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Rural film festivals: social functions, obstacles and challenges

Abstract

This investigation is centred on film festivals within Spain that take the rural world as their reference. A panoramic approach to an emerging trend is presented in the study. The concept of the “social function” is of central importance to the analytical perspective that is adopted, to understand what added value these sorts of festivals specializing in rural topics can contribute, especially in relation to the current challenges of rural depopulation. Qualitative methods are mainly used, based on semi-structured interviews with the people who direct and manage these sorts of events, with the support of digital documents downloaded from web-pages and searches for the digital footprint of rural film festivals on websites and social media. Promoting and financing a rural film festival is, at the very least, both a social and an organizational challenge, but our study distances itself from an economic viewpoint that might measure the success of a festival in terms of marketing, to contemplate its “social profitability.” From this perspective, we ask ourselves through which channels and to what extent are rural film festivals linked into the community. The results showed that, despite the vulnerability of the sector, these festivals represent an opportunity for links with the local area, social cohesiveness, and the revitalization of socio-cultural activities.

Keywords

Rural film festivals, rurality, cinema, cultural industries, social profitability, social functions.

1. Introduction

In a more or less emergent or explicit manner, the urban-rural dichotomy has always been with us. It sums up and defines two meaningful ways to confront life, inhabiting a place and living within it. It also occupies an undeniable ideological space in the discourse on modernity (García, 2001). As Pérez and Merino (2014) pointed out, rurality is understood as the link that a community establishes with a rural space, a relation through which the construction of social meaning takes place and the affirmation of identity: “It can be said that rurality is a form of relation between the human being and the rural space that implies the recovery of heritage and an appropriation of a symbolic nature” (*online resource*). Paraphrasing the words of García (2001), it is a good moment for us now to explain not only the city, but also rural spaces, so as to rethink the town and the countryside.

As part of that symbolic substrate, cultural industries, among which film festivals, have been filling a social space for decades within our environments, as a meeting place (Lee, 2012, pp. 100–103) that can gather together the collective links within the communities of each region. The study of film festivals as an academic field open to interdisciplinary research acquired greater weight when two researchers, Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist, founded the Film Festival Research Network (FFRN), in 2008. Since then, film festivals have awakened great academic interest and have been approached through different theoretical frameworks and historical, sociological, and economic perspectives. Then, in 2015, a specialized publishing house, Palgrave Macmillan, launched a series of publications called “Framing Film Festivals,” which has now published nine specialized books.

A large part of the studies on film festivals have been centred on questions related to their importance, in order to understand film-related production, distribution, reception, and aesthetics, as well as the promotional activities of the audiovisual industry at these events, in so far as they are “strategic nodes” (Iordanova & van de Peer, 2014). Among the functions of film festivals, Iordanova and van de Peer highlighted their capability to attract audiences, to establish a cinematographic culture, to promote the attractions of a region, and to provide local support for emerging talent, among many other variables (2014, p. 23). For Duffy (2005), film festivals are special events, created with the objective of building up the pride of the community and to “shape cultural difference and identity into some form of community to promote social cohesiveness and the feeling of belonging” (p. 681).

In Spain, the work of Jurado (2003) has mainly been focused on the impact of new promoters, analyzing the way that they are treated in the communications media (2003; Jurado & Nieto, 2013). The work of Vivar (2016) was, in turn, based on the study of the relation between festivals, the *new media* and the public. Fernández (2006) expressed interest in the economic impact of cultural festivals, through the specific case of the “Valladolid International Film Week,” and a study of the factors that determine attendance or otherwise at a film festival (Devesa Fernández *et al.*, 2015).

Despite the interest expressed in festivals with specialized thematic themes, investigations that cover the rural world as an area of analysis are still in a minority. Among them, the work of Connal Ó Duibhir on the Guth Gafa festival stands out, which first took place in a small rural environment of 106 inhabitants in the county of Donegal, Ireland. For the author, that festival offers a platform to discuss topics of a local nature through a particular rather than a general focus. In turn, Redondo (2015) centred his analysis on the “Curtas Vila do Conde–International Film Festival” of short films, a successful event at a Portuguese location, showing how trends can be set through peripheral cinematographic activities.

One of the most similar studies to our investigation is the work of Jurado and Cortés (2018), who isolated a total of 147 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2000 and 2002 with professional profiles from the sector to investigate the functions that they attributed to the festivals. Their work concluded that there were three aspects with which a film festival should comply, which were linked to the interests of the industry, the producers and the distributors. For the authors “it is not clear whether a film festival has to be a media circus for cinema, a professional meeting point, or a space for competitive exhibition” (2018, p. 84). They evaluated up to 18 functions associated with film festivals, among which may be highlighted: how to become a meeting place for professionals, the public, and the communications media; the promotion of films; a space for training, markets or festivals revolving around film, among others.

Each and every one of those functions is specific to film festivals, and the analytical perspective of this investigation is focused on their social dimension. The promotion and financing of a rural film festival, at the very least implies both social and organizational challenges, as well as economic and financial ones. Acknowledging the importance of the above, our study nevertheless distances itself from the economic viewpoint as the sole

referential framework for any interpretation of the results that could measure the success of a festival in terms of marketing. It does so to contemplate the “social profitability” of these festivals, which implies their capability to make a regional impact on the basis of social responsibility (Chaparro, 2009).

In contrast to the *glamour* of walking up the red carpets of Class A festivals such as Cannes, Berlinale, Venice, or San Sebastian, facing the war of budgetary figures, publicity, and audience numbers that are associated with those sorts of events, and the mediatic presence that accompanies them, we are aware that there are other sorts of events whose benefits cannot be measured in quantitative terms. Especially because we are in some cases talking about villages with fewer than one-hundred inhabitants; in other cases, it is a matter of autonomous communities, regions, counties, and municipalities with extensive geographical boundaries, and low population densities, something which concentrates the population within provincial capitals; and among the variables are likewise low incomes, the weight of the rural economy and the trend towards depopulation (Peralta *et al.*, 2020).

