

## INTERVIEW WITH MOON BLAISSE



**DIRECTOR OF  
“THE MIRACLE OF  
ALMERÍA”, A FEATURE  
FILM SUPPORTED  
BY EURIMAGES**

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BY TARA KARAJICA

*Moon Blaisse is a Belgian director who graduated with a Master in Audiovisual Arts in 2010. She was awarded multiple times internationally for her short film “Sometime Later” (2011). With the short film “Guest” (2015), she received the Press Prize from the Union de la Critique de Cinéma de Belgique. She was selected for the Berlinale Talent Campus in 2013 and the IDFA-Mediafund Script Development Lab in 2014.*

*Moon Blaisse is prepping her second documentary, “The Miracle of Almería”, and talks to Tara Karajica about it and the situation of women in film today.*

### HOW DID “ALMERÍA” COME ABOUT?

About six years ago, while researching places that were completely transformed and/or abused by globalisation, my colleague Thomas Bellinck and I discovered Almería, a place that we couldn’t believe we hadn’t heard about before. On satellite images of our globe on Google Earth, you can see an enormous white spot in the South of Europe. Almería, a province completely covered in white plastic, contains the big-

gest vegetable garden in Europe, an endless number of greenhouses where most of the vegetables we eat in the North come from. In between, you find slums with about 120 000 illegal migrants who work in slave-like conditions on these plantations. It’s a post-apocalyptic landscape of a region completely polluted by plastic and pesticides, running out of water and an extreme picture of Europe’s recent economic, ecological and migration crisis.

It was incredible to find out that about 50 years ago this place was an empty desert and farmers oppressed by Franco’s regime were forced to migrate to the North in search of better life conditions or let their family members die of famine. Now, these farmers are the owners of greenhouses that exploit migrants coming from the South.

Interviews with all kinds of different people living in or connected to this place made clear how different their perception of the history of Almería was; how hard some forms of violence or oppression were to express and to fight; how intertwined all the

different problems (ecology, migration, politics) were. It was also clear how fed up people were with journalists and filmmakers coming there to tell stories about their lives. Paralysed by its complexity, we were staring at the plastic sea, determined to make a film that would say something meaningful about the ever more complex realities we face nowadays. But entering the documentary industry with this ambition and the open question: “How can a documentary give the necessary reflection on this complexity?”, everything

wanted to just go for it. We did years of research with our own money, spoke with over two hundred people in the region and we started to do tests with different forms of storytelling, acting and writing in co-operation with the people of Almería.

This ended with a casting of about 20 people for the television series and 8 people for the single film who were, in our opinion, key figures in showing what had happened in the last 50 years in the region. These

people were all asked the same question: “If you could step into a time machine and get out at one moment in the history of Almería to change one thing, what would this scene look like?”

From this fantasy scene a process started where we discovered how people suffered and what made them powerless to react to it. Old farmers have a fictional funeral for their colleagues who

committed suicide after bankruptcy because the prices of their vegetable gardens spiraled; Malinese fruit-pickers are seen in a press conference about a fictional strike that put the whole of the north of Europe out of vegetables; an old man kills Franco, the mastermind of the agricultural project; a Moroccan woman and a Malinese boy show how they experienced the rescue operation at sea by the Guardia Civil and then the interaction later with journalists and people from NGOs. Despite all the good intentions, because of the stereotypical ideas that people in Europe have about “migrants”, they experience very strange and funny situations. We follow their story into the greenhouses until the moment their colleague drops dead in the greenhouse because of hunger and heat, and their boss forces them to leave the body on the side of the road, so the police never trace the body to him.



