroccan intentions to annex Ceuta, which has long been a multicultural town. The Spanish majority thus would like to maintain Ceuta's cosmopolitan status while there is an open wish in the Muslim community to invite Morocco to occupy the town and forcibly join the place to the *African motherland*.

This division is portrayed by the narrator as the "invisible wall", which is in the minds of the people and is built along religious lines. Muhammad Ali underlines that the Christian population does not want to share the city with the Muslims but rather stay in isolation. As a proof, the film shows footage about the allegedly impoverished quarter El Principe Alfonso, taken by a head camera of a biker. The scene shows a narrow medieval street – an alley – which is clean and runs in between houses which are in good condition – at least in much better condition than for example the Moroccan village homes of Hensala shown later in the documentary. Thus, the voiceover that emphasizes neglect and marginalization and their consequence: poverty of Muslims and the footage showing a clean and well-kept street are in conflict and the visuals do not underpin the argumentation of the narrator. The clothes of the people walking in the streets in this neglected quarter are nice and tidy and they generally look more like middle-class citizens than oppressed servants.

In the second part of the interview, Mr Muhammad Ali argues that Muslims are offered only short-term work contracts whereas Christians have the possibility to find permanent job positions, which allow them "to stay and have roots in Ceuta". This suggests that Christians from Europe also come in big numbers to the Spanish enclave and search for jobs which is not the situation. This comment re-creates the image that a Christian conquest is going on in a settlement, which *should* belong to Muslims.

Cultural marginalization of Muslim inhabitants of Ceuta is also strongly perceivable according to Mr Ali because "only Christian holidays are celebrated" there. The following scene, depicting a Catholic first communion celebration is intended to support his words. The Catholic priest, however, takes a different standpoint emphasizing that *all faiths* and cultures – including the Jewish community – can freely celebrate their spiritual traditions and openly, without any restrictions, declare their religious belonging. It is worth noting that the English subtitles accidentally or deliberately skip the information about the presence of the Jewish tradition in the town. This type of documenting already raises ethical questions and pushes the film even closer to the category of propaganda rather than a real documentary.

The discussion of the problem of the immigration and its solution illustrates the ideological bias of the documentary when, in the following scene, the Catholic priest speaks about providing "political and economic help of the countries of origin" of immigrants in order to help people find job in their home countries. This standpoint is paralleled with the demand of the former African colonies – voiced by Mr Ali – that the "advanced colonial countries of Europe have to return back some of the wealth they appropriated from the colonised African countries. Europe should also put in place programs for employment and progress". Though these views seem to be pointing in the same direction the argumentation that the establishment and maintenance of these economic programs is the sole *responsibility* of the European countries is at least questionable.

The following scene shows original footage of the journey of members of a volunteer group – the Solidaridad Directa – from Cadiz, Spain to Hemsala, Morocco whose goal is to

implement the ideas of *giving back* to Africa by building a small clinic and a school in the village. Unfortunately, the filmmakers fail to underline the complete message of Rafael Quiros, the leader of the volunteers when he says that:

The frontiers are something artificial. And it, at the end, is not going to stop the people. It is not going to stop illegal immigration. It *can* control illegal immigration, but it is not going to stop it. In order to change illegal immigration, we have to change our mentality. But the mentality has to change in Africa, too. Because they, in Africa, have to understand that they have to work protecting their own interests, developing their own economies.

The second part of Quiros' message remains unheard by the narrator who is re-emphasizing only the part of the interview, which underlines that "walls don't work". Mr Quiros' final message that "the main fence is placed in our hearts" however is greatly emphasized. The film's closing scene is a series of photos about a corpse lying on the seashore covered by space blankets, exhausted immigrants praying and crawling on the sandy beaches, dead bodies of immigrants who got drowned in the sea and other pictures that depict further horrors of illegal immigration. Original CCTV camera footage is shown about immigrants trying to break through the wire fences in masses, or swimming around the sea border facilities to get to Ceuta. The commentator underlines that the Spanish border guards shoot rubber bullets and smoke canisters towards the *survivors* as they swim across the border and they are immediately deported back to Morocco. One of the final scenes of the film depicts similar pictures of illegal immigrants crossing the Hungarian border control facilities, and the commentator speaks about the intensifying of immigration due to the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. As a final political standpoint Federica Mogherini – the EU Foreign Policy Chief – speaks about the idea of Europe without borders and the necessity of finding a political solution for the question.

Concluding Thoughts

Political activism has rarely become so intense and widespread as in the last decade and the number of different interest groups working and lobbying for diverse goals have multiplied in the world. The phenomenon of intensifying migratory movements has greatly contributed to the politically heated debate about the topic and the re-emphasis of political standpoints in every media platform. Documentary film cannot be an exception and has frequently been used and abused for propagandistic goals. The film, *Walls of Shame – The Spanish Moroccan Border* (2007) is an excellent example of degrading the documentary genre to the level of political propaganda. Depicting the phenomenon of illegal immigration, the officials struggle with this phenomenon in the Spanish town Ceuta and combining it with the radical pro-immigration vocabulary adopted by the European Left-wing political parties, the film is more a political manifesto than a real documentary. Though subjective reality in the form of re-enacting, animation, or any other technically possible way is generally adopted and accepted in the documentary genre, purposeful manipulation of facts, misinterpreting symbols and telling only the *suitable* elements of the story that can underpin the ideological framework on which the film is built is more than is needed to enrich the artistic value of this movie.

Notes:

- 1 Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/borders-and-walls-do-barriers-deter-unauthorized-migration>
- 2 Available at <https://www.citypopulation.de/php/spain-ceuta.php?cityid=51001>
- 3 Available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/989770/muslims-in-ceuta-by-nationality/>

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