



PERCEPTIONS



Imagining PERCEPTIONS findings
through an engagement with Film:
DYSTOPIA



Location

Valencia, Spain, Swansea, UK and online



Contributors

Swansea University, Samuel Sebastian (Director), Esther Mamadou (SPAIN), UNIBO, Erasmus University Rotterdam, SYNYO and URJC



Audience

International viewers



Purpose/Aim

At the level of design, the collaborative film *DYSTOPIA* explores the representation of PERCEPTIONS themes through an engagement with Film, using visual and non-verbal communication. The Film is directly informed by different materials collected during the project. It focuses on the production and consumption of meanings related to migrants and Europe, which are the central topics of the PERCEPTIONS project. At the level of production and distribution, the Film reflects the cross-border cycle of film-making and different mechanisms of visual communication to reach broader audiences and maximise impact.

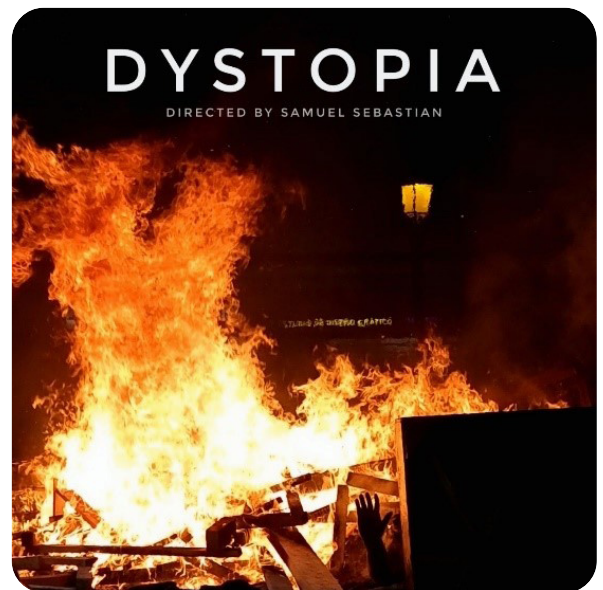
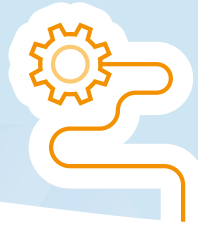


Figure 1: *DYSTOPIA* Poster (Ninots being burned)



Techniques

1. Exploring the production and consumption of perceptions and meanings

Since September 2020, regular discussions with Film's Director Samuel Sebastian have focused on three key issues: a) re-imagining of key migration concepts from the PERCEPTIONS project through DYSTOPIA film, b) borrowing from film theory to explore the representation of PERCEPTIONS themes and project's research questions, and c) linking spaces of Film with other visual outputs from the PERCEPTIONS project

a) Re-imagining migration concepts from PERCEPTIONS

Drawing on the theoretical discussions about representation and production of meaning, we considered how key concepts emerging from the migrant interviews within the PERCEPTIONS project (spatialities, temporalities, encounters with the unknown and foreign during migrants' journeys) can be put to work in the collaborative development of the DYSTOPIA film. We shared relevant papers published by the Swansea team (Shubin et al., 2014; Shubin and Sowgat, 2019; Shubin, 2022) and key quotes from the PERCEPTIONS interviews with the film-maker. The Director's Statement in the DYSTOPIA synopsis evidences the outcome of these discussions and their role in shaping the Film.

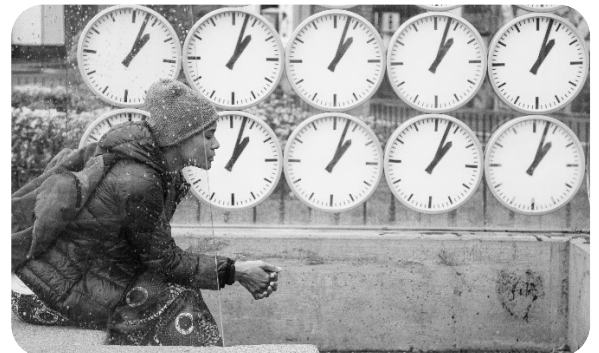


Figure 2: SPAIN is sitting next to several clocks - representing the feeling of timelessness that migrant and homeless people experience.

