

Sombras / Letters from the Shadows

Interview with Oriol Canals

'Every year, refugees inexorably beach on the Spanish coasts. At times it's like they've always been there, as if they were part of some sort of strange rites of spring, irrevocably doomed to be washed up on the shores of my land. Nameless faces haunting my thoughts...

How to film people who are afraid to be seen? How to tell their stories, when all they want is to forget?'

Graeme Hobbs: How did your film come about?

Oriol Canals: For a long time I had been spending breakfast with these people in the sea. For many years in Spain, people have been arriving at the coast, often there were some missing and boats had sunk. It had been in my mind for a long time and when once again it was in the morning news, I really felt the need to go among the survivors. The producer of the film put it in a very apt way, he said, 'the film is about them but more than this it's about your will to make them exist' because what I realised when I first arrived at the spot where I filmed – it's a village like many other villages in Spain, there is nothing special about it – was that those people were somehow deprived of a real existence, of what we think the existence of a human being must be, even legally, with all the rights that go with this, and these people were almost like ghosts. They are shadows, and I tried to make those shadows come to light.

GH: How do you get the trust of a marginalised group of people?

OC: When you arrive with the camera, what usually happens is that you are mistaken for a journalist, and most of the refugees have had bad experiences with journalists, who never film them in a way that shows they feel they are a subject of interest, of real interest. This situation is compounded by the refugees being so afraid of revealing the 'secret' of their existence to people back home. The starting point of my film was to say 'let's meet these people in another way, let's really meet them. I want to see the situation with my own eyes and to make other people see it through my eyes, which are not the eyes of a journalist'. At the beginning there was no trust, most of them rejected me, they never trusted me, and that was the end of the story, but there came a point when some of them understood what I was trying to do and they became part of the film. This is the beautiful part of the story. The difficult part is there is often hostility, but the beautiful part is that once someone understands and he feels the film is about himself the film becomes part of him, so we have made it together in a way.

GH: On a practical level, there are many languages in the film, was communication a problem?

OC: Well, not really, no, most of them don't have good Spanish, but I could speak French, Spanish or English so I could manage. There was just one person with whom I had real difficulties in communication, but only one out of fifteen.

GH: The refugees' status is curious, they are illegal but ignored, left in limbo...

OC: Exactly , that's the right word, they are in limbo. They don't really exist for the Spanish people. In the cities we don't see them because they are hidden, while in the villages they are not hidden but everybody acts as if they are not there!

GH: There seems to be an unofficial acceptance of places like the camp in the woods where they live. It's a strange situation, living with a presence and ignoring it at the same time.

OC: I guess you get used to it. Every year it's the same story, every summer they come, everyone knows that they are going to come, and when they arrive, they are there, and life goes on. I met some people in the village who were not even aware they were living there because they lived on the other side of the village where they didn't see them. The police know they are there and clean up the camp from time to time when people complain, but they know they will return, so it's a co-existence of sorts – an easy co-existence because there are no conflicts. There is no dialogue at all between the two worlds except for in the bar we see in the film where the woman has taken them as her family.

GH: I've seen a number of films at this festival which deal with the subject of migration but the migrants are generally mute subjects seen from a European viewpoint. What is so refreshing here is that at last the people who are being pictured get the chance to speak.

OC: That was my first wish. I never pretended to have any knowledge of the subject, and as time went by I lost my certitudes about it. The main point was to give the refugees the floor. The real difficulty was how to do it, because it was obvious to me I couldn't interview them. That would have been impossible because of language limitations which would have immediately put them in a position of inferiority through not speaking in their native tongue. It was obvious to me that they had to speak their own language and that I couldn't ask any questions because I wouldn't know what to ask. I wanted them to say whatever they wanted, so this is why I prepared a room where the person could be alone, and where he could speak to his family back home. The contract between us was that I would make a copy of the film and send the tape to their family. At the beginning it was just a trial to see what would happen, and of course I didn't understand what they were saying, but as I watched the first videos I realised this was a good way to work – they felt free to talk and there was a sort of catharsis in the process. At first they would talk to their families, and after about 15-20 minutes, some of them would stop, but those that continued started talking about themselves and it becomes something really deep, a truth that is very profound.

GH: Did the men talk to you about their experiences and how they felt after making the tapes?

OC: Yes, some of them. I realised that some of them were really reluctant before and afterwards they felt relieved, because for everyone it's a relief to talk about his suffering.

GH: ... and also to feel that you are being heard, being listened to somewhere, somehow, like tonight for example ...

OC: Yes exactly, and then you have the floor, you really have the floor. I discovered that the men don't ever talk about these things together because it's too painful and because they have all gone through the same thing so it's useless. For many of them it was the first time they could vocalise their experiences and this is why it's so powerful. African people are very modest in general; culturally it's difficult to express your feelings when things are not well, so you keep it to yourself. Such an explosion of words, very intimate words, is uncommon.

GH: Were the tapes posted to the men's homes?

OC: Of course, yes.

GH: Have you had any reaction?

OC: Yes, plenty! There are a lot of stories about this. In general I can say that there were two kind of reactions. Sometimes they were well received and other times they were received as lies, with the people watching them believing that those sent them were saying their stories to prevent people from home joining them. One man told me that a neighbour in the village was thinking of sending his son but once he saw the tape he decided not to do it. Then there are the funny stories – one of the guys discovered two years later that his film was being shown in a videoclub of his village, on market day once a week, and the owner was charging a fee for entry!

GH: How long did *Letters from the Shadows* take to make?

OC: 4 years. I started in 2005 and finished in the summer of 2009. I still want to work a little on the soundtrack but we could say it's finished.

GH: The soundtrack is interesting – there are moments when sounds, seemingly from the refugees' experiences, play over everyday scenes, such as in a market.

OC: They live that world in their minds, they are here but they are not here – it's the same story once again. In their minds they are thinking of their families, their journey, they are remembering the dead people who were with them and who they dream of. I had no way of directing what they said when they were alone in the film, so things that were not said I put in the rest of the film, through images or sound. The way I found to talk about the nightmares they live in their mind, or their memories of the

dead, or all the things they have seen during their travel is through the soundtrack – it's a way of making this part of the film.

GH: What is the future of the film?

OC: It's difficult to say, it had a very good beginning, having been presented in Cannes by ACID who tried to find a distributor, but now we have no money to make a 35mm copy, so we are at a kind of impasse. For the time being, it's through being shown in festivals like today. It's a difficult world for small films like this.

GH: What will you do next to follow this subject?

OC: I don't have a precise project, but I have some ideas. One thing is that what is in the film is just a tiny proportion of everything these people said, and once you watch the tapes you realise that it's real treasure. I don't want them to end up unused. I'm thinking of writing about what I've seen and what I've lived – this is one possibility – and also I'm trying to find money to organise an exhibition with other people on the subject. I don't know exactly because I have only just finished the film but these are some ideas. And then I feel like making a short film with the story of one man who is not in the film, who has an amazing story and an amazing way of telling it, with magic and other things. He's not in the film because when I filmed him my technical means weren't up to standard but I'd like to make a film just about his story.

GH: Is there anything else you would like to add?

OC: I'd like to stress that this is a film about human beings, it's not political, it's about human beings, and the only political content in the film is that there is a will to give the migrants back the status of complete human beings. In this way I suppose you could call it political but it's a film of people who don't exist, and who for the time of the film come from the shadows into the light. This is how I like to see it.

Graeme Hobbs
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