

Festival de Cans: Rethinking the Film Festival through Parody in Rural Galicia

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Abstract: This article focuses on the Festival de Cans, a picturesque film event that takes place in Cans, a rural hamlet in the heart of the West Galician province of Pontevedra. Through an ethnographic approach, this research seeks to understand how Cans' peculiar rituals and the organization's rhetoric uses parody as an aesthetic vehicle that allows us to reinterpret dominant meanings, allowing the conversion of the Galician rural landscape, its community, and settings into a location of cultural importance. Thus, it is interesting to observe how the festival articulates an exceptional setting where barns, workshops, basements, cellars and stables serve temporarily as film venues, altering the high-ranked film festivals cinephilic standards, excess and etiquette. Via the hybridization of classic film festival traditions with rural celebratory traditions Cans has consolidated its position both in the Spanish film festival circuit and the Galician film industry, becoming a must-attend event among Galician media professionals and personalities.

Keywords: *Festival de Cans*, film festivals, ethnography, parody, rural space, popular culture

Resumen: *Este artículo se centra en el Festival de Cine de Cans, un pintoresco evento que se celebra en una aldea con el mismo nombre, en la provincia de Pontevedra (Galicia). A través de un acercamiento etnográfico, esta investigación busca comprender de qué manera los rituales y la retórica de la organización utilizan la parodia como un vehículo estético que permite reinterpretar los significados y estructuras dominantes, para dar lugar a la conversión del paisaje rural de Galicia, su comunidad y sus localizaciones en un lugar de importancia cultural. Así, es interesante observar cómo el festival articula un escenario particular donde hórreos, talleres, bajos y establos sirven temporalmente como salas de proyección, alterando los altos estándares, el exceso y la etiqueta de los festivales de cine de más alto rango. A través de la hibridación del concepto de festival de cine con una celebración tradicional del ámbito rural, Cans ha consolidado su posición en el circuito de festivales de cine españoles y la industria audiovisual gallega, convirtiéndose en un festival de visita obligada entre las personalidades y profesionales del audiovisual de Galicia.*

Palabras clave: *Festival de Cans, festivales de cine, etnografía, parodia, espacio rural, cultura popular*

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Introduction: going to a hamlet to... attend a film festival

Anyone who knows the quirks of a typical film festival, would be shocked at the Festival de Cans unapologetic rethinking of the classic formula. For starters, “Cans”, as regular attendees call it, takes place in the hamlet of Cans, a satellite of the larger town of O Porriño, in Pontevedra. But the *Festival de Cans*’ unorthodox environment might not come as such a surprise to regular festival goers. We have become accustomed to seeing festivals flourishing in the most unusual places and parts of the world. This one, however, seems particularly atypical as some of the most well-known festival traditions and rituals have here been parodically deposed: it is the elderly locals who receive honorary awards; it is their commemorative signs that are hung next to the names of Spanish film celebrities on the village’s “wall of fame”; it is the everyday interior spaces for animal husbandry, hay or wine storage, or parking your tractor that are transformed into screening rooms, conference halls and film workshops. It is barking dogs, mooing cows, and clucking hens, that provide the background soundtrack during colloquiums, round tables and famous filmmakers’ talks.

Given “Cans” unconventional nature, it is not surprising that the festival has been the subject of academic research (Creus *et al.*, 2015; Nuñez, 2017) as well as creative literary accounts (Meixide, 2016). From an ethnographic approach, this research aims to analyse how parody, as a discursive and performative mechanism, is used in Cans to redefine the concept of a film festival, in this case, a festival that unlike most film festivals, actively involves locals and regular attendees in its construction. This article represents the early results of a work in progress where we consider Cans as a festival worthy of anthropological study. Thus, it seeks to offer an interpretation of the event as a “subaltern counterpublic” (Fraser, 1990) where a negotiation around important aspects of film culture and Galician culture takes place. Seen from this angle, the unique nature of Cans raises questions related to the ways in which specialized, small festivals make use of different rhetorical and performative strategies to create feasible alternatives to urban, international film events. With most film festival research focusing on major, international events, the local and national impact that these smaller-local film events have upon a region’s and a nation’s film culture remains largely underexplored. Therefore, we expect that the examination of the social and anthropological aspects of Cans will provide insight into how peripheric publics and film-viewing contexts, contribute to the larger film cultures in Spain.

Research design: an ethnography of a film festival

Several scholars engaged in the study of film festivals have given their attention to the challenges involved in apprehending and understanding a live event “as it happens” (De Valck, 2007; Iordanova, 2009; Chan, 2011; Lee, 2016; Vallejo, 2017). Despite its unorthodox display, the *Festival de Cans* is no exception to the rule when it comes to studying the frantic nature of a multi-layered, live event, with the additional challenge that Cans only takes place for four days, each year, a significantly compressed time-frame compared to the one-week duration of most film festivals. The need to get insider experience of the overarching event while being able to systematically analyse its different layers and “divergent discourses” situates this research within the context of a larger corpus of ethnographic work done on film festivals and film events (De Valck, 2005; Dickson, 2015; Lee, 2016; Vallejo, 2014, 2017; Vivar, 2018; Peirano, 2020). In a volume that explores the merits and limitations of ethnography in film festivals, Aida

Vallejo (2017) reflects on the potential of ethnographic methods for studying ephemeral, cultural events that are made of converging discourses, with multiple stakeholders: « Ethnographic tools focused on the performance of cultural practices as they evolve, especially participant observation, are of paramount importance to studying present film festival practices that do not leave any written record. » (Vallejo, 2017: 253). *Cans'* compact time-frame along with its extensive schedule of films, live music, workshops, and parallel activities, required us to study the festival program prior to the event and carefully plan our visit in advance. The research took place with the support of the festival's organizers, which meant having unrestricted access to all the festival events. Carrying a weekly pass allowed us to be participants in the festival as well as researchers, a delicate equilibrium to maintain. However, we did balance our roles successfully, which helped us gain an insider's view of the festival activity.

