

Crossing the Space-Time Border

An analysis of the portrayal of refugees in El Ministerio del Tiempo

Nienke Wessel s4598350 | June 21, 2021

CROSSING BORDERS to flee from a unsafe situation is an old tale. It is therefore unsurprising that parallels can be drawn between any current refugee ‘crisis’ and refugees in the past. *El ministerio del tiempo*, a Spanish tv show about traveling through time, has precisely made this connection. In their episode *Refugiados en el tiempo*, a group of Spanish moriscos from 1609 accidentally end up in present day Spain.

In this essay, I will analyze this episode with help of recent theoretical insights into the border and border politics. I will argue that the show both intentionally as well as unintentionally draws many parallels to our current understanding of the border.

El ministerio del tiempo* and *Refugiados en el tiempo

El ministerio del tiempo is a Spanish tv show that has been airing on and off on RTVE since 2015. According to its premise, the Spanish government has secret time doors with which people can travel to different time periods in Spanish history. In every episode, the team goes on a mission to preserve Spanish history, to keep it exactly as we know it. There are often villains who try to change history for personal gain.

The episode under consideration is the tenth episode of the third season and originally aired on the 9th of October, 2017 (Olivares and Olivares 2017). In this episode, a group of moriscos (arabized Christians) from 1609 accidentally end up in 2017. The refugees roam the streets of Madrid, gathering unwanted attention, so they are brought to the ministry where they receive food and medical attention in an *in promptu* refugee camp. We later learn that they have been led to 2017 by a man from yet another time period that intends to blow up the ministry, and used the refugees as a distraction to get into the ministry. Because of the publicity, the ministry is under pressure from higher ups to deal with the crisis quickly. In the end, they manage to convince king Filipe III to rescue the moriscos by providing them safe passage to Italy.

Parallels

Because of the show’s emphasis on both the past and the present, it is particularly suited to draw parallels between the two. The show sometimes does this explicitly, for example by letting characters link past and present events in dialogue, but it is also done more implicitly, by using imagery that reminds us of images of the present day.

Examples of the former can be found in a character that, in the show's universe, comes from the Civil War period in Spain:

Esta situación de los refugiados me recuerda a la guerra civil. Me he jugado la vida intentando salvar a los que huían a Francia y a judíos que venían hacia España. Y ahora no puedo hacer nada. Eso es lo que más me duele. (0:30:28)

Another rather obvious quote that links different time periods: "Pasa el tiempo y las cosas no cambian" (0:50:10), which is uttered after King Filipe initially refuses to help the moriscos.



Figure 1: Still from *Refugiados en el tiempo* at 0:25:53, showing refugees being checked by officers of the ministry for weapons.

In terms of imagery, we can take a look at how the refugee camp is portrayed. In figure 1, we see how refugees are checked for weapons. In figure 2, we see the refugee camp from above. These images greatly resemble the images we see in contemporary media of refugee camps; tents, clothing style, etc. The color scheme is bleak and gray, while the rest of the show has more colors. There are also similarities in how the whole group gets branded as terrorists because of one person in their midst.

Crossing the border(s)

Now that the episode is explained and we know how the parallels are drawn, it is time to consider how the theoretical notions from border studies translate to this example.

Whereas refugees normally cross only one type of border, the moriscos cross two. Besides spacial displacement, they also experience temporal displacement. This aggravates the effects that 'normal' refugees experience; the culture shock and confusion is even greater, because they not only move away from their homes, but also from their time.



Figure 2: Still from *Refugiados en el tiempo* at 0:48:55, showing the refugee camp from above.

The leader of the group describes the trauma as follows:

Mi pueblo tiene que abandonar sus casas, sus pertenencias. Lo hemos perdido todo.
Incluso nuestro futuro. (0:53:00)

The trauma of leaving behind homes and possessions are again common in refugee narratives. The worry about the future is so as well. In this case, the worry is a bit more literal; at this point in the episode, they cannot go back to their own time. They are stuck in a different time, hence missing out on their own future.

