



Anthropology of Communication in Cultural Events the Oran Arab Film Festival as a Model

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Abstract. *This article explores the phenomenon of communicational anthropology within the context of cultural events, using the Oran International Arab Film Festival in Algeria as a case study. This festival offers fertile ground for the study of cross-border cultural interactions through cinema. The study aims to observe the manifestations of cultural communication between different actors, employing a descriptive methodology based on fieldwork conducted during several editions of the festival. The research focuses on analyzing the "interactive manifestations" that emerge within the natural context of the event, whether through the aesthetic relationship between the audience and the film, or through direct interaction between artists and the public. It also highlights the process of "cultural projection," where films and participating delegations become a means of representing local Arab identities and rediscovering the "other" in a shared space. The study concludes that the festival transcends its simple function as a cinematic gathering to become a true anthropological laboratory that reshapes the symbolic and social links between Arab peoples through art*

Keywords: *anthropology, communication, Oran Festival, acculturation, cultural events*

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Mədəni tədbirlərdə kommunikasiya antropologiyası: Oran Ərəb Film Festivalı nümunə kimi

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Xülasə. *Bu məqalədə Əlcəzairdə keçirilən Oran Beynəlxalq Ərəb Film Festivalından nümunə kimi istifadə edərək mədəni tədbirlər kontekstində ünsiyyət antropologiyası fenomeni araşdırılır. Bu festival kino vasitəsilə sərhədlərarası mədəni qarşılıqlı əlaqələrin öyrənilməsi üçün münbit zəmin yaradır. Tədqiqat, festivalın bir neçə buraxılışı zamanı aparılan sahə işlərinə əsaslanan təsviri metodologiyadan istifadə edərək, müxtəlif aktyorlar arasında mədəni ünsiyyətin təzahürlərini müşahidə etməyi hədəfləyir. Tədqiqat, tədbirin təbii kontekstində, istər tamaşaçı ilə film arasındakı estetik münasibət, istərsə də sənətçilər ilə ictimaiyyət arasında birbaşa qarşılıqlı əlaqə vasitəsilə ortaya çıxan "interaktiv təzahürlərin" təhlilinə yönəlmişdir.*

Həmçinin, filmlərin və iştirakçı nümayəndə heyətlərinin yerli ərəb kimliklərini təmsil etmək və ortaq bir məkanda "digərini" yenidən kəşf etmək vasitəsinə çevrildiyi "mədəni proyeksiya" prosesini vurğulayır. Tədqiqat, festivalın kinematoqrafik bir toplantı kimi sadə funksiyasını aşaraq, ərəb xalqları arasında simvolik və sosial əlaqələri incəsənət vasitəsilə yenidən formalaşdıran əsl antropoloji laboratoriyaya çevrildiyi qənaətinə gəlir.

Açar sözlər: antropologiya, ünsiyyət, Oran Festivalı, mədəniyyətləşmə, mədəni tədbirlər

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Introduction

Communication is a social phenomenon manifested through the interaction of its elements: the sender, the receiver, the message, and the communication channel. Since anthropology is the science that studies races, these two sciences merged to give rise to the anthropology of communication. Numerous studies, such as Goffman's work, have contributed to laying the foundations of this new discipline. It can therefore be said that the anthropology of communication is a form of social research that follows a specific cultural and social model. In this article, we seek to explore the mechanisms of the anthropology of communication through cultural events, studying the interactions that take place there through film festivals. We have taken the Oran Film Festival as a model for our study.

1. What are festivals and how do they work?

Film festivals:

There is no precise definition of a film festival, but we can offer a general interpretation of a set of interpretations.

A film festival is defined as an event sponsored by a local or national government, service organizations, writers' and film associations, or private sponsors. It offers filmmakers, distributors, critics, producers, and anyone interested in the seventh art the opportunity to present their productions. This event provides an opportunity to discuss the latest advances in the art of cinema.

There are also observers who present the definition from a spatio-temporal perspective, meaning that a festival is a cultural event with a known location and duration, where films are screened in one or more movie theaters. Screenings vary from one festival to another, with some offering outdoor screenings rather than in movie theaters. Film festivals vary in their themes and objectives. In Algeria, a festival, according to the law, is any cultural event related to the arts and literature, organized periodically in the form of successive screenings in a specific location.