In order to identify the main contextual and discursive areas through which the “parody of the classic festival” is laid out, we take a holistic approach to the festival occasion, its visual elements and « divergent scripts » (Dayan, 2000: 45). Drawing on existing film festival research, this approach involves a consideration of both the written and performative components of the event (De Valck, 2007).

This article uses a range of documentation that derives from desk research and from ethnographic on-site engagement with festival attendees, organizers, and guests during the sixteenth edition of the festival, celebrated for four days in mid-May 2019. It draws on qualitative data gathered through participant observation and informal conversation with guests and attendees; an in-depth interview conducted with the festival director Alfonso Pato in January 2019; printed and audiovisual material produced by the festival (film program, official magazine, and making of); and two different online questionnaires that we conducted in June 2019 with festival attendees and staff members. We obtained 18 responses from attendees and 18 responses from staff members. The questionnaires included qualitative questions that focused on how attendees and staff experience and define the event (e.g.: Have you attended the festival before, if yes, how many times? How would you describe the *Festival de Cans* in a few words? How would you describe the *Festival de Cans'* attendees? What is it that you like most about the festival? Is there anything you would change, if yes, what?). Our analysis is complemented by a list of audiovisual materials that were produced by external sources between the 2018 and 2019 editions (a documentary and an interview with Alfonso Pato in a local TV station).

On a methodological note, staff and attendee responses to questionnaires should not be taken as a reflection of the festival audience as a whole, but as a chapter of the larger festival chronicle that we assemble in this piece of research. Having said that, the qualitative data that we gathered during the 2019 edition revealed fascinating findings regarding how parody is orchestrated at different levels to put together a film festival. In order to capture and make sense of these “fleeting moments”, in what follows, we offer a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the different episodes and events we encountered while attending the festival. These first-hand experiences are presented in the analysis below to activate the three areas in which the *Festival de Cans* stages its parodic display: (1) the organizers' and attendees' participation in the festival rituals and protocols; (2) the staging of the festival and the use of space; and (3) the organizers' rhetoric. Prior to the analysis, we provide an overview of the two theoretical components that frame our understanding of this very peculiar festival which are, festivals as counterpublics, and parody. Finally, it is important to note that this article represents the first stage of a longitudinal study of the *Festival de Cans* that we are currently engaged in.

Fillas e Fillos de Cans: a “film counterpublic” in a rural setting

Unlike most Spanish film festivals which emerged after serious deliberation and conscious planning by technocrats and public administrators, Cans simply started with a name and a good deal of humour. In the early 2000s, members of the local cultural association *Arela* decided to turn a joke that for a while had circulated amongst the locals into reality: just like the giant in the French Riviera, Cans, a hamlet of no more than 200 people, would have its own film festival. Not only that: the festival would take place simultaneously with Cannes, it would feature Galician short films, and it would become a suitable alternative to the high-profile, glamorous, mega-event. With little more than a homophonic serendipity², the project was passed on to Alfonso Pato, an experienced journalist and scriptwriter born in the hamlet who had the contacts and the talent to turn Cans into a not-to-be missed appointment in the Spanish film festival circuit. The resulting event brought together Pato’s personal interests in film and music with the ambition to transform the rural setting of his home village into an annual gathering to watch Galician films and celebrate Galician culture. As Pato explains in a personal interview: « The event had links with land art, the films of Kusturika, with underground reflections [...] But most of all, what linked everything together was the reconversion of the everyday live rural space into a space for cultural action. » (Alfonso Pato, personal communication, January 18, 2019).

The festival started small-scale, in 2004, with limited resources. With a small public grant, Pato got the local residents, who agreed to offer their private homes, barns, cellars, stables and basements as ready-made exhibiting spaces, on board. Building upon local support, what had started as a joke turned into a well-established year-round event. By its third edition Cans had to double the number of weekly passes it released compared to previous years, and it was already widely known for its solid, competitive program of short films, its underground live performances, and its offbeat reinterpretation of festival rituals and paraphernalia, a concept that the festival humorously dubbed “agroglamour”. As Cans increased in popularity and started to be known for its carnivalesque display of rural pride, Pato was very careful to promote the festival as a very serious event:

Cans triggers profound reflections. Not everything is partying, music and film. There’s a real meeting of minds. Listening to social reality must be one of the main functions of film festivals. To be a connection between that reality and the audience: that’s what we want to be. (Con Alfonso Pato, Director del Festival de Cans, 2018)

With this remit Cans quickly became an annual meeting point for Galician film and media professionals, who used Cans’ laidback and festive atmosphere to bump into one another, network, and build casual alliances that, on many occasions, led on to living and breathing projects. As a networking hub, the festival takes credit for discovering and launching the careers of a substantial number of filmmakers whose established relationship with the festival has made them worthy of the title “daughters and sons of Cans” (*fillas e fillos de Cans*), a label that also gives the name to the annual talk section led by film professionals whose careers are closely related to the festival.

Beyond hosting an ongoing annual networking platform for Galician media professionals, Cans is most notable for advocating and supporting the “small cinemas” of Galicia³. Like many other minority communities that struggle to tell their stories in their

² In Galician and Castilian Spanish, Cans and Cannes are pronounced identically: /kæns/.