b) Using film theory to explore the representation of PERCEPTIONS themes

Building on the examples from film theory, we analysed **the use of cinematic techniques to convey migrant experiences and migration narratives** from the PERCEPTIONS project. Previous cinematic work by the film director Samuel Sebastian (2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2016a; 2016b) explored complex depictions of migrants, the interplay between technology and perception of migration, and the ways in which meanings are attached to mobile people, notably asylum seekers and refugees. Sebastian's particular interest is in raising awareness of refugees and their experiences by producing films, running audio-visual (film-making) workshops, collaborating with migrant-facing NGOs and promoting cinematic expressions of human rights as the Director of the International Film and Human Rights Festival of Valencia (HUMANSFEST). As a result of these discussions, the decision was made to produce a black-and-white film with the female African migrant as the main character and transgender actors involved.



Figure 3: SPAIN stands behind a fence. PERCEPTIONS of Migrants as isolated and bordered



Figure 4: All-Female Cast. Jen Gil (BELLA, left), Arantxa Ruix, (Executive Producer, middle), Esther Mamadou (SPAIN, right)

c) Linking spaces of Film and PERCEPTIONS visual outputs

Before the start of film production, discussions focused on the best ways to **integrate drawings and quotes from PERCEPTIONS** migrant interviews into the spaces of the DYSTOPIA film. We considered how the inclusion of actual migrant narratives and perceptions can **problematise the simplistic distinction between “true” and “false” representations** of migration, which draw on dominant moral frames of reference. We considered the **juxtaposition of enclosure and openness** in the migrant drawings, **conflation of different scales** (local and national in the perceptions of Europe) and **boundaries between private and public space** (contested meaning of home depicted by the migrants) and related this to how these visions were styled, choreographed and filmed in the earlier cinematic portrayals of migration. The film-maker highlighted the influence that materials ‘developed in the project PERCEPTIONS [had in the Film’s creation] – the disorientation experienced by the protagonists during the Valencian Fallas Festival, the lack of stability and uncertainty in their lives due to their legal status, and the lack of communication (voicelessness) through the main character’s inability to communicate.’ Migrant drawings from the PERCEPTIONS project were also adapted by the art students María Mas and Gabriel Ibáñez from Universitat Politècnica de València and later included in the Film. These drawings are prominently placed in the home (shack) of the Film’s main character, SPAIN, and highlight the transient and unstable nature of migrant experiences between private/public spaces.



Figure 5: BELLA and SPAIN communicate without language

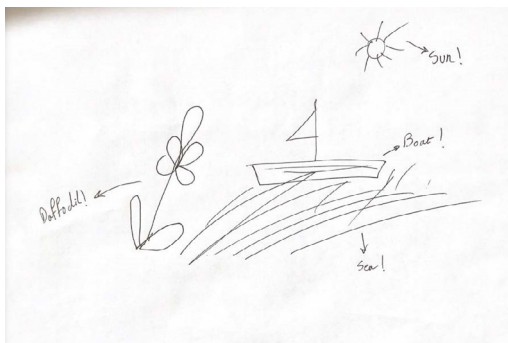


Figure 6 (Both photos):

Left - drawing made by a migrant during PERCEPTIONS interviews

Right - Drawing based on the left, made for DYSTOPIA

Stage 2 - Practical arrangements and production of the Film

Apart from co-designing the Film and informing its contents, the PERCEPTIONS project provides a financial contribution to the production of DYSTOPIA. To decide on this broader input and create a reporting method for PERCEPTIONS' link with DYSTOPIA, the PERCEPTIONS DYSTOPIA Film Working Group was formed – bringing together colleagues from SU, UNIBO, Erasmus University Rotterdam, SYNNO and URJC. A Microsoft Teams Team was created to allow the easy sharing of materials, including scripts, contracts, a film production roadmap, and to facilitate discussion of the Film without lengthy email correspondence, updated with new information and materials regularly.