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became very hard. The first question you always get about the project is to summarise it in one sentence. You are asked if the film is about migration or ecology. If not, it will be hard to buy/sell it on the market. As we wanted to do some extensive, necessary research, most people from the industry got worried that this would mean that the film would become theoretical and impersonal. By suggesting that we would like to put the people themselves in charge of what their story is – because they have a way better insight into the reality there – most people interpreted it as something we did out of sympathy, not that we did it because it was by far the most interesting choice. By explaining that there would be many different and/or contradictory realities shown next to each other, people got worried that this would not fit into a single documentary. We then proposed that this may mean that the documentary needed more than one film to show its complexity, and people made it clear that, for a series, there is not a lot of room in the industry – it must be a single film. With all this information, we still

## WHAT WERE THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE SHOOT?

What we wanted to do is radically change the concept of people being characters in our documentary into a dynamic where our film would facilitate a possibility for people to (re)write their history. This meant that we did not want to take any production decision without the people we worked with. Only then did we and our crew become aware of how used we are in documentaries to project our expectations onto people, lighting, locations and storytelling, and how wrong we constantly were when people start expressing their view of what poverty should look like in a film; what emotions should look like in certain dramatic or violent events; how people's reactions to historical events should be explained. It was a constant exercise in listening, observing and keeping our minds as open as possible. We stimulated people to say "no" as soon as they did not agree or feel comfortable with what was shown or told. The consequence was that people were constantly walking away from the scene angry, wanting to quit the project almost daily. But precisely these situations always led to the following question: "Is it possible to try and make a scene with us about the reason you want to leave the project or the story right now?"

By doing this, we entered a deeper feeling of powerlessness in expressing in words what had been happening to them. Things that were invisible to us at the beginning started to appear more clearly, and we only asked for the right scene or anecdote. We started to understand how difficult it was for people to express that, when you are illiterate (growing up under a military regime in harsh poverty), you do not always have the overview of your own history or what is happening to the society you live in and, as a consequence, this can make people feel extremely powerless and violent if their region is suddenly confronted with a big group of people that have migrated from African countries to the south of Spain.

We also found out that it is not always possible to describe what it means if journalists who have to represent you in the media see "migrants" as a helpless, passive and homogeneous group, when you see yourself as an ambitious person, speaking three or four languages and working 14 hours a day, determined to build a constructive future for yourself. It is not easy to express oneself in many situations of oppression or violence, and one anecdote or example of what happens never shows that these examples happen every day and have been happening for as long as they can remember, and that it is this duration that makes people lose hope or give up. And if people do not manage to explain these dynamics, let alone be able to prove them, it is not taken into account in



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writing history or making political decisions.

## WHAT WILL WE SEE IN THE FILM?

Through different storylines we will see the different perspectives on the history of Almería – how a dry desert became a massive vegetable industry that feeds us, the everyday consumers. Fruit-pickers, farmers, European Commissioners, an agent from the secret service and a Guardia Civil captain all give their explanation of where "our tomato" comes from and what led to these low food prices.

As the process develops, we ask these different people to be actors in each other's stories, thus painfully showing how many misunderstandings they have about each other's roles and positions, how many blind spots we have about each other and how exactly this can lead to violence.

**WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SHOW WITH ALMERÍA – THE CONSEQUENCES OF GLOBALISATION, THE CONSEQUENCES OF FRANCO’S DISCOVERY, THE DIFFERENT MIGRATIONS, THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF THE WORKERS, THE POLLUTION?**

I would say that the basic premise for me is the radically different perspectives on this. So the basic idea is very simple. It was an empty desert 70 years ago and now it’s a massive plastic sea, so we asked people from very different positions: “If you could write your own history, what would this be?” My purpose is to show how different these realities are and how intertwined migration is with pollution, globalisation, the food industry and the different faces of the European Union.



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**DO YOU THINK YOUR DOCUMENTARY WILL CHANGE MINDS REGARDING WHAT IS GOING ON, THAT IT WILL MAKE PEOPLE DO SOMETHING IN ORDER TO CHANGE THE SITUATION?**

Yes, for sure. But, for me, what is very important is that we went through a very long process in this because what I absolutely didn’t want was one pragmatic “buy other tomatoes” point. I didn’t stop with this process because I eventually wanted a three-part series. There will be one film for the cinemas, but there will be three films in total. I wanted to connect the dots. In the first place, I wanted to start developing another grammar to talk about this problem. So this means that if people from another country migrated to get work in Almería or to flee a war, they could set their own conditions. We did everything we could to make the film medium

in function of what they had to describe about injustice or what was happening there. This is more important than directly going to the viewer because this is where we sometimes go too fast, I think. What I already felt in the crew is how it changed their minds and, more importantly, the preconceptions they had of all these problems that we see repeated over and over again. But also that we don’t really listen to people and how they might have very different perspectives on what should change.