³ Here we are following the terminology established by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (2007): the notion of “small cinemas” encapsulates the existence of film productions that are typically excluded from the

own language, Galician films have historically faced major financial and structural obstacles, finding it extremely difficult to stay afloat in the domestic market dominated by Hollywood, and where films in Castilian Spanish are prioritized for their exportability to the Latin American market. As José Colmeiro (2018) explains, the Galician film industry presents an atomized structure, composed by a large number of small independent companies that work with limited financial resources, and whose survival depends on subsidy schemes and grant programs that protect cultural diversity. It is for these reasons that Galician cinema mostly operates within alternative film circuits (Ruy *et al.*, 2016), remaining invisible to the mainstream domestic audiences, but gaining visibility within the international film festival circuit.

While many of the shortages that affect the Galician audiovisual sector parallel the economic reality of the Galician farmland⁴, it is no coincidence that the *Festival de Cans* takes place in a region that stands out for its financial prosperity: situated in the middle of an autonomous community hit by the abandonment of its farmland, Pontevedra is one of the leading homes to the motor industry in Spain. Cans is part of a cluster of film events that focus on small-scale, Galician film productions, that have burgeoned outside the global circuit of urban, “mega-festivals”⁵. As Samuel Amago (2018) notes, the increasing popularity of these small and local film platforms provides evidence of how the « new means of exhibition have contributed to the formation of geographically dispersed communities of viewers who are able to access what might otherwise be considered “invisible” forms of cinema. » (Amago, 2018: 83). With this mission in mind, the festival has unashamedly remained small-size, adjusting its program and its dimensions to the geographical boundaries of the hamlet: in 2019, Cans featured 43 competitive short-films under the category of fiction, non-fiction (Furacans), animation, and music videos; and non-competitive films, with a majority of Galician features. While the festival’s program has not expanded significantly over the years, the number of workshops and parallel activities held during the festival has risen considerably. Some of these workshops, panel discussions and round tables are held in collaboration with non-governmental film associations such as AGAG (*Asociación Sindical Galega de Guionistas*) or *Academia Galega del Audiovisual* or CREA (*Asociación Galega de Profesionais da Dirección e Realización*) that aim to address many pressing topics that affect professionals from the media industry, such as lack of linguistic diversity, gender inequality, or lack of institutional support for local film sectors. In tune with this ethos, the festival has placed a special emphasis on the promotion and support of female professionals, dedicating special film sections to female creators (e.g.: Ultravioleta), and laying down guidelines to increase female representation among its guests, competing filmmakers, award-winners and staff⁶.

Cans unique way of merging activism, community building, and the promotion of nationally-overlooked minor cinemas of Galicia, places the festival in conversation with

established canons of “national cinemas”. These cinemas of “small nations” such as Galicia, Wales, or Taiwan, circulate and flourish in alternative film circuits from which they seek to articulate and establish a sense of distinction and identity.

⁴ In acknowledgment of the parallels that run between the atomized Galician film industry and the decentralized, fragmented, agrarian economy, José Colmeiro qualifies Galician cinema as *minifundio cinema*: « a chronic atomization of the audiovisual industry sector that is parallel to the economic, geographical and cultural minifundismo, running deep through many areas of Galician society » (2018: 136).

⁵ While (S8) *Mostra de Cine Periférico* and *Play-Doc* are well-established festivals, other more recent events such as *Festival Internacional de Cinema Rural Carlos Velo* (FICCVelo) and *Cinema Palleiriso*, explore the rural milieu as a base for collective film-viewing.

⁶ These guidelines can be found in the festival’s website under *Social responsibility: Women’s visibility* (*Decálogo para la visibilidad de las mujeres*. Festival de Cans, n.d.).

academic works that have understood that some film events are best defined as “subaltern counterpublics”, or “counter-spheres” (Stringer, 2008; Wong, 2011; Killick, 2017). In her influential essay *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*, Nancy Fraser (1990) proposes an « alternative, post-bourgeois conception of the [Habermasian] public sphere. » (Fraser, 1990: 58), that better fits the existing discursive spaces where subordinated members of society have historically created their own paths in order to participate in public life.

While the notion of counter-spheres is relatively new in the analysis of film festivals, Habermas’ conception of the public sphere unsurprisingly matches some of the quintessential qualities of a number of major longstanding film events. To start with, film festivals can work as public spheres in their dialogic capacity to provide an ephemeral, recurrent space for dialogue where different groups of people with divergent views meet and discuss film⁷. However, as occurs in the bourgeois public sphere, film festivals can also respond to vested priorities and agendas, leaving alternative voices that do not conform to dominant interests behind. Highly market-driven film festivals, festivals with geo-political interests, with swollen public budgets, with restrictive prices for audiences, or with a strict etiquette, are part of a long list of events that reinforce forms of exclusion and that could potentially work as vehicles for the perpetuation of social inequality. As Wong notes, « film festivals evoke a place and position that is very close to the traditional bourgeois public sphere, given the middle-class status and locales in which they foster informed debates and discussions. » (Wong, 2011: 160).

In the case of the *Festival de Cans*, the notion of “competing subaltern counterpublics” is particularly significant since what is at stake is the public demand for the recognition of the “small cinemas” of Galicia, its rural communities, and its rich forms of cultural expression, historically excluded from broader national schemes and agendas and characterized for its discontinuity and invisibility (Pérez Pereiro, 2014-2015). What is more, Cans, has gained a central position in the year-round cultural calendar for cinema goers and music lovers in Galicia, an area where opportunities to watch alternative films and deliberate around them tend to arise only in more populated areas. As we will demonstrate below, it is by parodying the film elite and its protocols that Cans finds a way to assemble a dialogic space where hegemonic ideas (some pertaining to the workings of the Spanish film industry), are not simply contested, but become a habitual subject for reflection in the dialogue that takes place between the different festival actors: non-professional attendees, guests, media professional and organizers. On the other hand, it is in its role as a film festival, that Cans has thrived and become a serious alternative in the context of the atomized Spanish film cultures.