Regular meetings were held to inform the group about the Film's situation and discuss colleagues from the wider project's ideas regarding how the PERCEPTIONS project could be further integrated into the Film. A review of the Film's synopsis was conducted by the Film Working Group, sharing ideas and potential changes to improve the narrative and PERCEPTIONS' input. Then a script review was conducted in a similar fashion with the film director expressly. The inputs from the Film Working Group were also discussed at the PERCEPTIONS consortium meetings, which provided suggestions for further meetings with the film director.

From the start of February 2022, weekly meetings were organised and recorded between the film director and Swansea University's team. The meetings involved other guests such as Esther Mamadou (Lead actor playing SPAIN in the Film). These meetings were created to discuss the Film's production progress and ensure the PERCEPTIONS input into DYSTOPIA. The meetings also involved interviews used to capture the film Director's vision and his use of the PERCEPTIONS research, which can form the basis of a future documentary about the making of the Film. Particular attention was paid to the actors' portrayal of the key concepts emerging from the PERCEPTIONS project findings, such as hope and uncertainty.

Current Roadmap for DYSTOPIA

WC = Week Commencing

TBA = To Be Announced

1. Complete the casting and crew of the film. Date (January, 22)
2. Complete film rehearsals. Date (12.03.22)
3. Develop content related to the production, actors, crew. Date (March, 22)
4. Incorporate content from the PERCEPTIONS project (interview quotes, drawing, images, sound recordings) into the synopsis of the film and indicate connections between the project's material and the film's script. Date (From July to November, 21)
- 4a. Complete Pre-production of the film: permissions, locations, equipment. Date (March, 22)
- 5. Film production begins (Payment process will initiate WC 21.03.2022) – 70% of invoice to be paid.**
6. Complete filming and collect all raw sound/image material Date (Beginning, April 22)
7. Develop marketing materials. Date (May, 22)
- 7a. Images, text etc. for social media. Date (May, 22)
- 7b. Develop teasers for the film, distribution on social media. Date (From May, 22)
8. Develop distribution plan for the film. Date (July, 22)
9. Complete Offline post-production. Date (September, 22)
10. Complete Online Image and Sound postproduction. Date (November, 22)
- 11. Film Completed and High-quality Digital Cinema Package Received by Swansea University. Date (November, 22). Final 30% of the invoice to be paid on completion of this KPI.**

Figure 7: DYSTOPIA Production Roadmap

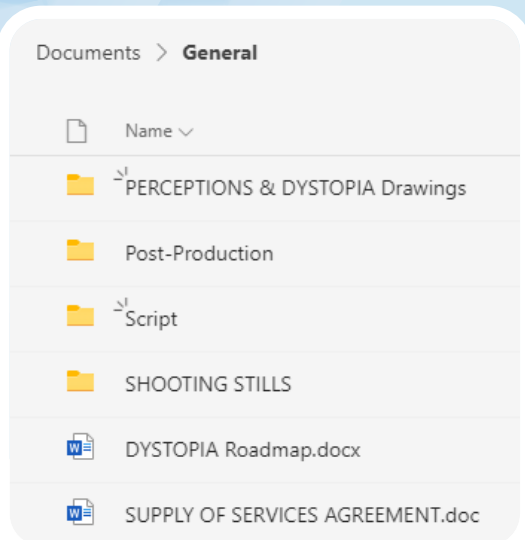


Figure 8: DYSTOPIA Film Working Group Microsoft Teams Files

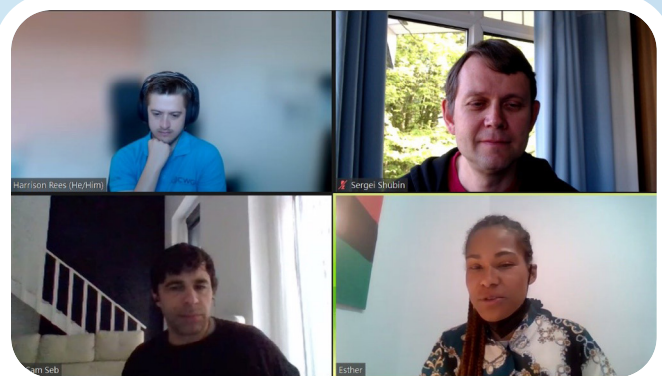


Figure 9: Screenshot from a DYSTOPIA Meeting. Harrison Rees (top left), Sergei Shubin (top right), Samuel Sebastian (bottom left), Esther Mamadou (bottom right)



