



Collective Learning Through Antiracist production

How to write an antiracist plot?

Theoretical framework

June 2023



Co-funded by the Erasmus+
Programme of the European Union

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À Films Ouverts contest: fifteen years of short films against racism

Between 2006 and 2022, Media Animation (Belgium) received hundreds of short films that responded to the invitation to participate in an anti-racism expression contest. Only two criteria formally excluded the works: their maximum length (which varied from 8 to 5 minutes) and the inadequacy of their content with the themes of the fight against racism, the promotion of interculturality, cultural diversity or living together. Some 1000 films were received and screened by the Festival's teams in order to propose a selection of about fifteen films screened in public each public, submitted to the votes of the spectators, to a jury of professionals and to the debates proposed during the sessions.

The short films come from many different backgrounds: made by people who are trying their hand at filmmaking or in the context of associations (neighbourhood, youth) or schools. With the exception of a few films made by audiovisual professionals, often at the beginning of their careers or in the context of film-making workshops, most of them are amateurish and show some technical or writing clumsiness. However, this amateurism, which is often very enlightened, combines well with the creative approach to the fight against racism, because these films express the opinion of their creators and provide a large number of points of view on these issues. Throughout the fifteen years of the A Films Ouverts competition, they reflect the evolution of the sensitivity of French-speaking society in Belgium to an issue whose acuteness and urgency has not ceased to increase with the news.

The set of works selected between 2008 and 2022 constitutes a corpus of 224 short films, each of which makes a statement on the subject of racism and interculturality. Within the framework of the European CLAP project, a dozen films made in Greece between 2014 and 2022 and a dozen films made in Portugal between 2011 and 2021 have been selected and analyzed by our Greek partner KARPOS and our Portuguese partner 4Change then added to the corpus of Belgian films.

This collection of short films offers perspectives, problems, questions or revolts in the face of inequality and discrimination. Their analysis allows us to identify the different angles through which racism is staged and dramatised, and their comparison reveals "narrative routines" relating to these issues that some films manage to circumvent by bringing in new angles.

For those who would like to start making such a work, the contributions of this collection allow the identification of useful questions to accompany the creative process, both in the writing of the script and in the directing. What pitfalls to avoid? How to approach the issue of racism and communicate its subject from a clear and controlled point of view?

The analysis identifies three main interacting themes: the problematisation of racism, the role of identities and the audiovisual treatment. This work concludes with methodological recommendations for engaging in anti-racist short film making.

Racism: a problem that goes from the particular to the general

Stories, including audiovisual stories, are built around a crisis. This is particularly evident in the problems experienced by one or more characters facing a difficulty. In our society, narratives have always been intended to highlight deviations from the prevailing norms and values. According to Jerome Bruner: "Our sense of the norm is nourished by the narrative but also by what we know about the flaws and exceptions to that norm. From this point of view, those who set out to make a film against racism point out in their stories where this issue hurts: which norms racism attacks and which values it undermines. The analysis of the films of our corpus allow us to map the perspectives adopted by their creators on this issue and to identify both strong, shared trends and original creations with regard to these trends. Over the course of the films festival A Films Ouverts, these perspectives have been enriched, certainly under the influence of current events and the way in which the treatment of racism has evolved in recent years.

In a transversal way, the analysis allows us to identify **two main approaches**: the one that focuses on the characters who are racist, to counteract them, and the one that places the narrative under the perspective of the racialised people to denounce the causes of their suffering.

Racism is because of racists

Many films depict the actions of overtly racist characters or portray situations where people suffer from the rejection and malice of these characters. The problem lies in their faults and the cause of these defects varies.

Intolerance

Racism is about intolerance. It is manifested by a whole gallery of characters who dislike people who are different, because of their religion, their supposed origin or their appearance. The intolerance is not justified by the story, but is manifested by the characters' aggressiveness or stupidity that the films denounce. In some works, this attitude is sanctioned by a moral reversal. It will be the violent man who suffers a heart attack when he receives a blood transfusion from a black person, the old lady who dies crushed after refusing the help of a helpful stranger, or the blind grandfather who spits at racialised people without realising that his life assistant is himself black. Racism is therefore a xenophobic trait that must be denounced and fought.