Parody as trans-contextualization: an overview

In order to understand the role of parody in relation to the construction of the *Festival de Cans*’ identity and core features, it is essential to approach the theoretical implications of its use. Linda Hutcheon (2000) suggests that it is hard to find transhistorical definitions of parody, as its meanings tend to change in different times and places. Thus, parody is dependent on culture and its shared meanings subject to constant negotiation and change. Assuming this variability, parody can be understood as a set of cultural practices which transform another cultural production or practice in a playful manner creating, at the same

⁷ Other approaches to this dialogic capacity of film festivals has been approached through the theoretical lens of festivals as “heterotopia” (Zielinski, 2012), or festivals as a “polyphony” of voices (Koven, 1999).

time, new fictions and meanings (Dentith & Dentith, 2000). In other words, it is a « repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. » (Shepherd & Hutcheon, 1986: 185). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu suggests that “the effect of parody” acts as an emancipatory tool by repeating and reproducing a work or a ritual in a sociologically non-congruent context which has the effect of contesting an established and dominant mode of understanding just by « rendering it incongruous or even absurd, simply by making it perceptible as the arbitrary convention which it is. » (Bourdieu, 1983: 313). Parody produces a distance of “trans-contextualization” which is key to allowing a wide criticism of dominant constructions of the world (Duncombe, 2007), involving the disruption of commonly held assumptions and expectations, forging alternative spatial imaginaries and meanings (Buser *et al*, 2013). As a result, parody clearly helps to imagine new possibilities and scenarios which, created from the original practice or text, contests its established meanings.

It is remarkable to consider that parodic discursive strategy depends highly on the culture and identity of those who communicate it. For resituating pre-existing texts and discourses the sender needs to appeal to the knowledge and understanding that the receiver has of the former text. Understood in this way, parody is primarily an act of communication: it depends on the existence of a common culture shared by the sender and the receiver as well as a communicative complicity between them.

In the case of the *Festival de Cans*, parody is mainly based on the change in the expected location of a film festival: while Cannes is a bourgeois city, Cans is only an agricultural hamlet. But this opposition, proposed, developed and performed by the organization, is only the starting point of the “effect of parody”, as the audience which receives the parodic discourse is able to naturally understand it, involving itself in its construction. The easy assumption of this shift in setting by the audience shows the existence of a common culture, an awareness of the dichotomy between the rural and the urban, which allows them to reinterpret their own performance as participants. Indeed, this dichotomy is one of the most important demographic and cultural dynamics of modern and contemporary Galician history. It is important to note that the second half of the twentieth century saw a steep increase in the abandonment of rural areas, with the Galician urban population growing exponentially from 22.6%, in 1960 to 42%, in 1999 (Álvarez, 2011). Partly due to this demographic and economic reality, there was a process of rejection of speaking Galician in favour of Spanish, as well as a rejection of other cultural features related to the rural environment by those who came to live to cities. A process that has often been defined as self-hate (Murado, 2008). It was generally thought that these cultural borders reinforced new identities neglecting the evidence: most of the Galician population living in cities still have family and cultural bonds with hamlets or small villages.

Importantly to the history of the *Festival de Cans*, the end of the twentieth century saw the advent of different cultural movements that criticized this new identity based on the exclusion of rural culture and the Galician language. A new music movement called *Bravu* emerged by the end of the 1980s aiming to overcome this cultural situation by recognizing that important cultural bonds exist between the rural and the urban within contemporary Galician culture. The *Rock-Bravu* movement included the celebration of hybridity between the rural and the urban (“rurban”), the local and the global (“glocal”) trying to show how inner Galician economic and demographic dynamics such as rural flight or international migration (mainly to Northern Europe and Latin America) resulted in a different way of living and of understanding the world. As Colmeiro (2009) notes:

Particular noteworthy in the bravu is the defense of the rural environment, with the legitimation of its popular culture and lifestyle (not in an essentialist or idyllic return to the past, but as an acceptable way of living in the present with pride in one's roots), and the appreciation of the natural milieu. (Colmeiro, 2009: 230)

These ideas show how the relationship of Galician culture with the urban and the rural is crucial to analysing how parody is performed within the *Festival de Cans*. By these means, through a playful juxtaposition based on a common culture shared by both the organization and the audience, the festival challenges the spatial assumptions of a canonical urban film festival through an alternative proposal within a hamlet.

« *Cans is charming, but comfortable it isn't* »: staging the festival

The substitution of an urban context for a rural environment in order to celebrate a film festival, far from being mere mockery, opens a new dimension for reinterpreting the whole nature of the event, which questions its foundations and objectives, as well as its social and cultural conventions. The *Festival de Cans* adapts public and private locations in the hamlet, interrupting the everyday function of these places, to convert them into film venues and concert halls. This shift underpins a new conception of an event of this kind: the event deliberately distances itself from typical film festival mannerisms, glamour and pretentious style. Furthermore, it shows pride in a hamlet and a rural community which are connected to the rest of the world, and which actively assume modernity. *Bravu* showed, for example, how a rock band can rehearse in a barn. Ultimately, this shift reaffirms the hybrid origin of people's roots between the urban and rural.