How festivals operate:

Film festivals are divided into two categories: for-profit and non-profit. Profitability depends on the objectives of each organizing institution. However, most festivals around the world adopt a non-profit model, with funding coming primarily from corporate sponsorship, which allows festival administration to promote publicity and ticket sales. Some festivals also receive public funding. Others charge an entrance fee, intended for new filmmakers to ensure their works are considered. This type of fee is applied at some international festivals, such as the Cannes Film Festival and the Toronto Film Festival. Others, such as the Rotterdam Film Festival and the Mumbai Film Festival,

do not charge an entrance fee. The principle of a festival is a competition that examines the participating films in order to judge them. Other festivals are dedicated solely to screenings, without competition.

Festival Team:

The success or failure of a festival depends on the team that oversees it. The number of members varies depending on the nature of each festival. Despite the differences in names, the roles are similar, as follows:

- Team Roles:

According to festival guidelines, even in cases of insufficient budget and reliance on volunteers, it is important to distribute responsibilities among individuals to allow them to fulfill roles essential to the festival's success, including:

President: This person is often the face of the festival and its official spokesperson. Their duties also include fundraising for the festival and representing it at other events.

Programmer: This person or group of people views all the films to select the festival's programming. This person is sometimes referred to as the viewing committee.

Program Coordinator: This role comes into play after the program has been approved. They communicate with all the films' rights holders to obtain original copies for screening at the festival. **Technical Coordinator:** Their role is to oversee the work from a technical perspective.

Production Department: This department collaborates with other departments and coordinates various tasks, such as booking screening rooms, issuing tickets, etc (Annaba Mediterranean Film Festival, n.d.).

Guest Coordinator: This coordinator is the intermediary between the festival and all guests, especially foreigners. They are responsible for their accommodation, transportation, and visa assistance. They also provide them with travel arrangements (flight number, hotel name, etc.) and their personal schedule (screening times, press conferences, discussions, meetings, etc.). They are also responsible for preparing a file for each guest, including their activities, a welcome message, a city map, a guidebook and the festival program, entry passes (if available), useful information about the city or country, and an accreditation badge. **Press or Public Relations Officer:** This person has an excellent media network and the communication skills necessary to promote the festival.

Venue Manager: This is a team member who must be present during the screening to intervene in case of errors. Their duties also include ensuring that the screening starts on time, that guests and supervisors are in their designated seats, and that the screening equipment is secure.

Translators: An international festival cannot take place without translators.

Discussion Moderators: The person who conducts interviews, interacts with the audience, and leads discussions. They must be knowledgeable about film.

Volunteers: These are people who may hold positions less familiar with festival affairs and are recruited shortly before or during the festival.

Festival Objectives:

The festival generally aims to:

- Introduce lesser-known cinema;
- Present the best film productions to local audiences;
- Discover promising film talent;
- Promote film culture;
- Attract audiences to theaters;
- Promote local or national cinema.(Al-Sarmini, 2024).

1. The Festival's Image: Interactions in the Press, Critics, and Audiences:

In our research into the festival's image, we revisited this trinity: the press, critics, and the audience. Through this research, we sought to engage in debate. Some present a positive image of the festival, while others present a negative one. Rarely does a third party stand between them, weighing the balance between the two.

The Audience:

By "audience," we mean the group of individuals who regularly attend the Oran Festival. Based on the question, "Is there a regular audience that frequents the cinema, specifically Arab films?" Based on this, we relied on a network of field observations by quantifying the approximate number of audience members attending the auditorium. We observed the following:

- Free access to cinemas during the festival and free viewing of competing and out-of-competition films.
- A large audience presence at the festival's opening and closing ceremonies (attendance to watch the red carpet and the winning films). As for invitees, invitations are sometimes received through intermediaries.
- During the festival, audience attendance decreases depending on the screening and the time period.
- The audience attending the films consists mainly of journalists, the jury, critics, and some film buffs.
- During some screenings, some audience members leave the hall for reasons including programming errors, delayed screenings, the showing of pornographic clips, etc (Ficinema, 2024).