Intoxication by prejudice

Intolerance is not always reduced to a manifestation of hatred of the other. A whole series of films present it as the consequence of a belief based on prejudice. These prejudices associate foreigners with problematic behaviour: foreigners are thieves, fanatics, stupid, etc. The films then set out to break down these prejudices: the wallet was not stolen but lost and it is the foreigner who finds it and returns it to its owner without any ulterior motive, despite the latter's aggressiveness. Prejudice thus poisons social relations and is the source of racism. In their own way, these films advocate that a better knowledge of the other, that education can help cure racists of their xenophobia. More than that: getting to know others without reducing them to clichés is also enriching.

A truncated relationship with the world

Some films address the racism of their characters by putting it into perspective with globalisation. While our society is flooded with goods from all over the world and interdependence between

countries is very strong, some characters show their rejection of the other by seeming to ignore the real diversity of society. Thus, the discovery of the foreign origins of their loved ones or of themselves or the realisation that they appreciate gastronomy from elsewhere puts their point of view into perspective. The character becomes aware of the complexity of the world and that their racism prevents them from appreciating its richness.

Subversive and thwarted love

Xenophobia often appears as an element that thwarts love. Conversely this feeling is also said to have the power to transcend differences and cultures and its strength can overcome the intolerance of the protagonists. Sincere love sometimes appears as an antidote to the hostility of relatives towards a racialised person. The difficulty of mixed marriages often appears as a cross-cultural element and the universal narrative par excellence: the love of a Jewish person with a Muslim, of a member of one ethnic group with another, are among the few narratives that question the racism of Western populations but also what sets communities apart. Love contradicts the tradition of privileging relationships with one's own community and manages to build bridges between groups as a supreme antidote to xenophobia.

Racism is an adversity

When films look at the experiences of racialised people or question the phenomenon on a more global scale, they offer a wide range of explanations or situations that broaden the perspective beyond the xenophobic attitude of certain protagonists.

The racist climate

Insults, suspicious looks, daily discrimination, online harassment, vexations... living as a racialised person in Belgian, Greek or Portuguese society means being exposed to a hostile atmosphere that many films show. Whether it is a question of underlining the psychological impact on the characters or denouncing, in particular, the banality of media treatment with xenophobic overtones, many films highlight this pressure in order to better bring it to the attention of the general public and raise awareness.

North/South relations

Is racism first and foremost an international issue and the observation of an asymmetry of power and relations between the countries of the "North" and the "South"? This is the approach of some works that situate issues such as development, migration and conflicts in a long history that has its roots in colonialism and imperialism. The reflection then focuses on the inequality of births and life courses to raise awareness of these issues. The historical weight of this domination is sometimes translated into the expression of a feeling of inferiority or a psychological glass ceiling from which certain characters struggle to free themselves. World history and large-scale but low-key dramas (such as the economic exploitation of children) are mobilised to put the issues of racism on a political scale.

Radicalism

The context of the conflicts following the September 11 attacks and then the attacks that hit Europe from 2015 onwards have contributed to the installation of an anxiety-provoking and often Islamophobic climate. Several films refer to this atmosphere and denounce the amalgam between Muslim characters, or simply those of foreign appearance, and terrorism. If it is a question of denouncing a prejudice, these films underline above all the heavy atmosphere that weighs on these populations and the need for many characters to justify themselves with regard to this generalised

suspicion. It is not so much the action of xenophobic people that weighs on them as the social or media discourse and the mistrust it engenders.