2. Social profitability in the context of rural film festivals

Studying social profitability in the context of rural film festivals is turned into a way of understanding the principles, values, and circumstances driving the dynamics of these events with a capability to mobilize the public, in cognitive, affective, political, and axiological terms (Galletero & Saiz-Echezarreta, 2022, p. 35); in this case, through cinema and proposals for programmes and parallel activities. Within the framework of cultural industries, the conceptualization of social profitability would be associated with a process of horizontal management, reinforced through networks of exchange, with contents that promote social and political participation (Carpentier & Scifo, 2010). It would be associated with collective groups that self-manage their own activities (McQuail & van-Cuilenburg, 1983), and with activities of a democratic nature that those groups build up through links with their social and regional environments, amongst other attributes (Chaparro, 2012). In the political and the business imaginary, on the contrary, the success of a project is frequently related with its economic performance, without responding to financing opportunities as a function of social profitability. A question that has been highlighted in previous investigations in the case of the communications media, through the application of the *Indicador de Rentabilidad Social en Medios de Comunicación* (IRSCOM) [Indicator of Social Profitability in Communication] (Chaparro *et al.*, 2016; Peralta *et al.*, 2022).

Tied to the concept of social profitability is the idea of a “social function.” The performative social functions of film festivals as spaces for subjective reflection, testimony, negotiation, and transformation are a key perspective in our theoretical focus. In *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968), Merton distinguished between manifest and latent social functions. Whereas the players within the social system plan the manifest functions, the latent functions make themselves felt at times without being recognized, nor searched for, nor planned. In any case, the maximum exponent of the social function is reached when it refers to observable objective consequences and not to subjective assessments, such as the end, the motive, or the purpose.

3. Objectives, materials and methods

In the light of the review of our academic literature and the theoretical framework that guides us, the principal objective of this study is to map out an initial study plan on the nature of film festivals with rural themes through the perspective of their social functions. We propose the following specific research objectives:

- RO1. Determine the principal social functions that rural film festivals serve, in a context of concern for the rural environment and its recovery.
- RO2. Determine whether there are recurrent patterns or elements relating to the activities, missions, and visions of rural film festivals.

- RO3. Understand the difficulties and the challenges that these sorts of festivals face.
- RO4. Detect some milestones and achievements from the point of view of social functions.
- RO5. Analyze the links between those milestones and achievements and the region and up to what point they are converted into a vehicle for social cohesiveness and regional networking.

Our starting hypothesis is the assumption that these sorts of events comply with relevant social functions, despite the obstacles and challenges that they face, as they can be turned into a vehicle for regional cohesiveness with a propensity for social activism, precisely due –or thanks to– the rural context in which the festivals are set and, where applicable, to depopulation.

There are numerous methodologies with which film festivals may be approached, as Paz and Vellejo (2021) have shown. We opted for the use of semi-structured telephone interviews for the specific objectives of our investigation, one of the most significant methods for qualitative approaches (Valles, 1999), it being a data collection strategy with which a series of pre-determined, but open questions may be asked. The utility of the method is evident in that some questions arise from the dialogue between the interviewers and the interviewees (Vasilachis de Guialdino, 2009).

The semi-structured interviews were over the phone rather than in person, given the geographical scatter of the interviewees. They were completed between July 2022 and March 2023, for the most part with people in charge of the events: individuals (in many cases the founders) and representatives of associations and municipal councils.

The participants were informed of the purpose of the interview, and their consent was sought to include the information in the present study and to record the conversation for subsequent transcription with automated systems. The interviews lasted between half-an-hour and one hour, in some cases running over that length of time.

The questionnaire was organized into three main blocks of questions:

1. Information: name of the festival (including web and social networks), name of the person in charge, and name of the interviewee, the association organizing the festival, and geographical and demographic data. In relation with the latter, the way in which the concept of rurality feeds into the festival dynamics was investigated.
2. Data on the profile, the management and the programming of the festival. In this block, the origins of the festival and its creative context were investigated. Data of an organizational sort were collected, in relation with the number of people hired, volunteers and collaborative associations, budgets and forms of financing, among others. Questions were asked on the film selection processes, programming activities and data on audiences.
3. Data on the social functions of the festivals. This block inquired into both objective data and other subjectively perceived data. In other words, as well as knowing the types of collaboration and specific actions with regional associations, questions were asked on how these actions were perceived to have driven social cohesiveness and up to what point they had promoted some type of beneficial transformation for the local area and its inhabitants. In that sense, the respondents were also asked what had made them feel prouder from the point of view of social functions.

Our database was generated and our sample was formed through searches of academic publications, blogs, the Internet, and newspapers. It was principally conducted thanks to the search engines integrated in the platforms for registration and submission of new films at film festivals. In all the searches, the label “rural” was used, a term that had to appear in the name of the festival, in some of its sections, or as a requirement in the terms and conditions for screening the films. The following search engine platforms were used:

1. Festhome¹: this search engine identified 10 Spanish festivals with the search term rural. However, no indicators of the total number of festivals within Spain were found.
2. Movibeta²: this platform returned 486 film festivals in Spain; however, no search results were returned with the search term “rural.”
3. Short films Archive³: this internet portal is exclusively dedicated to short film festivals within Spain. The search term “rural-ethnographic” was used, which returned 29 out of the 482 Spanish festivals on the database.

The interviews were conducted after having managed to contact the people in charge of the festivals, and having prepared extensive notes on them. Throughout the process, we managed to identify a total of 50 festivals of a rural nature; from among those 50, we selected the ones that specifically had the word “rural” in their names, discarding others that even though held in rural environments, were specialized in specific topics. Some examples are festivals like “Most Penedès – Festival Internacional de Cinema del Vi y el Cava”⁴ and “Mares da Fin do Mundo”⁵.