These observations prompted us to investigate audience apathy during the screening period. We conducted random interviews with some individuals, whether as student Z. F. said, "# The professor forced us to attend the festival, watch the screenings, and prepare a report on the film. Arab cinema does not appeal to me, and now I have no choice but to leave the hall and write a report that I will copy from the newspapers." What we can say is that the absence of audiences from festivals or cinema is itself a problem that existed before the festival's inception. Research, academic theses, film workshops, and intellectual seminars continue to address this problem in Algeria in search of a cinema audience. Academic Hamid Bouhabib asked about what he called a paradox: "What does it mean that film festivals in Algeria have more films than films produced throughout the year?" Playwright Ahmed Razak asked, "Is it a festival for filmmakers or for poets?" referring to the invitation of a large group of Arab and Algerian poets (EZZINE, 2017).

Critics:

Algerian critic Abdelkrim Kadri believes that "Algeria is still lagging behind in organizing cultural events, and here I mean film festivals. Take, for example, the Oran Arab Film Festival, whose first editions were more sober and solid than recent ones, which are now managed using primitive, outdated methods, relying on names that have nothing to do with cinema, at least from a practical standpoint. This is not to mention the selection of the festival's organizers and the outdated mechanisms they employ. The festival has failed to attract new, modern films that generate interest and address important topics. It has also been unable to attract a single film for its premiere." In

response to a comparison between screening at the Oran Festival and the Gulf Festivals, he replied, "What would a premiere at a Gulf Festival add to my film compared to the Oran Festival?" The former would offer significant media coverage and a respectable award, and the director would meet with numerous filmmakers from around the world. The latter, however, would not. The answer would be that he would choose the Gulf Festivals. Returning to the introduction to your question, I have not wronged the Oran Festival of Arab Cinema. It has wronged filmmakers and Algeria. It is unfortunate that the Ministry allocates a large budget to the festival's management, yet these meager, disgraceful results are delivered. Organizers, who are far removed from cinema, always choose the last minute of preparation, while other festivals, as soon as one edition concludes, begin preparing for the next year's edition. The Oran Festival has relied on the same principles throughout its past editions, seeking different results. In an article, Syrian critic Salah Sarmini points out the difference between the Oran Festival and the Tunisian Keliba Festival, saying: "However, as it seemed to me, it was launched as a major, exceptional event (Algiers, Capital of Arab Culture), and it is one of its activities that took place in all Algerian cities. The festival fell to Oran for announced reasons that we did not understand or learn about on the ground during the festival's activities. With its sluggishness and the decline of local spectators, it would have been more appropriate for it to be held in Algiers." (EZZINE, 2017)

Research

The critic, who was present at the first edition of the Oran Festival, points to the controversial choice of the city of Oran at the time. In investigating the reason for this, he finds that the choice was made by the festival's first curator, Hamraoui Habib Chawki, who was accused of destroying the Caracalla Film Festival in Tebessa and transforming it into the Oran Festival, according to a statement by Mr. Jamal Eddine Hariz, director of the International Salon of Cinema and Video and supervisor of the Tebessa International Film Festival. He said that the Caracalla Festival was hindered by a series of decisions that stood as a stumbling block for the organizers, including invitations to foreign guests, which must be subject to prior approval from the competent authorities. Returning to the Oran Festival, critic Salah Al-Sarmini adds: "It's a festival of occasions, and its organization and programming were rushed, perhaps over three months (which is not enough to organize a festival). Moreover, the forms of "hospitality" overshadowed its hoped-for cinematic activities, displacing some of them... The festival attempted to imitate the celebrations of other Arab festivals such as Damascus, Cairo, and Dubai... without possessing their expertise in balancing their cinematic and festive activities.

A painful observation for any loyal cinema guest is the emptiness of the three halls designated for screenings, except for a passing Oran audience, whose curiosity led them to enter the gloomy halls to shelter from the summer heat, or at most to see what was not available to them outside the framework of this celebration..." (EZZINE, 2017)