Description of the Activity

1. Instagram reel - captioned on Harrison's phone

To advertise the Film, PERCEPTIONS' contribution to it and the wider PERCEPTIONS project, Instagram Reels were created to be displayed on Swansea University's main Instagram account. With over 27,000 followers, the Swansea University Instagram provided a large and diverse audience in which to disseminate the Film as a creative interpretation of migrant experiences and findings from the PERCEPTIONS project.



Figure 10: Post 1 - The first post consisted of a photo taken during DYSTOPIA's filming, depicting lead actor, Esther Mamadou (SPAIN), before a scene, accompanied by a caption that both enticed viewers to continue through the reels and highlighted the input of PERCEPTIONS in the Film.



Figure 11: Post 2 - The second post highlighted an article from Spanish media outlet, El Periodico De Aqui, that depicts DYSTOPIA as the first ever Spanish feature film to have an African woman as the protagonist. The photo shows Esther having her makeup done for a scene, with Director Samuel Sebastian in the foreground.



Figure 12: Post 3 - The third post shows Esther behind a fence looking at a Ninot, a stereotypical and satirical representation created for Valencia's Fallas Festival that depicts, in this case, an African woman, depicting conflicting and confusing perceptions of migrants. The caption tells the viewer of the themes from the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews that influenced the creation of the Film: hope, fear, uncertainty and faith, also providing a link to the PERCEPTIONS project website.



Figure 13: Post 4 - The fourth post shows the two other main characters in the Film, BELLA (Jen Gil), a trans woman and homeless migrant of unknown origin who works as a prostitute for money; and NORMA (Lucrecia Masserani), a migrant woman from Argentina who fled due to domestic abuse. The caption highlights DYSTOPIA's all-female cast and its story that follows the uncertainty and dangers faced by migrant and homeless women.

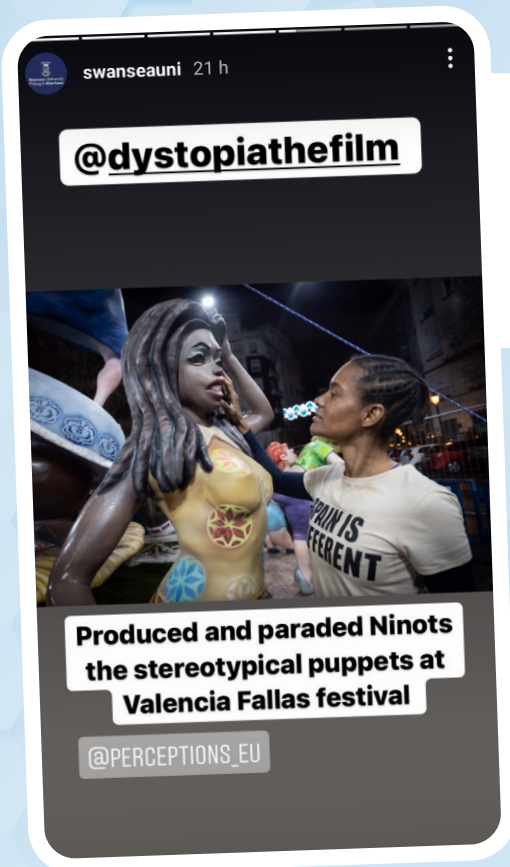


Figure 14: Post 5 - The fifth post shows Esther opposite the Ninot created for DYSTOPIA that is a stereotypical and satirical representation of herself. The caption tells the viewer of the way the Ninots are produced for and paraded in the festival.