In parallel, we discovered references to a network of rural festivals that had disappeared: “*Cine Grande en pequeño*”⁶, a set of various festivals that aspired to set up national and international networks of rural festivals. The network and the festivals within it helped to create a more representative sample, as we could include festivals that had disappeared, with the purpose of illustrating and identifying the obstacles that some of the events had to overcome for their survival. These festivals were as follows: “Agrofilm Festival”⁷, “Festival internacional de cine rural de Galicia Carlos Velo” (FICCVELO)⁸, “Festival internacional de cine de Porcuna”⁹ and the “Mostra de cinema rural ‘Al nostre ritme’”¹⁰. Following that same logic of representativeness, two film festivals were also included that despite calling themselves rural cinema had their headquarters within a city. These were the “Festival internacional de cine rural” (FICRURAL)¹¹ and the “Festival de cine lento de Guadalajara”¹².

Contemplating the varied motivations, contacts were initiated until a sample of 20 festivals had been formed, whose representatives we managed to interview, as can be seen in Table 1. 20 out of a total of 50 festivals is not an exhaustive sample. Without being exhaustive, it is nevertheless a significant sample of the events under analysis. In all, 9 festivals were missing from the list, for which we created contact sheets, although they were never included in the final sample, following various unsuccessful attempts to contact them¹³, and some

¹ <https://filmmakers.festhome.com/festivals>

² <https://festival.movibeta.com/web/controllers/siteController.php?action=4>

³ <https://archivodelcortometraje.es/etiquetas-del-festival/rural-etnografico/>

⁴ Must Penedès – International Film Festival of Wine and Cava.

⁵ Seas at the End of the World.

⁶ “*Cine grande en pequeño*” [Big Cinema on a small scale].

<http://web.archive.org/web/20180423183820/http://www.cinegrandeinpequeno.org/index.html>

⁷ Agricultural Film Festival.

⁸ Carlos Velo International Rural Film Festival.

⁹ Porcuna International Rural Film Festival.

¹⁰ Selection of Rural Cinema “At our rhythm.”

¹¹ FICRURAL International Rural Film Festival of Galicia.

¹² Guadalajara Slow-Life Film Festival.

¹³ The festivals with which we tried unsuccessfully on various occasions to enter into contact were as follows: Semana de Cine Rural Villa de Saldaña [Rural Cinema Week in the town of Saldaña], Festival de cine de Afinidad Rural-RAFFA [Rural Affinity Cinema Festival], Muestra Nacional de Cine [National Cinema Show], and Mujeres Rurales [Rural Women], Al nostre ritme, Cinemascampo-encuentros de lo audiovisual y lo rural [At our rhythm, countryCinema-the audiovisual meets the rural], Festival de Cine de Música de Roca [Film Festival of Rock Music], Gateando-Festival de cine rural medioambiental Sierra de Gata [Walking on all fours-the Sierra de Gata Rural Film Festival], Festival Internacional de Time

representative festivals that were identified throughout the process 1. but too late to include them, either, among which: “Festival Internacional de Cine de Calzada de Calatrava,” with a section on *la España Vacuada* [Empty Spain], “Festival de Cans,” “Biosegura Cine, Medio ambiente y Mundo Rural,” “Luces, Cameros, Acción,” “MICE, Mostra internacional de cinema etnográfico Museo do Pobo Galego,” and “Lazos, Festival de Cine Descentralizado.”

Table 1. Sample of festivals and contextual information.

Name of festival	Year of creation	Locality and province	Inhabitants	Person interviewed
Muestra de Cine Rural de Dos Torres	1998/2002 (inactive but included by interest)	Dos Torres (Córdoba, Andalucía)	2,339	Miguel Coletto Vizuet (Council Cultural Officer/ Co-organizer)
Festival Internacional de Documental Etnográfico de Sobrarbe	2003	Boltaña, Comarca de Sobrarbe, 19 municipalities (Huesca, Aragón)	986	Patricia Español (Director)
Certamen de Cine de Viajes del Ocejón en el Montgó	2009	Jesús Pobre, Comarca de La Marina Alta (Alicante, Community of Valencia)	783	María José Ramos and Álvaro Pardo (Coordinators)
Mediu Güeyu	2011	Asturias	369	Tilo Martín (Co-founder)
Festival Cine Lento de Guadalajara	2011	Guadalajara (Castilla-La Mancha)	87,064	Elvira Ongil (Co-founder)
FESTIFAL Festival de Cortos de Temática Rural	2011 (biennial)	Urrea de Gaén (Teruel, Aragón)	436	José Ángel Guimerá (President of the Bajo Martín study centre and festival director)
Muestra de Cine de Ascaso – “la muestra de cine más pequeña del mundo”	2012	Ascaso, municipality of Boltaña (Huesca, Aragón)	7 of 1,065	Miguel Cordero (Festival Co-founder)
Festival Internacional de Cine de Porcuna	2012	Porcuna (Jaén, Andalucía)	6,156	Alberto Gallego (Festival Director)
AgrofilmFestival (Festival Nacional de Cortometrajes y Cine Rural del Parque Natural de Redes)	2013-2016	Sobrescobio and Campo Caso (Redes Natural Park, Asturias)	829 and 1,441	Ricardo Alonso (Co-founder/Director)
Rural Film Fest (Festival Internacional de Cinema Rural i Medi Ambient)	2013	Itinerant. In localities of the provinces of Ciudad Real, Community of Valencia and Alicante.	Varied population densities	Jaume Quiles and Alberto Gutiérrez (Founders) Joaquín Antón Larrosa, Head of Environmental and Agricultural Departments, Elche Municipal Council Juan Carlos Aranda López: Sustainability and Urban Mobility Area Coordinator. Elche Municipal Council

Lapse Molina de Aragón [International Time Lapse Festival Molina de Aragón], la Muestra de Cine de Aineto [Aineto Film Show].