The physical structure of the hamlet and the distribution of its spaces determines the nature of festival activities. First, it forces the organizers to synchronize the many activities taking place simultaneously in different locations, indoor or outdoor, of different sizes, and within 5 minutes' walk of each other. Thus, participants need to situate themselves within the hamlet's urban structure to be able to move from one festival activity to another. As a result of the venues' specificity, people mix within asymmetrical events: some of which are free to enter, while others are not; some of the events have a large capacity (*Baixo de Bugarín*, where part of the competitive section is screened, or *Leira de Alicia*, where the guests of honour are interviewed in front of a large audience), while others attract only a few attendees (*Jalpón de Alicia*, with hay bale seats, and dedicated to non-competitive sections). Somehow, this asymmetry generates a sort of "planned disorder" which affects the behaviour and action of participants. Thus, it is easy to see how groups of friends split up to attend different activities and then join back together for lunch at *Parque del Río* (a big esplanade near the river) or to have some beers while watching a rock music concert at *Torreiro* (the square opposite the church). It is important to note that rather than attempting to completely transform the hamlet because it did not meet the expected requirements for holding a film festival, Cans' locations are only minimally adapted in order to receive visitors, very often with homemade solutions. It is not unusual to hear Alfonso Pato commenting on the microphone while people try to find a seat on beer crates, hay bales, wooden planks or any another improvised seating space: « *Cans is charming, but comfortable it isn't...* ». As a result, participants arriving at the *Festival de Cans* tacitly understand that they are in a tiny municipality which is not trying to imitate a city. Furthermore, the organization uses the physical structure of the hamlet to construct a discourse and build different practices which serve as starting points

for the process of trans-contextualization, inducing an ironic inversion through collective participation.

“Agroglamour”: repurposing the *romería* as a film festival

Romerías are popular religious festivals in Spain, which come in various forms. They often involve solemn processions to a religious site or devotion to a patron saint, and always include large collective meals prepared by the team work of local residents.

One remarkable aspect which makes the festival different is its sense of community and collaborative work. The cultural association *Arela*, has dedicated a lot of energy to getting the local population involved in the event and building relationships. This involvement is twofold. On one hand, it means contributing to important logistical and organizational aspects of the event. As Alfonso Pato recognizes, a significant part of the festival takes place inside private properties which locals grant to the event. These ready-made venues' names not only invoke their actual function as cellars (*baixo*), storehouses (*jalpón*), or sheds (*cuperto*), but also bear the name of their owners: *Baixo de Alfonso*, *Jalpón de Alicia*, *Cuberto de Antonio*, etc. Furthermore, locals also provide accommodation and food for special guests at the event. This structure of community collaboration is common to rural *romerías* in which inhabitants of the hamlet usually help and support the expenses of the celebration in different ways. On the other hand, the close collaboration with locals transcends the organizational dimension and fosters their participation in festival activities and rituals. Therefore, the role of locals goes beyond being mere hosts or benefactors, as they are cast as protagonists who actively perform the cultural dimension of Cans. They constitute one of the juries of the festival, in parallel to those constituted by professionals; they are honoured in festival rituals and with festival distinctions at the same level as professionals, on the same stage, at the same ceremony, deliberately breaking down any sense of hierarchy that might separate celebrities and industry professionals from the general population. Some villagers even participate as performers or musicians playing in traditional bagpipe bands. Indeed, the latter aspect has become a distinctive feature of the festival. In the words of one festival participant:

[...] For me, the most remarkable thing [of the festival] is its relationship with the hamlet and its inhabitants. The fact that local people are willing to host the festival, get involved in it (allowing the use of private locations, forming part of the jury, etc.), the fact that they are participants, that there are parts of the program created for them, about them, and the environment. This is what makes the festival unique⁸. (Questionnaire respondent)

During the festival it is easy to see people who live in the hamlet or in the surrounding towns participating as staff, as artists, or sitting in many of the festival's parallel activities as audience members, mixing with people that come to attend the festival from other places in Galicia or other parts of Spain. As a result, there is a heterogeneous audience within the event, as well as a sense of cohabitation within the hamlet, quite different from the typical “tourist invasion” of other festivals and cultural events.

The performance of parody also depends on the display of some form of local ritual, which is very often constructed as a rural version of well-known film festival rituals.

⁸ Author's translation. Original text: « [...] Para mí, lo más destacable e importante [del festival] es la relación con la aldea y sus habitantes. Que las vecinas y vecinos se presten a acoger el festival y se involucren en el (dejando espacios, siendo jurados, etc.), que sean partícipes, que haya partes de la programación pensadas para ellos y sobre ellos y el entorno. Es algo que lo hace único.».

Through these fixed ceremonies the event achieves unity and reasserts the “effect of parody” around the duality between the urban and the rural environment. Just to name a few, the *Festival de Cans* substitutes the glamorous French red-carpet event that opens Cannes for a parade of hand tractors (*Desfile dos Chimpíns*) (vd. Fig.1), where guests, media professionals and members of the audience alike march along on the top of hand tractor trailers driven by locals, cheerfully saluting and followed by a cohort of visitors and locals who join the parade. Similarly, the festival has created its own Cans’ Hall of Fame (*Paseo da Fama de Cans*) where the festival honours the trajectory of one important film professional every year. At a parallel ritual, locals are publicly honoured on the Hand-Tractors’ Wall (*O Muro dos Chimpíns*), a commemorative wall in the middle of the village where hand-tractor-shaped plaques are hung in recognition of their collaboration with the festival. Finally, Cans’ highest prize is the *Cans de Pedra*, a statuette that the festival awards to the winning short-films. The *Cans de Pedra*, parodically references other prestigious film festival awards, such as Berlin’s Golden Bear or the Cannes’ *Palme d’or*, with the exception that this statuette is not made of a precious metal but is literally a “stone dog” made of granite, a common mineral in the area.



