
TRANSNATIONAL GANGS AS AGENTS OF EDUCATIONAL COMMONS: THE EXPERIENCE OF AN EXHIBITION

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ABSTRACT

Youth gangs have often been seen as agents of criminality and subject to stigmatization. In this text we show that they can also be seen as agents of the educational commons and subjects of exhibition. We rely on the results of the TRANSGANG Project, which, for five years, has analysed transnational gangs as agents of mediation in twelve cities in southern Europe, north of Africa and the Americas. The text focuses on the experience of the exhibition 'From Gangland to Transgang', which has presented the main results of the

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MuseumEdu 8 / Spring 2024, pp. 145-150

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project, exhibiting objects, images, testimonies, music and films collected throughout the research. After presenting the background of the project, we synthesize its script and the main exhibiting options, as well as its impact as an example of knowledge transfer.

Keywords: Gangs, Gangland, Transgang, Educational commons, Exhibiting cultures.

Introduction

The TRANSGANG research project, funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 program with an Advanced Grant from the European Research Council and led by the UPF, studied street youth groups of three different geographical areas from 2017 to 2023. Specifically, experiences of youth gangs have been analyzed in twelve cities of southern Europe (Barcelona, Madrid, Marseille, Milan), north Africa (Rabat, Algiers, Tunis, Djendelin Algeria), and the Americas (Medellin, San Salvador, Santiago de Cuba, Chicago).

One of the main conclusions of the project is that mediation, prevention and social work with youth gangs have to be prioritized over coercive and security policies. The research is committed to addressing the phenomenon of youth gangs on a global scale, because many of these bands have adopted a transnational character, which has been fostered by Internet and digital technologies. Likewise, the need to adopt a plural, not androcentric perspective when designing these policies is emphasized, a perspective which is not carried out from a single western vision, but that takes into considers the diversity of these street groups of youth, according to factors such as gender, ethnicity, their territorial context of action, etc.

Based on these conclusions, a white paper of public policy recommendations has been drawn up with youth gangs, and the TRANSGANG research team itself has promoted the realization of four documentaries to make visible the experience of youth gangs in some of the cities included in the research area (Feixa et al., 2023).

Figure 1: Poster of the Exhibition (Photo: Albert Cano)

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/n04deecvliid5ckc3k5kop/Expo.png?rlkey=ish2hpkkcfcy8qj81fibwyf8k&dl=0>

Exhibiting Gangs

'From Gangland to Transgang' invited visitors to understand contemporary gangs as one of the resources of globalized youth to defend their dignity against the criminalizing action that the penal State imposes upon them. The exhibition was organized in a linear itinerary mainly determined by the physical space, a gallery linking two different buildings of the university campus. Its content was structured in three main parts proposing a conceptual walk through a story that began a century ago ('From Chicago to the world'), spread over the world ('Seeking respect'), and inspired and created rich cultural expressions ('Gangpedia'). As a tool for transferring social research

from Academia to society, the exhibition used all kind of visual and material items, and oral testimonies mainly from ethnographical fieldwork.

From Chicago to the world

In 1927, Frederic Thrasher published *The Gang*, a monograph on 1,313 Chicago gangs, considered the first serious academic investigation into the phenomenon (Thrasher, 1927/2020). That same year, Josef von Sternberg premiered *Underworld*, considered the first gangster movie. With the Dry Law and the crisis of 1929, some street gangs evolved into criminal organizations or came under the control of the mafia. Over the next century, Gangland expanded from Chicago to the world. With the globalization of gangs, the classic strategies of the neoliberal Penal State model to prosecute them also became global. A legal reform in the United States in 1996 gave an extraordinary boost to deportations, and, consequently, accelerated the spread of both gang culture and police and penal policy. Both traveled together from North America to Central and South America, and then to Europe and the rest of the world.

Figure 2: Whittemore *Candy Kid* gang (Photo: P.& A. in F.M. Thrasher)

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/t8uva3s7p9li5ozee6or2/ny-crime-7-0822-1-1.jpg?rlkey=9d6hj7g1gldw2rklmqp7771f2&dl=0>

Figure 3: *Scarface, el terror del hampa* (*Scarface*. USA, 1932. Directed by Howard Hawks. Script: Ben Hecht, after Armitage Trail's novel

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/zoehcppyk31bbxewkoh66/scarface-2.jpeg?rlkey=c2qzoczrgl92axwglm4nzwz7p&dl=0>

Seeking respect

Despite the increasing criminalization of gangs, young people from all over the world gather in street families, as a form both of resilience and resistance against the punitive populism promoted by the Penal State. Their life stories show that they seek in these groups the respect and dignity the rest of society denies them. Three different kinds of response were illustrated by a series of photographs taken during the fieldwork: resistance, street groups and mediation (Feixa & Sánchez-García, 2022).

Figure 4: Self-injuries. Salé. 2022 (Photo: TRANSGANG-M. Iniesta)

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/rj1mud89x31kd4n9lzfby/29_2021_Self_Harm-2-Photo-Montserrat-Iniesta.jpg?rlkey=09p1eaaa9l2yq5tmivl7k2ua3&dl=0

Figure 5: Image of a newspaper.

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/tgtgrbe20jchmbvjfdiks/46_Avui-15-9-2006.jpg?rlkey=jlqedwycp4qodlqka8101u0zt&dl=0

Gangtopia

The imaginary of gangs is created from very diverse materials: the cinematographic production that has not stopped growing, the media, the scientific literature that tries to analyze them, and the cultural productions through which gangs imagine the world (music, dance, graffiti, performance). This part began raising the issue of how cinema have imagined the gangs, and showing a video created on fragments of three representative films on the subject: *Los olvidados* (Mexico, 1950. Directed by Luis Buñuel), *The Wild One* (USA, 1953. Directed by László Benedek), and *Ali Zaoua, prince de la rue* (Morocco, 2000. Directed by Nabil Ayouch).

As, besides ethnography, the TRANSGANG project used cinema to investigate this Gangtopia, a cycle was organized to show the three documentary films produced by the project: *Monte Tropic* (Barcelona, 2021. Directed by Andrés Duque), *Instrucciones para cuando no esté* (Medellín, 2022. Directed by Lukas Perro and Yira Plaza), *Al-Houma Dreams* (Rabat-2022. Directed by Boris Svartzman), and *The Sense of the Strings* (San Salvador, 2022. Directed by Marcela Zamora). These productions dialogue with fieldwork in a creative way and reflect the process of research without mechanically replicating it. Each of them started from a workshop with young people who participated in the project and interacted with the film directors to co-create a visual approach into their own lives and worlds (Mecca & Feixa, 2023).

A visual mural of photographs and several material items showed how the gangs imagine the world through a great variety of cultural expressions and closed the itinerary of the exhibition.

Figure 6: ‘The power of the street is great because it depends on the gaze. Looking is reality, it’s what I see. Everyone has their own look! Capitalism prevents you from looking’. (Ramzi. 20 years old. Tunis)

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/d5filqa2f1aw6w1o258a1/IMG_5964.jpg?rlkey=y5261nt2xiqdyckt6qtnyor1j&dl=0

Conclusion

Youth gangs have often been seen as agents of criminality and subject to stigmatization. In this text we have shown that they can also be seen and as agents of the educational commons and as subjects of exhibition. That is to say that young people assembling in gangs can also be seen as active agents in shaping and transmitting their own responses to negative contexts, in creating and negotiating -for example, through films or exhibitions- those self-representations they want to transfer to the new generations -as an educational tool from below- and to show to the world.

Funding

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC), under the European Union's HORIZON 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement 742705.

Project website: www.upf.edu/web/transgang.

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