FICCVVELO (I, II y III) / FICRURAL (IV y V) Festival Internacional de Cine Rural de Galicia Carlos Velo	2014-2019	Cartelle /Santiago de Compostela (Orense/La Coruña-Galicia)	2.570/ 97.858	Inés Vázquez (Co-Founder/Director)
Puertas FilmFest. L	2014	Puertas de Cabrales, Natural Park of the Picos de Europa-Asturias, Cabrales Council (18 pueblos), Asturias	50 de 1.942	Griselda Coro (Co-founder)
Cortometrajes Mudos Goya Rural	2018	Fuendetodos (Zaragoza, Aragón)	142	Sonia Rodríguez Penich (Councillor for culture and festival director)
Muestra y Festival Audiovisual Peralejos Caminos Cortos	2018	Peralejos de las Truchas (Guadalajara, Castilla-La Mancha)	152	Nerea Moreno (Director)
Muestra de Cine de La Vera	2018	Jarandilla de La Vera (Cáceres, Extremadura)	2,805	Mane Cisneros Manrique (Director)
Festival Internacional De Cine De La Siberia “Reyes Abades”	2019-2020	Comarca de la Siberia (11 municipalities, Badajoz (Extremadura)	Varied population densities ¹⁴	José Antonio Morales (President NGO Humanitarian Mission and Festival Director)
Festival de Cine Ambiental Ecozine Rural	2019	Aranda de Moncayo (Zaragoza, Aragón)	145	Lydia Bermejo (Director)
Festival de Cortos por el Desarrollo Rural	2020	Guzmán (Pedrosa del Duero, Burgos, Castilla y León)	102	Beatriz García Rodríguez (Member of the association Sanidad Rural. Festival of short films for rural development)
Festival de Cinema Rural Espadà CASDA	2021	Tales, in the natural park of Sierra de Espadà (Castellón, Valencia)	825	Moisés Agustín Torres (Festival Director)
RURÉFILOS, Festival Internacional de cine y mundo rural	2022	Rabé de las Calzadas and Tardajos (Burgos, Castilla y León)	229 and 783	Inés Vázquez (Founder/Director)

Source: Own elaboration with population data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE) [National Institute of Statistics], 2021.

4. Results

4.1. Cinema and rurality: a concept found throughout Spanish geography of diverse origin

The set of film festivals with rural themes share a series of recurrent features and elements in relation with each one of their objectives and missions. In general, many of them are looking, on the one hand, for films that are set in rural zones and, on the other hand, that reflect rural themes. Likewise, the passion for cinematographic culture arises as the driving force for the creation of the festivals, offering “other” forms of audiovisual leisure and culture, in contexts with a strong predominance of popular culture, traditions and religiosity. Another

¹⁴ From the 283 inhabitants of Baterno to the 3,500 of Herrera del Duque, the capital of the county of Siberia, Extremadura.

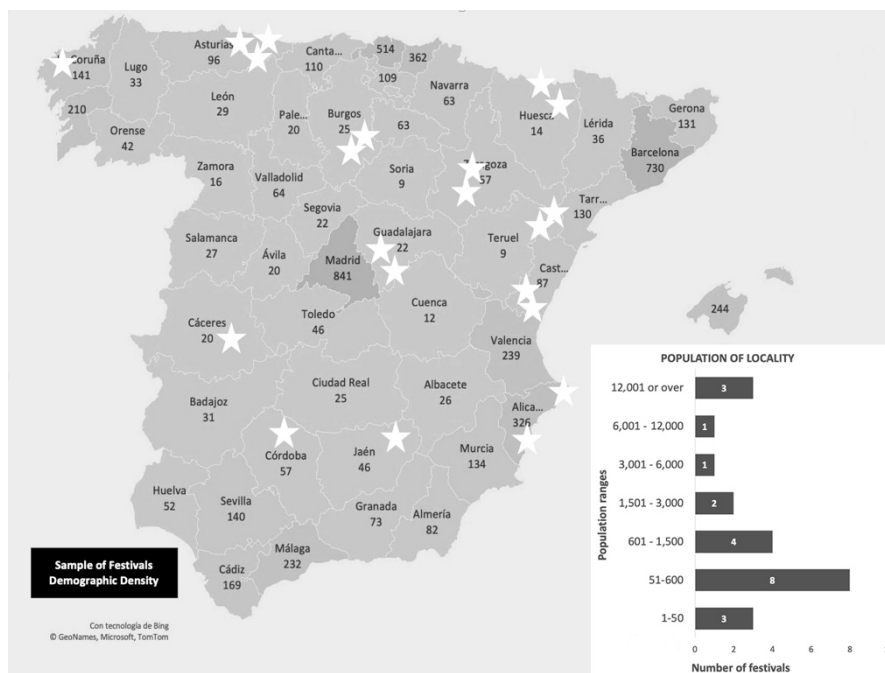
of the great attractions behind the conceptual foundation of the sample of festivals is the idea of showing a “different” sort of quality cinema that is located outside the commercial circuit and that can only normally be enjoyed in cinemas within large cities.

As added value, some festivals flag an interest in cinematography that can offer a positive image of rural environments and the way in which today they represent an alternative for a lifestyle that is more in accordance with the seasonal cycles of nature, with the circular economy and with a concept attached to the idea of social and environmental justice.

Some of them have a line of work that is closely linked with social conscientization, adding intersectional layers, which add to the concept of rurality, such as the environment, gender and the visibility of minority communities. Among them all, we can highlight “Cinema Rural Espadà CASDA” (Tales, Regional Community of Valencia), an event that is sensitive to the realities of the LGTBI community in rural zones, on the one hand, and the incidence of HIV Aids, on the other.

The film festivals with a rural theme in this study are found throughout Spain in very varied geographic and populational contexts, from Aragón to Andalucía, and from Galicia to Extremadura. The festival locations are shown in Figure 1, with indicators on the population density of their venues, a preliminary indicator that helps us to map out the festivals under the heading of “rural film festivals” and their varied justifications.

Figure 1. Map with indicators of population density (2021).



Source: Own elaboration based on INE Data, (using a map under a Creative Commons License by Pedro Wave)¹⁵..

In terms of population, 14% of the festivals within the sample were located in villages with no more than 50 inhabitants. Most of the festivals, 36%, had their headquarters in villages with no more than 600 inhabitants.

