

AGAT FILMS & CIE AND OKTA FILM PRESENT



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THE OTHER SIDE

A FILM BY
ROBERTO MINERVINI



SYNOPSIS

In an invisible territory at the margins of society, at the border between anarchy and illegality, lives a wounded community that is trying to respond to a threat: of being forgotten by political institutions and having their rights as citizens trampled. Disarmed veterans, taciturn adolescents, drug addicts trying to escape addiction through love, ex-special forces soldiers still at war with the world, floundering young women and future mothers, and old people who have not lost their desire to live. Through this hidden pocket of humanity, the door opens to the abyss of today's America.

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERTO MINERVINI



Your first three films, *The Passage*, *Low Tide*, and *Stop the Pounding Heart*, comprise what you have called the “Texas trilogy”. Your last work, *The Other Side*, explores and tells the stories of the people and places of Louisiana. How did you make contact with these communities?

I came to Louisiana thanks to Todd Trichell, the patriarch of the bull riders you see in *Stop the Pounding Heart* and the father of Colby, the boy who is the protagonist of the film. For me Todd was a sort of guide, introducing me to the ways and places of the south of the U.S. He has a difficult story of his own which resonates with the people of Louisiana. He saved himself, left the poverty and ruins of Louisiana to try his luck in fertile, rich Texas, and made a life for himself there. He’s the only one of his circle who succeeded in getting out. The family we see in Louisiana is related to Todd: his sister, Lisa, is the girlfriend one of the protagonists of *The Other Side*. Because of this, I started working in West Monroe in north Louisiana to get to know Todd’s and his family’s roots. The initial idea was to explore Todd’s past so I could better understand his present and then work backwards. But once I got to Louisiana I discovered an entire world, and I never left. I began to see this place was not a starting point for understanding the characters in Texas but instead a destination. I had to launch a new exploration. What I had thought would be the final stretch of a long cycle - meaning the trilogy - had become a new beginning.

What did you find in Louisiana?

In north Louisiana, unemployment is 60 percent. The people are ravaged by amphetamines and poverty. Initially the film was going to tell small, intimate, family stories but then the scope widened because the common denominator of all these communities is anger at everyone who isn't like them, especially the institutions that abandoned them. The film began to take on a political cast, and this led me into the paramilitary communities. As the scope of the film widened, so did its ambition of telling a larger and less known story: the story of the Midwest, a region in freefall, jobless, anti-government, anti-free market, anti-institution, and where public opinion and government policy had been completely delinked. This was the story not just of the Trichells but also of the events that were affecting a very important area of the United States. For me, this meant a shift from an approach of observation and personal analysis to one that was more political.

Given this change in approach, why did you choose to tell the stories of Mark, Lisa, Jim, and the other members of the community?

It was a gradual process that began in the summer of 2013, when I travelled to West Monroe to meet the extended Trichell family. In contrast to Texas, and Texans, in Louisiana the first thing you sense is anger. The people I met immediately took me in, made me a part of their lives, and making absolutely clear their desire to be heard and seen.

I remember well meeting the future protagonists of the film for the first time at a diner. They said right off, "We never set foot in places like this. Everyone's looking at us, rich whites and poor blacks. We don't belong to either, or any other group, because we're poor whites. We were cast out of this society. We're in limbo, we're angry about it, and we don't want to stay this way." The discussion immediately became political, and the film did as well.

After the first meetings, I went back between October and December 2013 to deepen my understanding and make sure that they would remain open to me in the presence of a movie camera. They did. Their desire to make themselves heard came across genuine, pure, and clear, camera or no camera. The difference between this project and the Texas trilogy is that I was led by hand, even dragged by force, into this world. The final choice of characters thus happened naturally. The characters emerged because they wanted their stories to be heard, each in his or her own way: some spoke of their suffering, others merely wanted to be seen, like the pregnant woman or the boy who dreamed of being a soldier. The actions and bodies alone of these people speak with disarming eloquence.

How did you end up among the paramilitary group, which is the second community featured in the film?

After a year of establishing contact, gathering material, and exchanging ideas, the members of the community of drug addicts made real progress in their process of self-discovery, grew more courageous, and understood that they were subversives in their own way. What had been anger was transformed into a need for insubordination. I don't mean armed insubordination, in part because some of them cannot legally own weapons – which they feel is a violation of their constitutional right, as serious as denial of the right to vote. Unable to own weapons, they feel vulnerable. I discussed this subject with them at length, and in our discussions they made frequent mention of “the other side”, meaning, the community of those who had weapons. And thus, in what had turned into a sort of sociological study of a deep and forgotten zone of America, I sought out “armed groups” that were animated by the same rage and insubordination. This was possible, again, thanks to certain members of the extended Trichell family, who introduced me to the paramilitary world.