**CAN YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR WORK AND YOUR METHODOLOGY IN THIS DOCUMENTARY BECAUSE YOU HAVE EIGHT RADICALLY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES AND YOU QUESTION YOUR MEDIUM IN THE SENSE THAT YOU ASK THE QUESTION OF HOW YOU**

**AS DOCUMENTARY MAKERS TODAY CAN RELATE TO INCREASINGLY COMPLEX AND INTERLINKED PROBLEMS?**

The first thing we tried to do with the people who are living there was to get them out of the “things are unfair, people are not treating us right, things will not change” mindset and put them into the question of the time machine: “If you could go back in a time

machine and change one thing ...”. So you’ll feel that people are going directly to a moment that is very important for them and they are also activated in their fantasy of another world. So instead of thinking in terms of the rules that are written for them right now of what a black person can do, or what people without papers can do, or what a poor farmer in Almería or an uneducated woman in the south of Spain can do, they start to think within a reality where these rules would be different. And if they start to talk about their reality from this other role, you see that they start to respect themselves more, they are able to criticise the situation more sharply or describe the powerlessness they are locked into.

**THE WAY YOU'RE TRYING TO DO THIS IS BY NOT SHOWING THE AUDIENCE HOW YOU YOURSELF SEE THE SITUATION IN WHICH PEOPLE LIVE OR ACT BUT HOW THEY SEE THE SITUATION, SO IN THAT SENSE YOUR DOCUMENTARY IS REVISIONIST. WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT ASSUMPTION?**

Yes, because I have very much the feeling that the way the documentary industry is built is such that, in the first place, you have to write the script before you even start shooting and the golden rule is that you don't have to actually make the film that you have written, but it also means that there is already a certain pressure on a certain narrative that you agreed on with the financiers. Before you start, you have to have quite a fast pitch, for example. For a lot of broadcasters, you have to decide if it's an ecological film or if it's a film about migration, globalisation or pollution and it already sets up a lot of limits or preconceptions before you even start talking with people to express their reality. So what I try to do is to keep the questions as open as possible and to avoid questions that have anything to do with proof, like, for example, what happened. What it is important to show is that this gives the opportunity to people to also talk about the more invisible power structures of oppression, discrimination and sexism that are often not very easy to prove, but are very vivid for the daily reality of the people.

**THERE'S A LOT OF TALK ABOUT WOMEN IN FILM TODAY. HAVE YOU NOTICED ANY CHANGES? WHAT IS YOUR POSITION ON THIS SUBJECT? HAVE THESE CHANGES IMPACTED YOUR CAREER?**

In a search for other ways to approach the complex themes I wanted to describe, I found it sometimes difficult that, in a lot of conversations I had, people reacted by saying that I was very passionate, ambitious, enthusiastic and somewhat naive. But it didn't happen so much when I had conversations that led to a serious critical conversation about what I was doing and how this was working, or not. My producer and I are both women and look – and are – young, and although we felt that people were curious about what we were doing, it was not always easy to be taken seriously. What I felt very much is that because of the complexity and ambiguity of what I wanted to show, I did not want to throw out simple one-liners or absolute conclusions. This was a lot of times interpreted as if I did not really know the essence of my story, that the project was not developed enough or that I wasn't self-confident

enough to do such a big project. This would sometimes make me feel powerless because I needed realistic, critical conversations about doing these things differently and the consequences thereof. If my ideas were not good or unrealistic, I wanted to talk about it and find out why, and I had the feeling I did not always come to that point in these conversations. People were charmed by my wanting to change the world, but it was hard to go further than this. But about four years ago, a lot of discussions started to appear about women in leadership positions. For both my producer and I, this changed a lot in how we could talk, work and develop and we were really surprised by it, and it made everything a lot more possible than before.