Fig.1: Parade of hand tractors (*Desfile dos Chimpíns*)⁹

In order to understand the way parody is performed within the event, it is important to consider that all rituals are infused with the spirit of a traditional *romería*. For instance, the picturesque hand tractors’ parade, bears a strong resemblance to the religious processions that take place during local *romerías*. This consonance raises questions about the anthropological and social dimensions of film festivals, whose rituals and cultural dynamics often echo those that take place in traditional festivals, such as harvest festivals (Koven, 1999; Elsaesser, 2005; De Valck 2007; Vivar, 2018). Characteristically, the distance between the film festival and the popular festival becomes parodically suppressed in Cans, since it is in fact the *romería* what allows for this annual celebration of Galician film to take place. This repurposing of the “traditional fiesta”, helps participants to perform a sort of cultural activism which also repurposes their previous cultural backgrounds from other events (*romerías*, *verbenas*, but also music festivals). Consequently, the whole event is transformed and traditional roles and the distance

⁹ Parade of hand tractors (*Desfile dos Chimpíns*): <http://www.festivaldecans.gal/es/de-que-vai/>

between professionals and audience tend to vanish within the *romería* spirit and the hamlet landscape. This hybridization transforms the *Festival de Cans* into a leisure space as well as a democratic space, which fosters contact and conversations between attendees as well as collective participation.

Although the parodic discursive strategy can be critically constructive or destructive, in the case of Cans, parody and irony are used to reinterpret important aspects which differentiate the event from canonical urban festivals: the shift in location and conditions parodically signal arbitrary social conventions which tend to be fixed within what a film festival really is. Through a process of unveiling and substituting these conventions, the festival tends to become an alternative counterpublic space in which participants are able to negotiate their roles and their relationships with other participants. For instance, Alfonso Pato suggests that the festival has become a social meeting point, « I think there is great complicity between the public and a lot of artists that usually come [to the festival], and between the public and many locals. It has become a place to meet each other¹⁰. » (Alfonso Pato, personal communication, January 18, 2019).

This redefinition of roles and social relationships is also reflected in the *Festival de Cans* image. It tends to be seen by the public as an original and authentic event. Within the context of a television report on the 2017 edition of Cans, some members of the public explain what the event means to them: « To tell the truth, this [festival] is something “authentic”, and this is what people like, it is something different to other events celebrated in Galicia... ». (2017: 30:00-30:17) asserts one middle-aged man while he is transported on a hand tractor during the festival. Another participant points out that « the good thing is that this festival is something “rough-and-ready”, and I like it because people are closer... the other [referring to Portamerica, a big music festival celebrated in the same region]... is too crowded. » (2017: 29:50-30:00).

Finally, parody is the aesthetic means by which a film festival (as an industry and high-art event) can be celebrated in such an unfitting setting. However, it must be noted that the playful repurposing of different hamlet spaces does not necessarily translate into an automatic rejection of the “film festival archetype”. On the contrary, the scrupulous way in which Cans combines the typical film festival discourses and rituals (independent film culture, film competition, juries, awards, national and local media coverage, a hierarchical system of passes, ceremonies, etc.) provides evidence that this event is extremely loyal to the type of festival experience that has been patented by the original competitive events such as *Venice Film Festival*, *Cannes Film Festival*, or *Berlin International Film Festival*, to name but a few. The fact that this list of essential attributes is strictly followed at Cans, shows that while parody is selectively constructed through its staging, the actual structure of a film festival is never compromised, nor is the reverence for the films that are shown.

This has led to awkward moments where the informal setting is put under scrutiny by audience members who resist Cans’ unpretentious protocols and adopt manners that are more typical of highbrow film viewing contexts. For instance, we noticed that during some of the screenings members of the audience shushed other audience members who were leaving in the middle of a screening. On another occasion we overheard people showing their discomfort at barking dogs at the entrance of one of the venues or complaining about the uncomfortable light coming in through the venue’s gate. At the same time, we noticed the number of people holding erudite conversations around films. These anecdotes further confirm that far from rejecting the expected festival clichés, some

¹⁰ Author’s translation. Original text: « *Creo que ahí hay una complicidad de una gran parte del público con muchos artistas que vienen habitualmente [al festival], y de mucho público con muchos vecinos [...]. Se hizo como un lugar de cita.* » (Alfonso Pato, personal communication, January 18, 2019).

members of the audience seem to embrace behaviours that are typical of any regular film festival, particularly, when it comes to the consumption of film in collective spaces. On the other hand, it is important to note that these experiences are mixed with other less conventional ones, such as heckling guests during public addresses. From this perspective, parody seems to have the double function of positioning Cans simultaneously inside and outside the film festival category.

« *We love Cans, we owe it to Cannes* »: captioning the unseemly

Attendee participation, in some of the peculiar festival rituals described above, are continuously confirmed and reinforced by a solid script that narrates the festival's unique identity and that takes shape through written material (the official festival magazine, pamphlets, newspaper articles and reviews), archive films, and live public addresses. As Daniel Dayan (2000) explains in his referential ethnography of *Sundance Film Festival*, « Festivals need constant captioning. Their participants need the reassurance as to what goes on. Thus, they keep offering definitions for themselves and for others through what they do and how they dress, and who they are, and – endlessly – through what they say. » (Dayan, 2000: 45). While the national and local press are still central to the circulation and consolidation of the festival's identity (particularly the local newspapers *La Voz de Galicia* and *Faro de Vigo*): the festival chronicles itself through its magazine, *CanZine*, a modest publication the size of a tabloid, which the festival distributes for free during the event, and through a 25-minute making of film that narrates the highlights of that year's edition, and which is ritualistically screened at *Torreiro* the following year this long-awaited flashback is welcomed every year with cheers on awards night, and has become a manual for newcomers and veterans alike where they learn about the festival's quirks and receive confirmation of Cans' unorthodox reinterpretation of traditional festival behaviours.