Religious freedom

Over the years, there have been many controversies about the wearing of religious symbols. For several films, the prohibitions or attacks on people who wear them are one of the most explicit symptoms of racism in society. On this subject, it is mainly veiled women who are the subject of films that defend their right to express their identity and their religion. Remarkably, the context chosen to address the issue is often the school. The reduction of the hijab to prejudices about Islam is also one of the angles chosen to denounce these specific difficulties.

Being exposed to the violence of the system

Discrimination and xenophobia are reflected in several scenarios by exposure to explicit physical violence. It can be carried out by xenophobic characters who cannot stand the resistance of racialised people, but very often this role of antagonist is taken on by a representative of the police. Police violence, which is regularly denounced in the news, is therefore a popular subject for short films. Whether it is gratuitous and reflects the xenophobia of the police force or whether it is justified by the hunt for undocumented migrants, this violence appears as a real and latent threat to discriminated populations, denounced above all for being the most explicit symptom of the structural inequalities of our societies.

Employment, housing, access to public services

For victims, racism is not just exposure to xenophobic violence or vexation. It presents itself as a set of predictable or invisible obstacles that discriminate them on a daily basis. Many films denounce the complication for a racialised person to access the same rights or services as other citizens. Housing, employment, public transport or simply personal services (from the doctor's surgery to the restaurant) are all situations where racism transforms into difficulty things that appears to be a normal process for the majority of the population. Discrimination takes a psychological turn and leads either to revolt or to low self-esteem, or even to suicide. Racism is then a leaden weight which, through these films, is deployed in the most banal interactions of life in society.

Although rarely directly challenged or denounced, the State, or rather its absence, appears in the background in several films, particularly the Greek films. The state appears in situations where it is lacking: degraded living conditions in a refugee camp, refugee children who do not go to school, refugee families forced to sleep on the street, etc.

Refugees and migrants

Initially relatively marginal, the theme of migration has taken on an almost central role in the films of the most recent editions. Migration is presented as a life journey in two equally complicated stages. Several films underline the difficulty of the migration journey as such: fleeing a war, a dictatorship or a desperate situation, facing arbitrary or military violence, taking dangerous risks to dodge border guards or crossing an inhospitable sea or desert. Then comes the journey in the host country: the administrative maze, the complications of integration, the learning of languages and cultures and the uncertainty of the outcome of the procedures until the eventual clandestine status. All these films are concerned with revealing the humanity of those who suffer from the inequalities of birth and treatment depending on whether they were born on the wrong or the right side of the borders. The difficulties they face are clearly seen as a truth that would entitle them to sympathy. The films reveal

their humanity in order to fight against abstract or impersonal figures or slogans. They all denounce situations that are considered unjust and inhuman.

Genocide as a climax

The work of remembrance relating to crimes against humanity is regularly present in the films made. The remembrance of the Holocaust, whether through the testimony of the last survivors or through the evocation of the anti-Jewish laws symbolised by the yellow star, seems to be the most explicit and recurrent element mobilised by these works to remind us that racism can culminate in absolute horror. The Second World War, the totalitarianisms of the 20th century and other conflicts involving racial motives are mobilised to call for vigilance and to denounce the trivialisation of racism, which would lead to the worst.

From racism as a flaw to racism as a system

Most of the films situate their plot between two implicit poles: on the one hand, the denunciation of the racism of the people, embodied in characters who are xenophobic to the point of irrationality, and on the other, the denunciation of a system that is perpetuated in legal, impersonal and even invisible mechanisms, which culminates in the issue of the treatment of refugees. If all the films share the same revolt or moral outburst with regard to what is being denounced, the issues they explore change in nature depending on whether they address the behaviour of individuals who could be improved through awareness or whether they point to the social and political phenomena that are at work beyond the behaviour of individuals, in other words, **structural racism**.

Identity in the face of racism

Anti-racist films stage an issue that weighs on the characters. Choosing these characters situates the issue in a specific situation. Some films opt for a general approach to racism where identity has no particular impact. The only thing that matters is the difference that distinguishes the victims from those who discriminate or oppress them. In some cases, racism appears to be symmetrical: everyone is hostile to each other and this hostility should be overcome. Intolerance is universal or historical, and must be overcome. However, the majority of films are based on identifiable identities.