The two festivals with headquarters located in urban centres with larger populations were the “Festival internacional de cine rural” (FICRURAL) and the “Festival de cine lento de Guadalajara,” held respectively in the cities of Santiago de Compostela, with 97,858

¹⁵ Source: <https://pedrowave.blogspot.com>

inhabitants, and Guadalajara, with 87,064 inhabitants (according to INE 2022). FICRURAL was launched as FICVELO, the first rural film festival of Galicia, in the small village of Cartelle, although with survival in mind, it finally moved to the capital. At the other extreme, is the “Muestra de cine de Ascaso”¹⁶, whose ‘catch phrase’ defines it as “the smallest film festival in the world.” It has its headquarters at a small, almost uninhabited village, in the municipality of Boltaña (country of Sobrarbe, Huesca), with a mere 7 inhabitants, once its two co-founders, Nestor Prades and Miguel Cordero, had registered themselves as residents there. The following are among the social milestones associated with such a unique film festival:

- a. The construction of an access road to the village.
- b. The rehabilitation of traditional constructions within the village (Bordas).
- c. The transformation of an old and inviable plan for a hydro–electricity generation plant into a new solar park, connecting the village to the electricity grid for the first time in its history.
- d. Mobilizing audiences of between 1,200 and 1,500 spectators.
- e. Managing a budget of €30,000 (2022 festival), well above those of the other festivals under study, and in line with the dynamism of the activities that were organized.

4.2. An emergent, unstable, and growing sector

The emergence of rural film festivals in Spain took place as from the 1990s. One of the oldest in our study and, according to Miguel Coletó¹⁷, the first rural film festival in Spain that is still ongoing, is the current “Muestra de cine rural de Dos Torres”¹⁸ (Córdoba, Andalucía). This festival was first celebrated at Pedroche in 1998, sponsored by the University of Córdoba. In 2002, it was moved to its headquarters at the village of Dos Torres where, organized through the village council, it was an international and local competition for its first ten years. After that time, it was turned into a national non-competitive festival of full-length feature films, always connected to the university, and maintaining support for new creators through the organization of an instantaneous film marathon, an activity that was outsourced to “La Penultima Productions.”

One year later, in 2003, another festival sprung up in the same municipality as the present-day “Muestra de cine de Ascaso,” the “Festival Internacional de Cine Documental Etnográfico de Sobrarbe-Sabiñánigo”¹⁹ (Huesca). Also known as “Espello,” this festival was the first with the documentary specialization in Spain, adding an ethnographic dimension to rural film festivals. Both festivals have shown notable continuity over the years that has, in the end, given them a quality seal and a distinctive identity.

The years during which there was greater dynamism in the launch of festivals with rural themes were between 2011 and 2015, as may be seen in Graph 1. Those years, at the start of the decade, were marked by the need for specialization among the film festivals after the widespread *boom* of the 1990s (Jurado, 2003). They also coincided with campaigning on the social problems of depopulation, the consequence of or a reaction to the studies in which depopulation was presented as a problem and a controversial social issue (Cefai, 2016; Peñarín, 2017; Galletero & Sáiz-Echezarreta, 2022). Graph 1 also shows how the five-year period between 2016 and 2020 underwent a slight deceleration evident in the abrupt “slow down” during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2022).

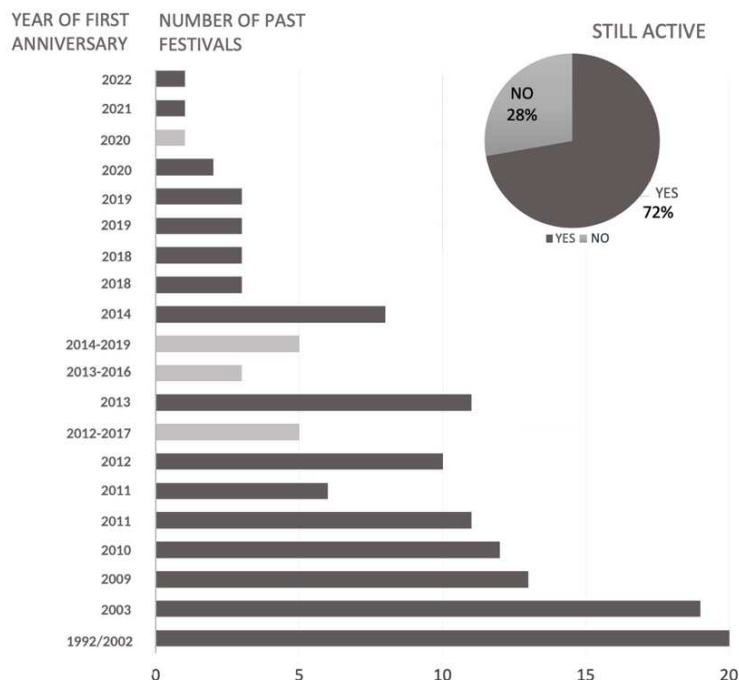
¹⁶ Ascaso film selection.

¹⁷ Council officer of the Dos Torres Village Council and one of the present-day managers of the Film Selection (interview, 03/09/2022).

¹⁸ Dos Torres Rural Film Selection.

¹⁹ Sobrarbe-Sabiñánigo International Ethnographic Documental Film Festival.

Graph 1. Film festivals with rural themes launched in Spain and number of past festivals (active or otherwise).



Source: Own elaboration.

In view of the reasoning behind the launch of each festival, perhaps one of the principal indicators of quality and the existence of a solid project is its continuation over time. Graph number 1 gives an example in which it can be seen that the two most longstanding festivals have celebrated their 19th and 20th anniversaries, respectively. Alongside those festivals, there is an intermediary band of some five festivals with functional life-spans of between 11 to 14 anniversaries. A lower band includes 3 festivals with 4 or 5 anniversaries, and finally 8 festivals that have not celebrated more than 3 anniversaries.