Figure 15: Post 6 - The sixth post shows the ninot of Esther and others being burned during the Fallas Festival. The caption tells the viewer of the burning representing the liberation from the stereotypes that the ninots depict. Director Samuel Sebastian recalls the moment: "Something that happened unexpectedly. The ninot was a bit far from the fire, so a teenager kicked the ninot into it, which was meaningful, because of how the protagonist is treated in the movie and how migrants are treated in Spain. [metaphorically] The protagonist and migrants are kicked into the fire."



Figure 16: Post 7 - The seventh post shows the DYSTOPIA clapperboard used before scenes to assist in picture and sound production synchronisation. The reel encourages the viewer to continue following production by physically following DYSTOPIA's (@dystopiathefilm) and PERCEPTIONS' (@perceptions_eu) main Instagram accounts, also containing a link to the main PERCEPTIONS website.



2. QR Codes & Links to Instagram posts



Topic 1: Introduction

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CbpoaausEon/>



Topic 2: Puppet (invisibility and perceptions)

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CcANkCHu1dE/>



Topic 3: Disorientation (Mascelta)

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CcFTY7iuloP/>



Topic 4: Drawings

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CcShdABMKOm/>



Topic 5: Drawings 2

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccm1ogdurp3/>



3. QR Codes & Links to Twitter posts

Topic 1: SU_Perceptions DYSTOPIA Introduction

https://twitter.com/SU_Perceptions/status/1508444505074278400



PERCEPTIONS_EU Introduction

https://twitter.com/PERCEPTIONS_EU/status/1512392720064593922



PERCEPTIONS_EU Drawings 1

https://twitter.com/PERCEPTIONS_EU/status/1514203861396905985



PERCEPTIONS_EU Drawings 2

https://twitter.com/PERCEPTIONS_EU/status/1517062362951565312







Cinematic Representation of Themes From PERCEPTIONS

Figure 17: Esther (SPAIN) disorientated by a mascletà



a) Disorientation and loss

 **Film's script (English Translated):** 'A new MASCLETÀ... FIRECRACKERS and smoke cover everything... Further away from the mascletà than the day before, SPAIN stands with a lost look, one more in the crowd, while the smoke and noise continue to spread around her.'

 **Theme from PERCEPTIONS findings:** Many migrants interviewed during the PERCEPTIONS project spoke about the sense of **shock, loss and disorientation** during the journey to Europe. Uncertainty and disorientation reflect the process of waiting for the future that might never come true and sudden readjustments deforming migrants' dreams. One migrant explains:

"We got the air tickets, we sold out as a bargain all our belongings, we were ready to leave and these people (who promised help in Italy) changed their mind, cut the communication, stopped to replying messages, and ... we find ourself lost, what is happening? What is going on?" (Male, 40, Venezuelan, Married)




 **Links between the Film and PERCEPTIONS:** SPAIN finds herself in the middle of a crowd as she enters the Valencian Fallas festival. She is **disorientated, distressed and lost** in the sea of people, who appear blurred around her, deafened by a mascletà (pyrotechnic). Nevertheless, she stands out: "SPAIN IS DIFFERENT", her t-shirt says, a material signifier of her alterity to the locals and perception of Spain prior to her arrival. Despite physical proximity, the trauma, anxiety and loss in migration produce a psychological distance, not just to others in the crowd, but from her former self - distanced in time and space, which is familiar to many migrants interviewed in the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews. Esther (SPAIN) recalled the moment: "my self-consciousness disappeared, because I felt I was invisible. I lost my sense of shame, because no one looked at me. I gave myself an anxiety attack because it was so crowded and got claustrophobia. When focussing on the noise, it was easy to be disorientated. It is easy for someone who is not used to [the mascletà] to freak out."


Figure 18: Esther (SPAIN) applying a rudimentary sanitary pad in front of an optical illusion (trompe l'oeil)



b) False/true perceptions?