Who does not suffer from racism?

The choice of the characters' identities often involves designating the individual or social group that is not suffering from racism (non-racialised people). The point here is to designate either the person who explicitly discriminates against an "other", or the "standard" group that is not a victim of discrimination and that mechanically reproduces discrimination, or educates themselves, expresses themselves, becomes aware of it or takes action against it. By default, this group is somehow indigenous, white, non-migrant: in some films, it implicitly represents a kind of "us" that represents the supposedly majority population that has to become aware of the problems addressed (for example, a class of pupils who would welcome a foreign child).

Some films focus exclusively on racialised characters without necessarily featuring those to whom they would be 'others'. For example, it may be a gallery of portraits of refugees or the exclusive testimony of one person who recounts his or her daily life as a person perceived as foreign. However, these films are made in the context of a specific society and a short film competition in which they are invited to participate. Their production therefore makes sense from the perspective that they will be shown to a third audience in an anti-racist way. Without necessarily staging the society to which these films are

addressed, their construction can be understood as being addressed to an audience to which they deliver a message.

From identity to racialisation

Films offer a wide range of specific identities relating to a religion, culture or country and illustrate the multicultural diversity of society. These identities are often, but not always, presented as otherness in relation to a majority population. Implicitly or explicitly, the films deal with the **process of racialisation**, which consists of positioning a person in an abstract social category (black, Arab, Asian...) and hierarchical in relation to other social groups. This category, 'race', is materialised by the racist issue that the short film addresses or denounces. The choice of a character's identity is therefore often the starting point of a plot that examines the tension between his or her individuality and the way in which he or she is perceived and discriminated against by a society that locks him or her into a category. Certain identities will be more present depending on the historical and social context and on the mobilisation of certain groups in the associative and anti-racist movements. For example, in Portugal, several films deal with the discrimination experienced by the Roma, whereas they are almost totally absent from the films made in Belgium or Greece.

At the crossroads of discrimination

Specific identities are not exclusively located within the perimeter of cultural diversity. Over the years, films have given an increasingly important place to female characters in order to highlight discriminations that are related to both gender and cultural identities. Disabilities, sexual orientation, age, social class, etc. are also among the facets that position a person in society and that films sometimes feature to highlight the accumulation, reinforcement or specificity of those discriminations. Although the concept is not explicit, these films situate their issue in terms of **intersectionality** and use it to emphasise that discrimination can cross several social categories and that it calls for a global fight against dominations and injustices.

Treatment: from fictional abstraction to documentary

The choice of the issue and thus of the racist crisis that drives the scenarios is translated in the image through many different approaches. The films adopt very diverse audiovisual forms: filmed fiction, documentary, stop motion animation, cartoon animation, collage, music video, and even artistic expressions bordering on abstraction. The films collected by the A Films Ouverts contest therefore cover the whole range of creativity that the notion of audiovisual offers. Over the years, the inspirations have diversified and we can clearly see greater freedom from the classic narrative form dominated by traditional cinema: the fictional narrative. There are now many formats inspired by web content: YouTube montages, smartphone videos inspired by Tik Tok or "found footage" in the manner of the countless amateur images circulating on the Internet.

In addition to the audiovisual form chosen to make the film project, the treatment consists of converting the thematic subject into a filmic subject. For example, denouncing police violence can be done through a narrative fiction that tells the story of a character's adventures or through the musical expression of a group of young people rapping about the subject. The cohesion between the subject matter and the form is the element that sets each work apart and allows us to appreciate the originality of the message and the artistic approach. Beyond the recurrence or the proportion of narrative forms, the analysis of the short films allows us to identify modes of treatment that translate a particular relationship to the problematisation of racism.