The paramilitary group is very different from the West Monroe group. Their ideology seems so extreme they could be considered fanatics.

The paramilitary group made radical life choices. It transformed itself into an insular community fortified by powerful ideals. Becoming the other side, crossing to the far shore, barricading themselves against other people, all this is a question of survival that is explicitly stated in the film. For these warriors, their struggle is not about politics or class or society or immigration but simply about themselves and their families, which represent the last bulwark for them. Without family, for them all is lost. It is important to note that after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the concept of National Security changed drastically in the U.S. The 2002 National Security Plan of George Bush gave the federal government significant new powers, legitimized the use of force to resolve conflicts, even domestically -like the recent escalation of police violence against black Americans- and eroded privacy protections of citizens. These changes threw into crisis the unity of the country by bringing into sharp relief the social, economic, and political differences between the various states and regions.

If the premises that American society was founded upon are in crisis, then the rhetoric of the paramilitary groups no longer sounds fanatic but is instead an expression of discomfort, the valid concern for a society that is breaking apart. They feel abandoned by the institutions and think their ancestral rights are being trampled. The paramilitary groups like white power (Mark and Jim) are on the other side of an island that is breaking away.

Your mode of filming is characterized by a closeness, almost an intimacy, with the people you are filming. Even when the subject matter is very difficult, and you are showing the characters in extreme situations or expressing repulsive ideas, the humanity of these characters emerges. Can you talk about that?

Respect and trust are born and grow image by image. I shoot just 20 percent of the time. In the rest I build up a relationship of a kind of love with the characters, a love without promises or vows, a love that takes you by surprise, that forms moment by moment. The relationship that developed with these people is honest and very mature, and obviously is not one formed in a few days. I have known the Trichell family since 2011. We have worked together on three films. That is why they introduced me to their extended family in Louisiana as someone who could be trusted completely. Then when we began shooting, my crew and I spent entire days and nights together with the characters of the film, sharing very intimate and personal situations in which we put ourselves on the line, openly stating what our intentions were. Without this initial straightforwardness, this candidness, the truth and the humanity of these characters would not have emerged.

I'd like you to say something about the question of the "fiction of the documentary". Your films show real people in real situations. These "witnesses" are transformed into "characters" the moment that in the film they become protagonists in the story of their lives.

I want to capture the real, what I see. I have no orthodox film making training. I studied documentary film making but I am not a "master" of the language of documentaries, or the language of fiction. What I probably know best is the language of the still image, of photography, reporting. That's why I say I try to capture what I see.

There is no acting in my films. There are renderings of the real chosen together with the people I am filming, selected to best represent the characters. They are not moving images but rather still images that I combine in a sequence. My eye is photographic. This sequence of photograms shares somewhat the rhythm of fiction films, one the one hand, and the content of cinema verite on the other. It lies in between the two.

Could you share something of your approach to making a film ?

I'd say the essential element of the way I make films is getting out of the way. This means above all that we, the crew, come across as a non-crew, and melt into the environment.

The camera is stripped of all accessories. In fact we use a single lens and one small monitor that we all share. There is little else, a few cables, maybe a camera without a mic. This lets us come across as amateur film makers, as if we were just making a home movie. And it lets me recede as author, as omniscient film maker. This is the most important element.

The other crucial element is the length of each take. We shoot without interruption for at least 20 minutes, normally in total silence, because with such long takes the relationship between me and the characters is no longer merely visual and aural but almost olfactory. The camera essentially disappears. Ultimately this submersion in the scene also involves a loss of control over how the shots turn out, and an almost complete passing of the baton from myself to the subjects of the film.

Until now I always recorded sound with a boom, never wireless, to keep from interfering with the organic flow of the scene. In this film the situation is slightly different. Certain characters have become an integral part of the creative process; I work together with them on building the scenes, so in a way they are also the authors, directors, and film makers. Perhaps I went too far.

Had you written out anything in advance of starting to shoot, or did the structure emerge in the editing process?

During the shooting of *The Other Side*, Denise Ping Lee, the co-writer of the film, was always taking notes, which we would look over together at the end of each day as we analyzed each situation. It was a daily process of seeing where the stories we were telling converged or diverged, and deciding where they would go from there. We shared all of these decisions with the characters right away and adjusted them together if necessary. Denise and I are spider-writers, meaning we are happy spinning a web however intricate and complex it is. This became the basic structure of the film.

by Dario Zonta



CREW

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