 **Film's script:** 'SPAIN is on the ground at the bottom of a dead-end. Behind her there is a trompe l'oeil that simulates an idyllic garden. We slowly approach her... In a very discreet way, although without hiding her discomfort, SPAIN makes sure that no one sees her.'

 **Theme from PERCEPTIONS findings:** Migrant interviews in the PERCEPTIONS project deconstruct the simplistic division between "true" and "false", "real" or "imagined" perceptions of Europe. Instead, migrants create different kinds of "reality", which reflect their particular ways of engaging with the world on the move. While idyllic imaginations of Europe from social media and Hollywood films have a particular hold on migrants before their journeys, these fantasies are often ruined after migrants arrive in Europe, partly because a single "reality" cannot satisfy multiple expectations and visions created earlier: *"It's like..... everywhere else, it's like wow, that's just suddenly not change but adjust my perceptions that I had in my mind about this romantic idea of Paris to the reality, you know, and suddenly just being aware that wow, those people begging for money, I don't know for real or not... I didn't think there were many poor people [in Europe]"*. (Male, 40, Mexican, Married)

 **Links between the Film and PERCEPTIONS:** This scene presents idyllic images of Europe prior to migrants' (particularly SPAIN's) arrival in the background, while the harsh reality of her current situation occupies the foreground. The "reality" she faces is the product of uneven power relations, and she appears out of place (both in spatial and moral terms) within this relatively static visual scene. The "idyllic" vision of the groomed European garden is interrupted by the Film's contextualised narrative (shot in Valencia), dissolving the self-contained perception of each locale. Director Samuel Sebastian described the idyllic cul-de-sac that SPAIN is in as "both a shelter and a trap. Because you are not as exposed as in the street, but if someone wants to hurt you, you cannot escape." The migrant, SPAIN, appears as a symbol of the disorientating impacts of migration – she is invisible to the locals yet watched by others through the camera lens. Esther Mamadou (SPAIN) described the scene "migrant women, whether from Latin America or Africa, they are kind of invisible, as [local] people don't want to take responsibility, they don't want to look and don't face it [migration]"

c) Deconstructing dominant perceptions

Film's script: 'The puppet walks in front of the feet of THE PUPPETIST. THE PUPPET PLAYER interacts with her own puppet although they never speak. A story is told through ONE LOUDSPEAKER with MUSIC and SOUND EFFECTS which is what LA PUPPETIST represents.

PUPPETIST (VO)

Slave, foreigner. You will never have rights to a name because you are a prisoner... please me!

In the distance, SPAIN watches the scene...'



Figure 19: Esther (SPAIN) watching a white puppeteer (Alba Yturralde) controlling an African made puppet

Theme from PERCEPTIONS findings: Many migrants in the PERCEPTIONS interviews spoke about living in liminal spaces and facing precarity in Europe, dehumanised and "othered" by the state. Despite fear and anger induced by the hostile policies, many migrants **deconstruct the dominant meanings and perceptions attached to them** as "forever foreigners". Using non-verbal communication, migrants refuse to be defined by their liminal status and use their cross-border cultural experiences to enact their belonging through empathy, listening and being together:

"Being understood is a human need, so just listening to what you are doing, being empathetic, is a really huge thing for many migrants ... many human in general, but specifically for migrants, because you have a cultural baggage, language baggage and all this baggage turn into barriers... Not everyone is able to cross that barriers. Now you are a bit more aware and you have more information about different country, different situations and it's food for thought". (Female, 31, Brazilian, Married)

Links between the Film and PERCEPTIONS: SPAIN's name was given to her by BELLA due to the language barrier, as they could not communicate. According to the Film's Director, Samuel Sebastian, this way of naming was "based on the materials provided to me by PERCEPTIONS", quoting the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews as inspiration. By bestowing a new name upon the main character through a tourism slogan, "SPAIN IS DIFFERENT", BELLA has unintentionally dehumanised SPAIN and reproduced the dominant perception of a migrant as "always already different". However, taking an active listening approach, two female characters in the Film develop trust, prompting mutual respect, reflexivity and a sense of togetherness. Similarly, SPAIN's encounter with the puppeteer **creates a space of non-verbal dialogue and inter-subjective corporeality**, which challenges SPAINs' racialised exclusion. Esther (SPAIN), when asked about the scene, said "it made me uncomfortable, both as SPAIN and as myself – thinking about how SPAIN would react [to the racially and sexually stereotypical puppet] made me cry."