Celebrating diversity

In the face of xenophobia, many films opt for an indirect approach. It is no longer a question of denouncing the racism of the protagonists but of celebrating the virtues of a multicultural and a priori tolerant society. Diversity appears as a value in itself. The meeting between characters from different cultures, the colourful presentation of the mixture of flavours, colours, music and traditions are at the heart of works that appear as the audiovisual translation of an ode to multicultural society. Implicitly, these films present themselves as positive antidotes to xenophobia and take a stand against withdrawal into oneself. Whether it is through the diversity of colours, traditions or sounds, these films take the form of vox pop, collages or music videos, often of a festive nature.

Several films translate this approach into an abstract artistic form: we no longer see humans with identified origins but mixtures of colours, object-based fictions or surrealist settings where black and white characters suddenly discover the richness of the arrival of colour in their universe. This optimistic vision values interculturality and appears to be the most obvious treatment for those tackling the racism of racists. Ultimately, these films want to contribute to reversing xenophobia by opposing it with the richness of diversity.

The struggle against racism

When the films address structural discrimination in society and global racism, the staging changes dramatically. Rather than celebrating diversity, the focus will be on the anti-racist struggle itself. Music videos will show young people chanting against injustice, animated films will feature medleys of committed slogans and collages that draw on famous figures in these struggles such as Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks. These energetic works are intended to inspire those who want to get involved to continue the fight and to become aware that it is a political process before being a moral one.

The documentary path

In relation to the themes explored by the films, one of the most decisive choices for filmmaking is whether or not using a documentary approach. A great many films choose to give a voice to the people discriminated against so that they can testify about their experiences. Other films translate into fiction or reconstruction (in "docu-fiction" mode) the testimonies collected by the team behind the short film project. This approach has several advantages: it allows those who embark on the adventure to think about the issue of racism in terms of real-life situations and not presumed ones. The approach thus allows non-racialised people to avoid the risk of clumsily translating an issue about which they will only have indirect information.

If we were to risk classifying the films according to the distance or proximity experienced by their authors, the analysis shows that those who refer to racism as a moral flaw more often come from people who opt for a fictional or totally artistic approach without necessarily translating a lived experience. On the other hand, it is in the films that denounce the effects and social conditions of racism that we find traces of experienced and more readily documentary: the real-life testimonies of refugees who have been through wars and administrative labyrinths, the expression of the suffering felt by those who experience the denounced discrimination on a daily basis, or fictions that reproduce realistic sketches written on the basis of a liberation of the word.

The pitfalls of staging racism

The trap of audiovisual reproduction of what is denounced

The audiovisual treatment of the problem endorsed by the film sometimes leads to productions focusing on the discrimination suffered by the racialised characters. Scenes in which antagonists use verbal or physical violence against other characters may appear to be easy ways of denouncing discrimination. However, there is a risk that these scenes will make for an uncomfortable spectacle for those who suffer from such violence, and that they will reproduce, even unintentionally, the excesses they are intended to denounce (such as racist expressions).

The flip side of identity: the stereotype

To portray a specific identity in a short film - especially a fictional one - means to quickly convey to the audience the information that identifies that identity. The question then arises: how do I represent a person of Malian, Iranian, Chinese or Peruvian origin? How do I make it clear that so-and-so is Muslim or Orthodox? That so-and-so is a refugee or an undocumented immigrant? To solve this issue, cinema and culture offer a wide range of stereotypes: a wax garment, a hijab, a yarmulke, used clothes and plastic bags, etc. While the stereotype is often a necessary narrative vector for the production, it also carries the risk of reproducing certain shortcuts, or even ignorance, relating to specific identities. These are sometimes quickly untranslatable: Western culture has no shortage of banal representations for portraying a black character from Africa, but there is nothing in popular culture that makes it easy to specify a specific African country or culture (which, moreover, reflects the inculturation of one society with respect to another). The risk of the staging is to reduce the specificities of an identity to a general social category and thus to participate in the abstract racial categorisation that anti-racism denounces.