A recurring narrative that the making of captures every year are the verbal reactions of guests who visit the festival for the first time. It has become a tradition to see the guests of honour expressing their astonishment at Cans' extravagant deviations from the rule. In the making of for the fifteenth edition, *Quince Primavera* (“*Sweet Fifteen*”), the Spanish filmmaker Borja Cobeaga, visibly shocked, explained to the camera crew as he left one of the venues: « I had just given a talk, and suddenly they walked me into this stable... they told me it was going to be like this, but to experience it physically was quite unexpected. Literally, your lecture is constantly interrupted by the sounds of all sorts of animals. » (Docampo, 2018). This emphasis on the bewilderment that newcomers experience when confronted by the festival's lack of protocol, is constantly referenced in *CanZine*. While flicking through a copy of the magazine, one comes across a repertoire of formulas and expressions where the uniqueness of the festival is laid out for the reader. Interviews with guests, for instance, very often elicit comments about Cans' atypical display. When Juanjo Giménez, a Catalan filmmaker visiting the festival for the first time, admits to having heard some very positive comments about the event, the interviewer responds: « You must know then, that Cans is a very atypical festival. » (Fernández, 2019: 12). Similarly, the award-winning director Rodrigo Sorogoyen, is questioned about his knowledge of the festival: « But you know this is a very peculiar festival, almost an “anti-festival” right? » (Mercader, 2019: 15). Agreeing with the interviewer, Sorogoyen replies with complicity: « I know, and I love that. » (*ibidem*).

Another recurrent theme that the written accounts of the festival relate is the temporary suspension of social status among the *mélange* of attendees. In an interview with Paz and

Rafa, two locals who received a *Chimpín de Prata* award (the festival's commemorative plaques permanently displayed in the centre of the village) for hosting meals for the festival guests at their home, comment on the virtue of Cans' democratic atmosphere: « It's a beautiful experience to see these very important people climbing up on the trailer of a hand tractor and behaving like us. » (Hernán, 2019: 10). Paz's amazement at the sight of celebrities using everyday farming objects, mirrors the surprise that film makers and professionals experience when seeing the traditional festival acts (the prizes, the parades, the juries, the red carpet, the networking opportunities) being framed by and activated through the local elements of the hamlet.

While the periodicity of the festival, partitioned from ordinary everyday routine, contributes to normalizing these otherwise startling situations, the frequent use of sarcasm to humorously highlight the inappropriateness of the setting, also plays an important part in the process of digesting Cans' unseemly display. Pato not only orchestrates the whole event but assumes the very important role of narrating the festival live, as events take place. Listening to Pato's constant references to the uncomfortable seating area, the bad weather, or the casual style of the venues, forms part of the festival's soundtrack. A good example of this oral reporting happened in the 2019 edition. Pato was in a particularly chatty mood during the informal talks *Fillas e Fillos de Cans*, where filmmakers display their work-in-progress to other professionals and audience members. Here he often interjected the filmmakers' discourse in order to underline the laid-back and friendly atmosphere of the talks. When one of the directors, who was anxiously showing the teaser for her new short-film exclaimed, « I haven't even shown this to my family yet... », Pato quickly responded, « We are your family. ». In the same session, the filmmaker Liliana Torres apologized for bringing unedited material, « I'm sorry, I'm actually sweating, this is all uncooked, I haven't even seen this material myself! ». Pato reacted while looking at the audience, « Don't apologize, this is how we like it at Cans. ». Later on, Pato interrupted his own introduction of a filmmaker to look at his vibrating phone and share with the audience, « Gosh, I've got about forty missed calls. ». These continuous references to the accidental and informal style of the festival while publicly addressing the audience give the impression that one is attending a festival whose uniqueness is not only dramatized, but constantly captioned orally by organizers and guests.

Another set of punch-lines, that have become part of the festival's vocabulary over the years and that are among some of the most celebrated by the audience, are references to the industry giants *Cannes Film Festival*, and *Donostia Zinemaldia/San Sebastian International Film Festival* (SSIFF) the A-category and most international film festival in Spain. From early on, these two events, their venues, their glamour and their arthouse programming became the main source of Cans' self-caricature. For instance, while the largest venue of the festival, Baixo de Bugarín, (which is the ground floor of a farmhouse) is often referred to in jest as the «*Kursaal*», the name of the main venue and most emblematic building at Donostia Zinemaldia/SSIFF; Cannes is the constant but of sarcastic jokes that reaffirm its supposed inferiority to Cans, in Galicia. Javier Tolentino, the host of the film program *El Séptimo Vicio* (*The Seventh Vice*), a national radio broadcast, praised the display in Torreiro during the 2018 awards ceremony: « The Cans marquee would be the envy of the Cote D'Azur film festival! ».