On the other hand, we find that other critics present a different view, and we often find this argument republished by the Oran Festival's communicator through various outlets, including the press. An example of this is the statement of Lebanese critic Ibrahim Al-Aris, who said: "The Oran Arab Film Festival is the only one..." Specializing in Arab cinema, which distinguishes it from other festivals (...) the necessity of continuing this official interest in the Arab seventh art (...) Algeria has become the only Arab country capable of hosting this type of film festival (...). It is the only festival specializing in Arab cinema, and it could also be the greatest opportunity to restore a brilliant and successful cinema. On this basis, I hope that this official and positive interest in Arab cinema will continue indefinitely, so that Algerian cinema can experience a new renaissance with authentic films that reveal to us the details of Algerian reality. Egyptian critic Alaa El Shafei believes that the festival has a special character and nature because it celebrates Arab productions in a big way, especially at this time. Egyptian critic Magdy El Tayeb believes that the Oran Festival places Arab cinema

productions within everyone's reach. It has become possible for any critic, journalist, or cinema specialist to discover these works, study them, and also study the issues they address, whereas other non-specialized festivals rely on showing one or two Arab films, while the rest are foreign... This The state's openness has led to audiences flocking to it in large numbers, even from other states. This is something that doesn't happen in every country. When festivals are held in a particular state, even the owners of those states are unaware of them. Meanwhile, in Oran, the festival's management has brought its cinematic event to the people, whose success is measured by its turnout. While there are those whose position oscillates in the middle, such as that of the Iraqi critic Kazem Al-Saloum, who said: "My attendance at the Oran Festival was to participate in it as an Arab film critic... I also make sure to report festival news to Iraqi newspapers, as well as write critical reviews of the films shown there... With the exception of the delay in the opening ceremony and the postponement of the screening of Khaled Youssef's film "Karma," the festival was good in terms of organization and film selection, as we watched important films... Accommodation and transportation were also good, starting from the airport, where there were no complications, and ending at the airport again... The media has the right to criticize and identify errors with the aim of highlighting and correcting them. No festival is free of errors and blunders here or there, and these are certainly unintentional mistakes. No one deliberately makes mistakes. He knows that a variety of eyes are watching him—the media, guests, and others—so festival organizers should welcome criticism. Critics should offer constructive criticism, and not direct criticism based on a preconceived notion.

Generally speaking, criticism is one of the mechanisms of cinematic work, and it is focused on developing and encouraging the best in artistic works. Therefore, this mechanism, which is sometimes marginalized, should be given importance.

Press:

Reports, reports, and articles about the Oran Festival are diverse in local, national, and international media outlets, as well as news agencies. Some of these media outlets sponsor the festival, particularly public media outlets such as Algerian Television and Algerian National Radio, as well as some national newspapers such as Al-Jumhuriya and Al-Shaab. Some editions are private Algerian media outlets. The same applies to the media outlets' portrayal of the festival, ranging from good to bad, and sometimes both. By observing the various media outlets' portrayals, the following can be noted:

- Media outlets must obtain prior authorization to cover the event, whether they are institutions, independent journalists, or interested parties.
- The Oran Festival's communicator will republish articles, audio clips, or videos that present a positive image of the festival.
- These outlets usually publish abstract news and reports containing technical and artistic data and information about the festival. Examples include: the Algerian News Agency, Royers Agency, Tunisian Radio Mosaique, the Egyptian newspaper Al-Youm Al-Sabea, the Egyptian newspaper Al-Shorouk, Al-Youm Al-Sabea, Al-Ahram Al-Masa'i, Al-Wafd, etc.
- The Oran Festival's communications officer focuses on the Arab and foreign press, citing them more than the national press in artists' statements.
- In some editions, the Oran Festival's communications team includes a group of journalists from various Algerian press institutions, which creates a lack of information.
- Some Algerian media outlets and some social media outlets cover the other side of the festival, focusing on the festival's missteps, errors, and incidental events.
- Some media outlets contribute to holding forums about the festival.

1. Oran Festival: Organization and Network Effectiveness.

Film festival as an organization consists of departments and a work team that shares roles in order to divide the work. Any organization or institution, no matter what it is, is based on the principle of advance planning. It is a process that is supported by a comprehensive plan based on material and human resources, which applies to the festival institution. However, what characterized the sessions of the Oran Arab Film Festival was improvisation in work, and this is evident through the organizational blunders that are repeated in each edition. This planning is based on the production or artistic coordination department (its name varies from one festival to another), which is based on searching for places to hold shows and celebrations, such as cinemas, theaters, public squares, etc. In the Oran Festival, and according to each edition, the location of the opening and closing ceremonies is subject to the festival's budget. Sometimes it is in luxury hotels or the conference palace, and other times on the stage or open-air theater. As for the locations for holding film screenings, they are limited to three halls: the Happiness Hall, the Morocco Hall, and the Cinema Museum (Cinematheque). According to specialists in this field, the location for the screening must be popular and easily accessible, especially for open-air screenings, which must also be in a central location and the selection of venues take into account a number of considerations, including facilitating audience access, taking into account the audience's economic resources, as well as the timing of film programming, in addition to the capacity of the halls and the number of seats.