Curiously, some of the recently founded festivals owe their appearance to evidence of socio-health failings that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light. It applies to the case of the “Festival de Cortos por el Desarrollo Rural”²⁰ (Burgos), which was launched in 2020, following the launch of an association called Sanidad Rural, to alleviate the lack of health resources in the village of Guzmán, within the county of Pedrosa del Duero (Burgos). That festival was launched online, because of the restrictions on physical contact that had been established, and in 2021, it also started to be held in person. The festival has an archive on the YouTube platform where all the short films from the yearly events may be viewed. Since 2020, it has been held without interruption, the first festival being limited to the theme of “rural health”; and in 2021, it was enlarged to “rural development,” to try to highlight other limitations affecting these populations.

It is a vocal festival, organized by the Management of the Association with a team of village volunteers. The uniqueness of this event is that it seeks to encourage anybody to participate, whether *amateur* or professional, of any nationality and, in its approach, the idea rather than the quality is underlined as important. It therefore acts as a portal, so that the public as a whole can reflect on rurality and the different issues surrounding depopulation. The festival promotes “community cinema,” a valuable social practice, as Gumucio (2014) recalled, because it impacts on the strengthening of cultural identity.

²⁰ Festival of Short Films for Rural Development.

The most recent creation in the sample of projects for analysis, “Ruréfílos, Festival Internacional de cine y mundo rural”²¹, dates back to 2022. Its director is Inés Vázquez, who was at the same time one of the founders of the “International Festival of Rural Cinema of Galicia,” one of the most affected during the pandemic, embarking on another adventure, on this occasion as a cultural coordinator outside Galicia. The first anniversary of this singular festival was in June 2022. To do so, Inés Vázquez carried out what she called “a casting of villages,” to select the village councils that she considered of most interest. The distinctive identity, which she wished to impress on Ruréfílos, was the link between culture, development and sustainability. The mayors of both councils that were selected –Rabé de las Calzadas and Tardajos– in the province of Burgos, a few kilometres from one another, joined forces to host the festival with an initial budget of around €8,000. In this case, a small part of the budget was assigned to pay for management services. According to Vázquez “although it’s not an income, it is one of the few times that the effort of the organizers has been financially acknowledged” (interview, 08/90/2022).

4.3. Infrastructure, social ties and budget

Numerical indicators, as we have said, are not the principal basis used to describe the level of success or the achievements of a festival, but they are thought to serve to map out the realities that underlie the concept of the “rural film festival.” Table 2 shows information relating to infrastructure and social ties through a series of numerical indicators. As may be seen, the festivals operate within a range of minimal means and resources, but from the qualitative focus, the priority is to understand and to interpret the real need that they satisfy and the benefits that they provide to the populations of the local areas where the events are held, as well as the effort associated with cultural activism.

Table 2. Numerical indicators taken from the 20 interviews.

INFRASTRUCTURE		
HEADQUARTERS	With own headquarters	5
	Without own headquarters	12
	With cinema	2
	Without cinema	16
FILM PROJECTION ROOM	1 film projection room	7
	2-3 projection rooms	6
	3-5 projection rooms	5
	More than 5	0
PEOPLE EMPLOYED	Nobody employed	6
	Single person project	2
	2-5 people	5
	5-10 people	2
	10-20 people	1
	More than 20	2
SOCIAL TIES		
VOLUNTEERS DURING THE FESTIVAL	2-5 volunteers	4
	5-10 volunteers	3
	10-20 volunteers	5
	More than 20	6
COLLABORATION WITH ASSOCIATIONS	1-2 associations	6
	3-5 associations	10
	6 or more associations	2

²¹ Ruréfílos International Film and Rural World Festival.

PARALLEL ACTIVITIES	YES	17
	No	1
	Tourist visits/Promotion/Cultural Tours	10
	Music/concerts/dance	13
	Street theatre	3
	Exhibitions	16
	Workshops	17
	Raffles	2
	Gastronomic festivals/meals	10
	Debates/round tables	17
TALKS/DEBATS AFTER FILMS	Yes	20
	No	0
	Only film-related	4
	Only on social topics	0
	Both	16

Source: Own elaboration.

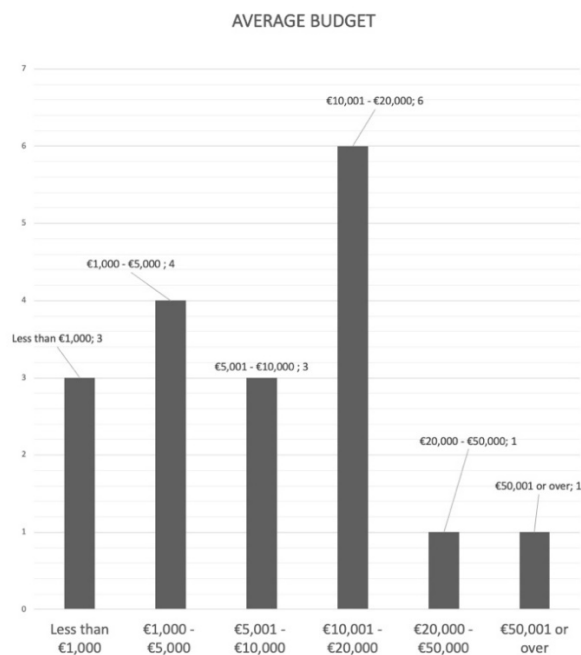
In relation with the infrastructure, it was observed that 69% of the festivals lacked their own headquarters and 88% had no cinema. However, 35% of them had between 3 and 5 halls or spaces, generally using spaces provided by the village councils: conference centres, village squares, or similar places. It might appear surprising where temporary headquarters were set up, such as in the “Mediu Güeyu”²² festival, in which films were screened in a hayloft as the festival travelled through small villages within the district of Villaviciosa (Asturias). There were –unfortunately– few occasions on which films were screened in cinema theaters appropriately prepared for viewing the films that had been selected.

In relation with the budgetary question, most of the festival organizers qualified the funding of the film festivals as a great challenge or difficulty. The co-founder of the “Rural Film Fest,” Jaume Quiles, expressed as much in the following terms: “The most difficult thing over these years, up until we had managed to consolidate the event, was the funding, the lack of support, the constant struggle and the insecurity of not knowing what was going to happen next year, which meant that we were all feeling quite insecure” (interview, 29/07/2022).