Key Concepts

Real/reel – challenging perceptions of migrants and Europe.

This creative activity establishes the **relationship between the “real”** migration-related events filmed on camera **and the “reel” representation** of such events as it appears on screen (cf. Benton, 1995). Particular attention was dedicated to exploring how the DYSTOPIA film can reflect contested and overlooked meanings of migration (poverty, uncertainty, inequality) and **challenge common cinematic perceptions of migrants**, where their individuality and uniqueness are often limited to standardised, marketable stereotypes (Aitken and Dixon, 1995). It was accepted that there was no single migrant reality waiting to be filmed, but multiple meanings attached to uncertainty, invisibility, and hope experienced in migration and captured on camera (Cresswell and Dixon, 2002). Building on the works of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and philosopher Maurice Blanchot (quoted in Shubin, 2022), discussions around the design of the Film explored the **limitations of the Film to represent migrant’s “reality”** as well as their myths, dreams and expressions before or outside of language, reflected in drawings or mimicry.



Figure 20: Graffiti created for the film reading “WHITE BLACK LIVES MATTERS”

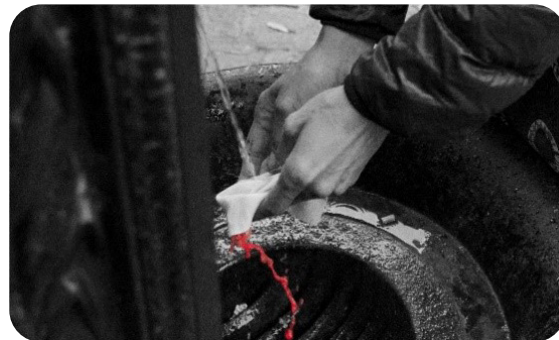


Figure 21: SPAIN washed her rudimentary sanitary pad. The blood is coloured to symbolise the unseen problems homeless migrants face



Filmic tools to reflect complex migrant worlds

The project explored how to adapt alternative (such as transgender, feminist) visions of migrations and their representations on Film (Emezi, 2019). Similarly, drawing on the works of director Terrence Malick, we discussed how **film narrative, sequence and rhythm can challenge normative conventions of depicting perceptions** of Europe and migrants. Building on the work of Gabriel (1982), we considered how specific camera techniques can undermine Western or European stereotypes of African migrants. We explored how camera angles and tilting/tracking techniques can **highlight the social disparity** of migrant actors in the Film; straight-to-camera dialogues can help to **develop empathy with the migrants**, while the comparison of different times in the Film can **highlight the contrasts between the migrants and the locals**.



Figure 22: SPAIN (Esther) stands in front of the stereotypical and satirical representation of her (ninet) created for the film



Figure 23: SPAIN (Esther) is viewed through the clocks seen in Figure 2

Drawn and cinematic perceptions.

We considered how the inclusion of actual migrant narratives, drawings and insights from the PERCEPTIONS project can **problematise the simplistic distinction between "true" and "false" representations** of migration, which draw on dominant moral frames of reference. We considered the **juxtaposition of enclosure and openness** in the migrant drawings, **conflation of different scales** (local and national in the perceptions of Europe) and **boundaries between private and public space** (contested meaning of home depicted by the migrants), relating these to how these visions were styled, choreographed and filmed in the portrayal of migration.