At the Oran Festival, the aforementioned halls are located close to each other and are on the same street. As for tickets, admission is free, but that does not prevent them from being distributed in order to control the number of guests relative to the available seats. They also help in the process of counting the audience and thus evaluating the festival. Since the festival consists of actors connected by a communication network, we are trying here to deconstruct this network. In general, the Oran Festival network consists of a group of actors, as follows: the governorate staff, which includes the governor and his assistants, including the artistic director, the media officer, and the logistics and financial director. Among the actors are also guests from filmmakers, actors, directors, and critics. The general public, as well as the parties that fund the festival, and the press, are also included within the framework of actors. Over the ten editions of the festival, several governors have taken over, and with each new governor, a new team has emerged. The governor is considered the festival's primary face, and his strong personality and connections aid festival management. This is why we see the differences in the Oran Festival's editions, particularly with the first governor, who served as director of television and a former minister.

He harnessed all available resources under his authority and employed them in the festival's success, not to mention the budget he received from the state, which approached one million dollars in one edition. This means that the governor is a key player within the festival's organizing network, unlike subsequent governors, whose effectiveness was less than the first. This is due to a number of reasons, including their positions before assuming the presidency of the Oran Festival governor (Director of Culture for the Wilaya of Oran, Director of the Algerian Agency for Cultural Influence, Director of News for Algerian Television), positions with limited powers. Festival participants, including directors, producers, actors, media professionals, and critics, are linked by a more interactive network through activities and events, both official and side events, and this is achieved through direct communication among them. The other main actor for whom the festival is held is the audience. According to our observations, their strong presence is at the opening and closing ceremonies, especially if the show is held in a public space. During the screening period, their attendance fluctuates from small to large, depending on the programming, the strength of the festival's publicity, and the context in which the festival is held. The strength and weakness of this network of actors are determined by an evaluation process based on internal and external evaluation mechanisms, which we will discuss later in this study. (EZZINE, & CHEDED, 2023).

4. Festival Communication Mechanisms

One of the most important ways to promote the festival is to persuade the media. This is done through the initiative taken by the communicator using public relations, carefully contacting journalists, inviting them, and providing them with materials (photos, news releases, etc.) to ensure wider media coverage. This is also achieved through the use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc.). The overall strategy for film festivals aims to identify the best ways to communicate with target groups at the festival, meaning the presence of a target audience and, subsequently, determining the most appropriate message. This is all determined with consideration for the allocated budget (EZZINE, 2016).

Throughout the last three editions of the festival, we have observed that the communicator seeks to involve journalists from various local and national media outlets in his team's work, either to edit the magazines and publications he issues or to work on the festival team, among other roles.

As previously mentioned, each edition differs from the next in terms of budget or portfolio, and thus the festival's media strategy is also affected.

- Preparing daily magazines during the festival, covering news and discussions about the festival.
- Publishing publications for critics and writers.
- Selling cinema-related books as a gift.
- Special radio programs for the festival, in collaboration with regional radio stations.
- Television and radio advertisements.
- Posters and billboards on the streets.
- Promotion via the festival's websites.
- Holding seminars and press conferences.
- Issuing press releases (EZZINE, 2016).

Conclusion

We conclude that the Oran International Arab Film Festival is one of the few events in the Arab world that focuses on Arab cinema and its productions. We also learned about the festival's image by monitoring the impressions of critics and audiences, as well as the national and foreign press coverage of the festival. This allows us to learn about different cultures and promote local culture.

We also examined the effectiveness of the festival's internal and external network to identify its strengths and weaknesses. This was embodied in our understanding of festival evaluation mechanisms based on the festival's guidelines.

Any festival hinges on the strength of the media and communication strategy developed by the communicator. This strategy, therefore, was identified as employed by the festival's management in managing the event. Therefore, we can say that the festival is one of the systematic pillars through which communication anthropology is studied.

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