While these sarcastic juxtapositions seem intended to humorously underline the deficiencies of the rural context for hosting a serious film event, what this rhetoric actually achieves is to highlight Cans' commitment to what really matters in a world of film and culture that survives on the periphery. Tolentino beautifully communicates the gulf in values between each festival in his open letter to the *Festival de Cans, A Cans, quéreselle. A Cannes, débeselle*, published in the 2019 *CanZine*:

It was in 2018 when the swanky, stinking rich Cannes Film Festival finally kneeled, and changed its dates, and had to accept that somewhere in another Gaul, in a village where people have been draining the broth from druids' cauldrons for hundreds of years, there stood and there still stands a film festival which surpasses them and still surpasses them in budget (smaller), in local bands, in soft locally-distilled spirits, in films which are edgier and driven by culture rather than the market, in village councillor/actresses, and of course, in rock and roll¹¹. (Tolentino, 2019: 20)

By playfully categorizing Cans as an “anti-festival”, organizers and guests not only express certain disaffection towards A-category festivals and their dominant, capitalist agendas, but define the *Festival de Cans* as an alternative space that is capable of delivering a real, authentic, and democratic collective experience that resonates with the festival’s role as a counter-sphere. Yet, to function as an alternative counterpublic does not mean to operate as a redoubt of resistance that simply stands against conservative and/or more capitalist forms of understanding film cultures and culture in general, since this would imply fostering forms of publicity that are as exclusionary as the public sphere that Nancy Fraser criticizes (1990). It involves, however, nurturing dialogue with those mainstream cultural gatekeepers from a less-legitimate, less-privileged position. A good example of this is the fact that while, on one hand, Cans has remained independent from large regional and national funding schemes, on the other hand, far from cutting all bridges with the institution, the festival has remained closely connected with the Spanish film industry and other hegemonic forms of cinematic representation in Spain. Since its earliest editions, a long list of industry-favourite personalities have been occasional visitors to Cans. Some of them are now regulars and go back to the festival year after year, attracted by its low-key atmosphere, far from the high-powered industry festivals that they are used to (e.g. *Festival de Cine de Málaga*). Well-regarded actors from the Spanish film establishment such as José Sacristán, Emma Suárez or Luis Tosar; producers such as Gracia Querejeta, or filmmakers such as Isabel Coixet, Manuel Martín Cuenca, or the Oscar-winning Fernando Trueba, are some of the guests of honour that the festival has welcomed.

While « discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status. » (Fraser, 1990: 63), in the counterpublic that Cans activates annually, the rustic setting, the use of humour and ultimately, the display of parody towards the classic film festival, invites national celebrities and locals alike to share a common experience where social differences are put on hold, and therefore, where the ideal conditions for dialogue and deliberation are laid out. *Coloquios na Leira*, a round-table where guests of honour and national film celebrities answer the questions of the audience, is a good example of how dialogic communication between different festival stakeholders takes place. While at A-category festivals, it is the members of the press who get to ask questions, in Cans, celebrities receive all sorts of questions from a variety of professionals and non-professionals in the audience and from different age groups. As Fraser (1990) writes: « participation means being able to speak in one’s own voice. » (Fraser, 1990: 69).

¹¹ Author’s translation. Original text: « Foi en 2018 cando o fachendoso e ricachón festival de Cannes fincou finalmente o xeonllo e trocou as súas datas, e tivo que recoñecer que aló, na outra Galia, nunha aldea na que apuran os caldos das marmitas dos seus druidas dende fai centos de anos, se erguía e se ergue un festival de cine que os superaba e que os segue a superar en menos orzamento, en Tanxungueiras, en tenues oruxos da comarca, en películas máis arriscadas e mellor relacionadas coa cultura que co mercado, en concelleiras-actrices e por suposto, en rocanrol. ». (Tolentino, 2019: 20)

Ultimately, it is through parody that the festival finds a way to perform this double rhetoric: one that echoes art films, the international film festival circuit, its dependence on market activities, and its tight etiquette; and another that connects with the local socio-cultural context, the rituals of village life, and the loss of the economic and socio-political relevance of rural Galicia, in Spain. It is in this constant cross-referencing and in the delicate equilibrium between these two discourses, that the festival is gradually taking a pivotal role in the promotion of the understated art-form of short-filmmaking and its value as an artefact for preserving and celebrating Galician culture.

Conclusions

The fact that a widely-known film festival like Cans takes place in such an unlikely scenario reveals the arbitrary nature of the classic film festival conventions. By activating the film event through the farmland, its everyday tools, spaces and machinery, Cans unmasks the fact that most of the standards naturalized through the canonization of the film festival as a European product (the strict dress-code, the rigor of film-watching protocols, the nationally-based criteria for film selection, etc.), exclude the majority of the population from having access to alternative spheres of deliberation around films and filmmaking. Through the use of a mix of ethnographic methods, we have demonstrated how *Festival de Cans*, by playfully reinterpreting historical dualities between the rural and the urban worlds, creates a break in the annual calendar where new interpretations of reality and forms of coexistence are possible. As we have argued here, this common ground is articulated by actively involving local people, as well as local art forms, including small-size experimental film productions, Galician traditional music, and even “art-land” (as Pato has dubbed the transfiguration of the hamlet’s common spaces). Our final contention is that this creative re-interpretation of the rural, together with the non-prescriptive atmosphere that strongly clashes with Cannes’ restrictive etiquette, activates a common culture among attendees that contributes to create what Fraser (1990) calls « alternative models of democracy » (Fraser, 1990: 57). While in Spain, the Festival de Cans is one of a kind, the growing media attention that the event is receiving, together with its growing attendance figures, points to the increasing importance of these experiences as viable alternatives to bigger, metropolitan film events, where narratives of purity, elitism, or global capitalism are the order of the day. Finally, while the tendency to explore unconventional screening environments is not new to the world of film festivals, the role that Cans plays as an institution that confronts cultural dispossession in a globalized world, represents a great opportunity for further research on the long-term impact that these events might have on the cinematic culture of small communities.

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