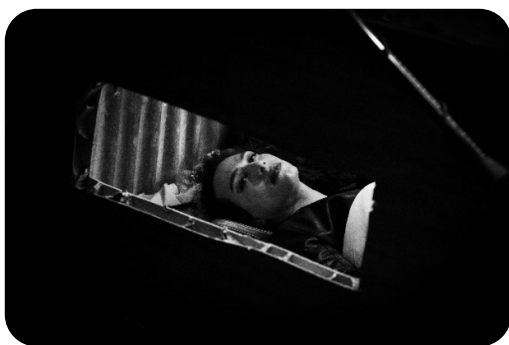


Figure 24: BELLA (Jen) inside SPAIN's home



Figure 25: SPAIN (Esther) distressed, invisible and ignored in a crowd



Outcomes

Film teaser used to draw attention to the key themes highlighted in the PERCEPTIONS project: <https://vimeo.com/samseb/dystopiaspain> / <https://vimeo.com/700240093>

Social media campaign (on Twitter and Instagram) designed to help with understanding the links between PERCEPTIONS project and DYSTOPIA and facilitate cultural translation of project's findings. QR codes were added to encourage the transfer and adaptations of filmic texts beyond their original cultural context

Preparation for public screening across Wales, including at the Taliesin Create Arts Centre and The Hay Cinema in Hay on Wye.

A selection of independent sections of the original Film will be made available to watch online on the PERCEPTIONS YouTube channel – as visual material for policy, guidance and training to encourage the provision of appropriate assistance and support for migrants.

Film teaser:



Password: DYSTOPIA22

For professional purposes only. *Not to be publicly disseminated*



Impact

The Film's production and dissemination on migration transcends the national borders and **reflects the cross-border cycle of film-making** described above. Post-production and editing of the Film involves 'practices and processes of cultural translation, transfer and adaptation' (Bergfelder, 2005: 315) in order to maximise the impact of this project and make the Film accessible to broader audiences. By sharing the dissemination of the Film across the project's partners, we aim to promote the broader project of an interconnected European culture while also **challenging some of the existing aesthetic traditions** and cultural norms in imagining Europe and migrants. In its focus on migration and uncertainty, DYSTOPIA resonates with the very foundations of the Western culture, which is 'at its very roots, about experiences of spiritual dislocation and homelessness' (Sennett, 1996: 6). With its focus on a black female African migrant in the leading role, DYSTOPIA **stresses the active agency of migrants** in developing cinematic visions of Europe and challenges gender bias in framing the portrayal of migrants.

Furthermore, with a limited number of dialogues in a European language included in DYSTOPIA, it does not depend primarily on the verbal dimension of cinema and highlights the aim of PERCEPTIONS creative materials in articulating cultural differences more than in words. The Film offers relatively open textuality and uses different mechanisms of visual communication (including drawings from the PERCEPTIONS project), which can increase its appeal to broader audiences. The project aims to use cross-cultural production to benefit from broader cultural references, marketing, and dissemination opportunities.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
1	Content Plan for PERCEPTIONS Project													
2	Period:	04/04/2022 - 28/04/2022												
3														
4				28/03/2022	06/04/2022	08/04/2022	13/04/2022	15/04/2022	22/04/2022	28/04/2022				
5		Topics	Day of Week	Mon	Wed	Fri	Wed	Fri	Fri	Wed	People/Orgs Involved	Tags		
6	Dystopia	Topic 1 - Introduction									SwanseaUni, DYSTOPIA #PERCEPTIONS_EU #H2020			
7		Topic 2 - Puppet (invisibili									SwanseaUni, DYSTOPIA #PERCEPTIONS_EU #H2021			
8		Topic 3 - Disorientation (M									SwanseaUni, DYSTOPIA #PERCEPTIONS_EU #H2022			
9		Topic 4 - Drawings 1									SwanseaUni, DYSTOPIA #PERCEPTIONS_EU #H2023			
10		Topic 6 - Instagram Reel									SwanseaUni, DYSTOPIA #PERCEPTIONS_EU #H2024			
11		Topic 5 - Drawings 2									SwanseaUni, DYSTOPIA #PERCEPTIONS_EU #H2025			
12		Topic 7 - PERCEPTIONS									SwanseaUni, DYSTOPIA #PERCEPTIONS_EU #H2026			

Figure 26: The Social Media Content Plan for DYSTOPIA

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PERCEPTIONS



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