The short film as a witness to the process

The professionalism of an audiovisual production can be measured by the degree of mastery of the result: sound, images, words and rhythm correspond to the intention of the artists involved. On the other hand, amateurism allows elements to transpire in the result that testify to the conditions of the production and the limits of mastery: the murmur of the microphones, the approximate settings, the hesitant acting, the sometimes crudely crafted plots. In the context of the A Films ouverts festival and the anti-racist approach, what would appear to be flaws in terms of the usual requirements of cinema sometimes become qualities. The childish awkwardness of a film made in a classroom becomes a charm that can signify the sincerity of the approach, the hesitations of the language translate the communication efforts of a foreigner and the set made of any old thing can illustrate both the lack of means and the difficult working conditions of the initiative of an association engaged in the field. In the same way, the unintentional casting of those who appear in the image can illustrate the cultural diversity and the commitment of a group to a project. The films thus both convey a message carried by a collective and bear witness, as a document, to the characteristics of this collective. Confronted with an audience, a clumsy film made by young people with a disability who testify to their anti-racist commitment could arouse as much enthusiasm as a polished production that conceals, according to the rules of the art of cinema, the other side of the story.

On the other hand, some of the environments in which films are made can be a message in their own by highlighting the plight of the people living there. This is the case of many Greek films where the tension comes from the presence of refugee camps, where refugees live segregated from the rest of the population.

How to construct an anti-racist plot?

The theoretical analysis of the short films allows us to sketch out methodological recommendations when it comes to making an anti-racist movie. These recommendations can be as many steps that question the approach, steps that could be taken in a different order depending on the group's initial intentions.

1) Document the actual experience

If an anti-racist approach can start from sincere indignation, the films that challenge them are often built on the basis of real life experiences. Questioning those involved in the making of the film to identify real experiences of confrontation with racism helps to identify genuine perspectives. In the absence of such experiences, a documentary approach that goes out to meet discriminated groups to collect their words and experiences can reduce the risks of making overly abstract statements that reflect relatively banal views on this issue.

2) Who are the characters?

Whether fictional, documentary or hybrid, a film often has a main character, more rarely a gallery of characters (as in a series of portraits). This character potentially carries a racialised identity. The choice of this identity raises the question of its representation and the precision of the discrimination it faces. This choice can also allow the subject to be broadened beyond strict racism, or to show that some of these discriminations are not necessarily racist. A male character does not face the same difficulties as a female character.

3) What is the anomaly?

The main character in a story is often facing an issue, a crisis. The conflict caused by this crisis energises the story and is manifested through the events that are staged (the opposition between two characters, for example). This issue can be what the directors want to denounce, and it is situated on the spectrum that goes from individual xenophobia to structural discrimination of various kinds that racialised people suffer.

4) How does my story end?

The ending of a story is an important element of the message it contains. If the ending is happy, if the character overcomes the problem, it means that the film indicates a way to solve the crisis caused by racism: to remove prejudices, to mobilise against discrimination, to get help, etc. In a way, this conclusion is similar to a moral and mobilises positive values: solidarity, tolerance, friendship, etc. However, a story may also not offer a positive outcome and not lead to a resolution of the problem. The main character continues to suffer from his or her situation, or even worse. This type of writing is often reserved for stories that want to alert the audience to a situation whose most dramatic aspect they denounce.

5) The treatment

Fiction, documentary, animation, stop motion, music videos... the creative possibilities of audiovisual media are vast and allow everyone to choose the way to express themselves according to their tastes, their technical possibilities or their audiovisual culture. The choice of treatment can sometimes be the basis of the approach or come once the intention of the film has been defined. The treatment is the creative space par excellence and gives each film its singularity. It also makes it possible to choose a technical form that facilitates the expression of a collective and the involvement of all in the process. This choice makes it possible to opt for a certain visibility of the group involved in the production through the images it produces.

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