The budgets covered plans that ranged from those festivals that were financed with less than €1,000 –and even at zero cost– to other festivals that have over time consolidated their budgets, exceeding €50,000, with examples that are even solvent, such as Espiello (€70,000). Nevertheless, festivals with budgets ranging between €10,000 and €20,000 occupied the widest band, as shown in Graph 2.

²² Mediu Güeyu Festival [Half an eye Festival].

Graph 2. Average budgets of the festivals that were studied.



Source: Own elaboration.

4.4. *The reality on the ground of the social functions: towards qualitative indicators*

In this last section, we will review the indicators that link the results of the field work with the idea of the social functions of rural film festivals. Some of these indicators have a quantitative and factual basis; and others refer to the opinions of the interviewees and the inductive interpretations that have been advanced. Both appear equally important to us, because they help us to establish the social strong points of these events that are the focus of this study. It is worth highlighting the hallmark of the programming (which includes both the selection of films and parallel activities), in order to have a social impact within the region. All the festivals in the sample make the effort to invite the film directors, so as to be able to hold public debates on the details of the production in the Q&A sessions. These sessions act as vehicles for the exchange of ideas and critical thought, while generating social cohesiveness. The study highlighted the interest in carrying out other types of initiatives, such as debates (19%), workshops (19%), exhibitions (15%), concerts and live performances (15%), gastronomic activities (11%), and other minority activities such as street parties and raffles, among others.

In our opinion, one of the principal social functions of the festivals is their coordination with the local region and their networks of associations and groups. Table 2 shows this social link through the number of volunteers participating in the festivals. Thus, most of the festivals fall within a band that has over 20 people for those purposes, at 29%. 33% of the festivals have between one and two people working with associations, and 11% of them involved over 6 associations as festival participants.

Among the noteworthy examples from the point of view of the collaborative network of people, it is worth mentioning the Sobrarbe “Espiello” festival, which started as an initiative of three people who believed in the need to create an activity combining cinema and ethnography. In its second edition, in 2004, there were already ten volunteers, an indicator that events of this sort generate social dynamics at the same time as filling a cultural gap in many cases. At present, it has a team of 35 volunteers and a solid network of sponsors among

the public, as well as three people in long-term employment²³. Patricia Español, a culture officer with the Sobrarbe county council and the director of “Espello,” felt proud to see how the festival activities had expanded far beyond the days of the event itself and during six months, for example, a group of people were involved in the screening of the films, with a view to their selection (interview, 06/07/2022).

Up to 30 of the 142 inhabitants of Fuendetodos were involved in “Cortometrajes Mudos Goya Rural”²⁴ in such tasks as the classification of short films and the festival logistics. In turn, the “Cinema Rural Espadà CASDA”²⁵ has managed to involve local associations such as elderly women from the Active Participation Centre, the Castelló LGTBI Collective and Tales Town Council to carry out such tasks as the preparation of posters to decorate the film projection room, logistical questions, and the panel membership, among others. For Jaume Quiles, the main social function that was developed through the “Rural Film Fest”, now the “Festival Internacional de Cinema Rural i Medi Ambient”²⁶ was to have encouraged the municipalities to feel part of the festival.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In this investigation, light has been cast on an incipient field of research into film festivals with rural themes that are held in rural environments, with populations ranging from 7 inhabitants, which is the case of Ascaso (Huesca), to the 97,858 inhabitants of the city of Santiago de Compostela (Galicia).

The study connects its results with some of the leading references from the theoretical framework, demonstrating in first place that the concept of social profitability (Chaparro *et al.*, 2016), which has been applied in other contexts and for other ends can serve as a qualitative framework from which to analyze this type of event in the cultural industries sector. It might be desirable, in that sense, to continue advancing with the idea of developing an indicator for which, in the same way as IRSCOM, suitable variables could be developed, so as to assess the intrinsic and extrinsic quality of rural film festivals.

The study has also demonstrated that the underlying characteristics of the film festivals, as they have been defined by other authors (de Valck, 2007; Devesa, 2006; Iordanova & van de Peer, 2014) are also applicable to rural film festivals. But, above and beyond what they may reveal, in line with the precepts of Dovey (2015), each festival is a creation in itself, and like a “*film d’auteur*,” they must be contemplated as “unique works.” In fact, as has been demonstrated, these events have shown flexibility in adapting themselves to the specific circumstances or belief systems within which they have been developed.

The analysis of the sample of 20 festivals in demographic terms leads us to note that the majority of urban centres that cover these events are villages with fewer than 1,500 inhabitants. That information is relevant, because according to demographic studies in Spain (2022), urban centres of between 1,500 and 2,000 inhabitants are those that act as providers of cultural services for other smaller villages. In some way, our results contradict that affirmation, because half of the festival headquarters in our sample are located within villages with fewer than 600 inhabitants. This fact reflects their importance as cultural satellites from the point of view of their social functions; which is to say, they have turned themselves into agents and animators of cultural life, despite having a small population.

²³ Among others, the *Comarca de Sobrarbe* [County of Sobrarbe], the Centro de Estudios de Sobrarbe [Sobrarbe Study Centre], the Diputación de Huesca [Huesca Provincial Council], the European Union (Next Generation EU); the Government of Spain (Ministry of Culture, ICAA) and the *Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia* [Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan], Government of Aragón.

²⁴ Goya Rural silent short films.

²⁵ Espadà Rural Cinema CASDA [Castelló Citizens Association against AIDS].

²⁶ International Rural and Environmental Film Festival.

Our study has led us to reflect on an underlying debate in relation to the difference between festival “selection” and “film” festival. The “Muestra de Ascaso” can be used to highlight a theme that is common to some of the events under analysis, such as “Dos Torres” (Córdoba) and “Mediu Güeyu” (Asturias). The latter two were initiated as competitive film festivals, although they were subsequently forced to limit their format to non-competitive cinematographic film festivals. It was mainly due to the excessive load associated with the management of guests, film selection, and screening. It is worth recalling that any festival, however remotely located its headquarters are, can receive a large volume of films, thanks to the involvement of the distribution platforms. It is a relevant aspect, because in general the festivals have a far broader spectra of functions than a cinematographic selection. With regard to support for fringe cinema, the advantages of festivals are far greater than film selections for strengthening professional relationships and interaction between the local area and the exterior world. Hence the “loss” of a festival or its recreation as a selection is generally translated into a loss in the scope or spectra of social functions.

