

# Understanding Hacking the Veil

ESPAÑOL . ENGLISH

10.04.2014 by [Sarita Malik](#)

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With an ambitious and complex programme such as **Remapping Europe**, it can be difficult to communicate the key messages in a simple way. What is the project about and what is the Encounter seeking to do? Emerging key themes are perhaps easier to identify: representation, identity, freedom, borders and control.

All of these themes were addressed head-on in Day 1 of the encounter, **Hacking the Veil**, which brought together artists, journalists, academics and activists. Each participant was tasked to consider how Europe is responding to its diversity and perceived others and how **we can rethink, redraw and redefine the meaning of Europe**.

One of the central issues discussed in the working sessions held in the morning, was how we can reconsider the imagery of migrants in the media. As Reuben Diaz, the MC for the morning highlighted, such deconstruction involves understanding how representation is constructed. The media, as we know, does not simply reflect lived realities, but actively constructs a veneer, or veil that now needs to be deconstructed, or hacked.

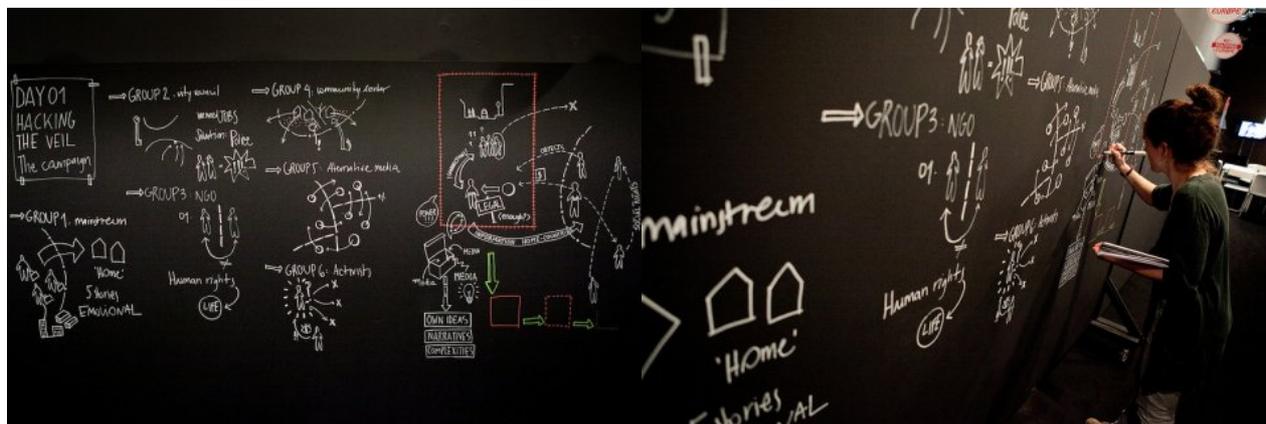
Activist-artist, **Toni Serra (Abu Ali)** showed examples of blatant discrimination towards migrants, by activist-artist Toni Serra (Abu Ali) in his morning presentation. Serra reminded us that these powerful mainstream media communication campaigns are naturalized through recurrent representations; the veil is the construction of these images. It covers up the reality and replaces it with a veneer of fear, panic and nationalised politics that seeks to exclude all those perceived to be 'Other'.

As the Encounter reminded us, the use of the trope of 'home' is especially prevalent in these images: a presumed idea that home is not here, but somewhere else for certain kinds of people. For Toni Serra, there are many such media examples; blocking the view, obscuring unity, stirring up trouble. Processes of hacking therefore serve to challenge through images and a different way of life in relation to structures and power. Serra is interested in the aesthetics at work here; how subjects are nationally and racially coded within media representations.

After the morning presentations, everyone set to work. Participants engaged in a role-playing exercise, which involved thinking and acting collaboratively and incarnating different subject positions that mobilise around issues of immigration. This methodology was designed to take participants out of their comfort zone, meet others and build commonalities and differences.

The six tables consisted of the mainstream media, a community centre in a migrant neighbourhood, an alternative media outlet, the City council, an international NGO for human rights and finally a human rights activist local collective. Using a range of visual aids, each group devised a slogan and visual representation for their respective campaign, before promoting their group at a mock press conference pitching session.

A very astute graphic teller captured the essence of the pitching session and shared the lively graphical summary with the participants as they spoke. A reflective session followed where the groups produced a number of key messages or 'tweets' - what had we learned after playing these roles and how did it take us out of our comfort zones? All materials were visually captured and will create an important legacy of the Encounter for others to also share and reflect on.



Later in the Theatre Central, Professor Daniela Berghahn gave a clear and comprehensive account of the day's proceedings. Supported by images taken throughout the day, she took us through the journey of the first day.

The final event in the encounter on Day 1 was a talk by Toni Serra. Serra also took us on a journey where he highlighted the significance of the visual but also of borders in current contexts. Serra asked the enthralled audience, whether when artists cross borders, they really cross them or whether they take borders with them, like a kind of elastic, flexible border. What do they take and what do we leave behind; what are the losses and gains?

Serra's main focus was the imagery built around migration, because it blocks and perpetuates our ignorance; and the power in turn to make reality imitate images. The range of representations Serra shared with us included military type of maps (in fashion again), surveillance camera images of people being returned to Morocco (serving as propaganda), infographics (involving clean graphics) and the iconography of computer games such as Border Control. These are part of the veil; shown to us in order to make us see designated Others as a threat. For Serra, the media, military, entertainment industries are all interwoven here.

By linking past and present images, Serra skillfully demonstrated how the thread that links them is the same, although inflected by different realities and contexts.

So today, it is a context that is shaped by economic agendas, with the ultra-right discourse being picked up by the government and large corporations and subsequently to be found within the surveillance market; there is big money involved in this this node of ideas - that links migrants, with drug traffickers, with criminals - also picked up and recycled in the burgeoning computer games market. "Control" says Serra, "is out of control."

Through evocative imagery, Serra makes the argument that it is alternative discourses, non-mainstream discourses that are now required to hack the veil. The crucial question we need to ask is not just '**What is happening with the other but also what is happening with all of us?**' And as the rare film footage exemplifies, it is not just about the violent stereotypes that we see, it is also about those that are rendered invisible within media representation, because the image-makers tend not to be the 'Others'. This is how certain kinds of knowledge flow.

Significantly, the film ends with the Mactar Thiam Fall voice, so rarely heard as a voice of reason in the public sphere. And the words capture the politics of the present perfectly. The speaker on film tells us a lesson learned from his wise grandfather; people who are rich on the material level tend to also be poor on the moral and spiritual level. Perhaps at the heart of the research challenge for this Encounter is the question of how we can tackle the social dynamics that Day One of this 2014 Encounter has so dynamically put on the agenda.

[Video streaming by Ustream](#)

Streaming of the **Audiovisual Source Code**, *Hacking the Veil* by Abu Ali.

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