The border that was crossed in this episode is both a spacial and a temporal border; it is one of the *puertas del tiempo*; the time doors. According to Nail (2016), all borders “introduce a division or bifurcation of some sort into the world” (2). In this case, a division through time as well as space. These borders are discontinuous in both the temporal and spacial sense; at least when related to the normal laws of physics of time and space. This is in contrast with how normal borders can be continuous or discontinuous, depending on who passes them (3). This discontinuity is usually a central theme of the episodes; the discontinuity of time is most prominent, but the discontinuity of space is sometimes also present. Often, this leads to a comical note, but in episodes like the one central in this essay, the tone of the social bordering (i.e. the social differences between the sides of the borders, see Nail (2016, 17)) is rather serious.

Borderlands and contact zones

Besides borders themselves it is also worth taking a look at the physical and social spaces that surround them. These concepts have been called ‘borderlands’ (see e.g. Anzaldúa (1987)) or

'contact zones' (see e.g. Pratt (1991)). Let us look briefly at how these concepts can help us understand the border as portrayed in *El ministerio del tiempo*.

The borderland or contact zone in the series is the refugee camp built in the cellar of the ministry. Like with 'normal' refugees, the world does not want to see them. They need to be hidden from view. In the show, this is because the refugees are from another time, and hence pose a threat to the secret of the ministry. However, refugees from our own time are also preferred to be held out of sight.

Hence, they end up in the borderland. According to Anzaldúa (1987), this can be described in the following way: "A borderland is a vague and unnatural boundary. It is in constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants" (3). Clearly, the inhabitants are indeed the prohibited and forbidden. They are the terrorists, as one of their members tried to commit a terrorist attack. They are to be hidden from the outside world, as they are a dirty secret.

Anzaldúa also argues that it is the whites who are in power in the borderland. We also clearly see that in the show. The absolute bad guy (or so we believe) is the secretary of the state who wants the refugees out of there as soon as possible, no matter what happens to them after that. He calls them 'terroristas' and says that they must want to avenge the real terrorist that had used the group (0:21:47). Clearly, he is the (white) bad guy in this story.

Yet, while the rest of the cast is portrayed as the good Samaritans, graciously trying to help the refugees, this white/non-white power imbalance remains. Figure 1 shows such an example, where the white officers pat down the moriscos. The ministry, consisting of white people only, determines what happens with the people in the borderland.

This is also what we find in the description of Pratt (1991) of the contact zone. She uses a contact zone "to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (34). The asymmetrical relations of power are clear; both in the more racist sense as is portrayed by the 'bad guy' secretary, but also more subtly by the ministry as a whole, arriving at a more Orientalist notion (after Edward Said's *Orientalism*).

Conclusion

We see in *El ministerio del tiempo* that showing us the past can be an effective way to trigger associations with the present. The treatment and discourse surrounding the 'what to do with the moriscos?' question is eerily similar to the discourses we have today on refugees. However, by showing this in a TV show, the images become somewhat less direct and call us out less.

However, there is also a certain diminishing of the refugee problem. As said before, we are talking about a double crossing of borders, both in space and time. That means that both the distress the refugees experience as well as the measures taken to hide and deport them, can also be attributed to and condoned because of the traveling through time. This means that the refugee skeptical watcher can still feel sorry for the TV refugee but distance themselves from

compassion with a real life refugee, even though they go through eerily similar processes.

Besides this, we also saw that the portrayal still relies on contemporary power structures. Not in so much as what we might call 'classical racism', but rather an Orientalist form of 'we can save you because we know it all better than you', taking away a lot of agency of the marginalized group.

So for all its trouble of portraying refugees, likely to help people understand the refugee crisis, this might not convince the skeptic. It might also backlash in terms of going for breaking down existing power structures. This shows that the representation of topics like these remains a difficult topic.

References

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