The organization of festivals on low or medium budgets in no way means that the actions that are carried out cost that money, but rather that many are achieved with the extra effort of their organizers supported by an indispensable network of generally unremunerated volunteers. Proof of this is that the festivals such as “FICVELO I and II” (Orense), the successive celebrations of the “Muestra y Festival Audiovisual Peralejos Caminos Cortos”²⁷ (Guadalajara), the “I Festival Cine Lento” (Guadalajara), the “AgroFilm Festival I and II”²⁸ (Asturias), and the “Puertas FilmFest I”²⁹ (Asturias) were, according to their respective promoters, organized at zero cost. It all speaks volumes of the need to professionalize culture. In that sense, the “Ruréfílos” festival, in so far as it attempts to organize the festival through an emphasis on the professional role of the cultural manager, may well represent a path to follow.

Some councils, on the other hand, have contributed stability and professionalization when involving themselves in the dynamics of the festivals. Thus, the “Rural Film Fest” (“Festival Internacional de Cinema Rural i Medi Ambient”) was launched in 2013 as a travelling selection of films in Castilla-La Mancha, at the initiative of two filmmakers, Jaume Quiles and Alberto Gutiérrez. The average budget for the event stood at around €10,000 to €12,000. In 2022, Elche Municipal Council expressed interest in the concept of this festival, after its organizers had requested sponsorship. The municipal council, through the Council Department for Energy Efficiency, Rural Development and Commerce made an offer. As Juan Carlos Aranda (2022), sustainability officer of the council, affirmed: “more than sponsorship, we were interested in being co-organizers, with a larger budgetary contribution, but with a commitment [from the festival] to stay at Elche. Forming part of a festival of this type is a means of attracting people from the city to the countryside” (interview, 09/03/2022). The festival budget currently stands at €40,000. The participation of the municipal town council, like many that support these events, is not a cash contribution. Instead, the municipality assumes the costs that in previous events were charged to the festival, thereby freeing up more of the budget to carry out new activities. In any case, it is one example of how a particular initiative is “adopted” by a public institution in an exercise of symbiosis between culture and public sector management. In 2022, films from 28 countries were screened at the festival, with a daily total of 40 people invited to the 9-day long festival and with the presence of 76 people active in the world of cinema and production.

In conclusion, the aim of this paper has been to cast light on the social profitability of some cultural initiatives that carry out essential work in the construction and the

²⁷ Peralejos Short Paths Audiovisual Festival and Selection.

²⁸ Agrofílm Festival I and II – National Festival of Short Films and Rural Cinema of the Redes Natural Park.

²⁹ Puertas FilmFest.

empowerment of citizenship, exercising a public service. The first general conclusion is a confirmation of the starting hypothesis, noting that it is a vulnerable sector with budgetary shortfalls and that in some cases it is very exposed to the ups and downs of political and municipal life.

However, from the analytical perspective of a non-economic viewpoint, it has been demonstrated that rural film festivals engage in relevant social functions that justify their existence and organizational effort. Beyond the indicators that link the success of film festivals with figures and numbers of participants, events undertaken, and invitees, among many other indicators, the need to interpret the results is highlighted in this research, in the case of the initiatives which concern us here, through the lens of social profitability. More than the *share*, to use a parallel term in the world of audiovisual media, what these festivals demonstrate is their capability to impact on a local area, responding to a cultural type of need, in accordance with the parameters of communication and activities entailing social and human contact. Moreover, some of the festivals have managed to consolidate their activities over the years, giving them a quality seal and a distinctive brand name, managing to generate both internal and external dynamics, from the periphery towards the centre and *vice-versa*. Some festivals have managed to contribute to the local community, through cinema, other realities of rural life from other latitudes –whether common, shared, or different– at the same time as having attracted audiences from outside the county. However, over and above any national or international ramifications, these festivals with rural themes demonstrate that they are conceived to cover concrete needs on a municipal, county, or regional scale.

And it is within that area where they exercise their principal social functions, as we have defined them in this study, leaving a clear trail of how cultural events of this sort can serve as a vehicle for regional cohesiveness with a propensity for social dynamism, precisely due to – or thanks to– the rural context in which they are set, and where applicable to depopulation. On numerous occasions, “social success” and the continuity of events of this sort are clearly linked to the social groundswell that sustains them. This is quite evident, in line with the requirement of Merton (1968), through the numerous associations that are linked to the festivals, finding interesting channels for mutual collaboration with public associations, NGOs for social assistance, women’s associations, mother’s associations, minority groups, and citizens in general, among others. By mobilizing the public, through the network of associations, people within the local area come to own the event, either through their participation on festival committees, or through occasional collaboration in their activities.

Nevertheless, a series of limitations are set out in this study, such as not having been able to prepare an exhaustive sample, due to the reasons that were explained in the Objective, Materials and Methods section. The results, however, set out a baseline study that points to new research questions to understand the keys to social success and sustainability over time, linking this ideal with the study of such variables as budgets, stable professional contracts, programming lines and support networks, among others.

Besides, there are some indicators, such as social ties, which might require a high level of processing. It might be worth drawing conclusions on how far a festival can position itself and promote itself in terms of its capability for social mobilization. In effect, having between 5 to 10 volunteers within a population of 142 inhabitants is not the same thing as within a population of either 2,339 or 87,064, to look at three very different cases.

In conclusion, the results have shown that films festivals that are held in rural areas represent an opportunity for linking up the local area, for social cohesiveness, and the revitalization of socio-cultural spaces. They also suggest raising awareness among public administrations of the need to support the economic sustainability of those initiatives, so that they can in every sense exercise their social functions.

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