

ARCHIPEL 33 presents



like an open sky

A FILM BY MARIANA OTERO

SYNOPSIS

FRANCE - Colour - DCP - Format 1:85 - 1h50 - 2013

Alysson observes her body with wariness.

Evanne spins until dizziness makes him fall.

Amina cannot manage to utter words clearly.

On the Franco-Belgian border, there's a unique place that takes in children with mental and social problems. Day after day, the adults try to understand the enigma that each one of them represents and, without ever imposing anything on them, invent the solutions that will help them to live in peace, case by case. Through their stories, *Like an Open Sky* reveals their singular vision of the world to us.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The origins of the project:

The realm that we call “madness” has always intrigued, fascinated and even frightened me, yet at the same time, I have always had the vague notion that it was possible to understand something about it and, moreover, that madness could teach us something. After *Entre nos mains*, I wanted to confront this altered state against which rational thought seems to come up short.

I subsequently visited numerous homes and institutions for the “mentally handicapped”. In the course of my lengthy scouting, I discovered a medical and educational institute for children on the Franco-Belgian border that is virtually unique in Europe, Le Courtil.

The fundamental idea behind the institution is that children suffering from mental problems are not handicapped or lacking something to be like others. On the contrary, at Le Courtil, each child is above all considered by the staff as an enigma, a subject with a singular mental structure, in other words an original way of perceiving and imagining the world and the relationship with the Other. The staff, by abandoning all pre-established ideas and knowledge, try to understand the singularity of each child in order to help them to come up with their own solution, the one that will allow them to find their place in the world and live there in peace.

I thus encountered an extraordinary way of thinking and living with madness in an institution that places the subject and its singularity at the heart of its work. More generally, I found a way there of approaching the Other that touched me deeply and which, I hope, is perceptible throughout the film: whoever it may be, the Other must above all be viewed as an incomparable mystery.

Filming:

Despite the scouting that lasted almost a year, what I saw during it and the stories about the children that I had been told, when I started filming I hadn't made much headway on possible "screenplays". Things were necessarily going to be different. At a place like Le Courtil, where everything revolves around the subject and its inventions, the children's stories are unpredictable. Moreover, the importance of events is grasped and evaluated long after they happen, in relation to the child's development, in other words "after the fact".

At Le Courtil, one can say that the stories are written backwards. This is unsettling... and breath-taking even. True, I had sharpened my gaze during scouting and could see more clearly than when I had first arrived at Le Courtil. But my powers of prediction ended there. I had a short lead on the events that were going to allow me to film them more or less accurately but I had no "visibility" beyond that.

I shot for three months in a state of total concentration, the camera strapped to me eight hours a day, with the sensation that every second could be precious. To succeed in filming the scenes, I had to forget my usual bearings that allow me to evaluate the importance of an event and what it entails. At Le Courtil, these bearings were not necessarily the right ones and could have made me miss out on something essential. To retain the acuteness of my gaze, to be accurate in the shooting of each scene, I had to be present on a daily level with the children and staff. I didn't film everything but I was with them at all times, on the alert.

As filming progressed, I started to perceive the importance of certain scenes that I would then complete with other scenes, which in turn took on a different significance the following week. In fact, this was a totally atypical, fascinating shoot that was very different from everything that I had experienced until then.

The children and the camera:

For the children, I knew before shooting that the relationship with the camera was going to be very particular, directly linked to their way of living out their relationship with the Other, their body and the world.

Because I knew that the relationship with the camera, in other words with the gaze, could be central, I chose to work alone for the scenes with the children, without my sound engineer. I decided to carry the camera strapped to my body with a light and flexible harness system, thus turning me into a "body-camera". And, even when I wasn't filming, I carried all this apparatus.

From the start if shooting, for the children, either the camera and I didn't exist, or the children spoke to me as if I didn't have the camera, or they took an

interest solely in the camera. In a way, for them, there was nothing outside the frame. That's why, at times, the children's interaction with the camera and me was commented on in the meetings and supervisory sessions just like any other element of a workshop.

In any case, these children displayed no narcissism, embarrassment, shame or timidity: their image and the rendering of it didn't really matter to them. It was their relationship to the Other or its gaze that was directly called into question and which could assault them or, on the contrary, soothe them.

Let's take the example of Evanne. For him, at the start of shooting, the camera didn't exist and it was as if I were transparent. Then little by little, at the same time as he changed, as "the Other" began to take shape for him, I saw that he was starting to see me, to see the camera. And so, the first time he looked into the camera, I was very moved: this revealed a change in Evanne and it had its importance, very different from all the other looks to camera that I had filmed in the past.

For Alysson, who had hardly paid any attention to me during scouting, my silent presence as a camerawoman became very important. The staff and I had the impression that the camera resembled Alysson's body and allowed her to put it in motion. Something very powerful occurred that made me think of the relationship that actors have with the camera: not so much the desire to be seen, which is surely not fundamental, but rather a much more vital function: it brings them together.

The relationship with the camera here was very strong, very "meaningful", which is why, in a totally logical manner, it found its place in the film's final cut.

Editing:

In the end, I shot 180 hours of footage. With the editor, Nelly Quettier, we cut the sequences, character by character, trying to highlight the singularity of each child and his or her development. After four months in editing, we had four hours that brought together scenes built up from the four main characters: Jean-Hugues, Alysson, Evanne and Amina. After that, we had to construct the film by intercutting these "stories" while bringing space and time into play, even if the film's construction was not solely chronological.

Through the editing, we had to make madness understood in a way that was sensory, emotive and intellectual, while building up a form of dramatic structure with the children that needed to integrate a constant back and forth movement between their everyday lives and the meetings. We had to avoid being systematic and retain the emotion linked to the characters at all times. The pitfall would have been to become didactic: the film had to remain an experience and not a lesson. More than give an explanation, the main thing for me was to allow the audience to live out the experience of comprehension, in other words give rise to a fresh gaze. Time was essential for the film: the time of interrogation first, then that of discovery and finally that of understanding.



CREDITS

Director **MARIANA OTERO**

Editing **NELLY QUETTIER**

Image **MARIANA OTERO**

Sound **OLIVIER HESPEL, FELIX BLUME**

Sound Editing **CECILE RANC**

Mixing **NATHALIE VIDAL**

Written by **MARIANA OTERO** and **ANNE PASCHETTA**

Music **FREDERIC FRESSON**, with the complicity of **MATHIAS LEVY** and **ANTONIN FRESSON**

Producer **DENIS FREYD - ARCHIPEL 33**

Co-producers **JEAN-PIERRE AND LUC DARDENNE - LES FILMS DU FLEUVE**

A coproduction **ARCHIPEL 33, ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA, LES FILMS DU FLEUVE, R.T.B.F. (TÉLÉVISION BELGE) – DOCUMENTARY DEPARTMENT**

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International Sales **DOC & FILM INTERNATIONAL**

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INTERNATIONAL SALES

DOC & FILM INTERNATIONAL

13 rue Portefoin
75003 Paris France
Tel + 33 1 42 77 56 87
sales@docandfilm.com

www.docandfilm.com

DANIELA ELSTNER

+ 33 6 82 54 66 85
d.elstner@docandfilm.com

ALICE DAMIANI

+ 33 6 77 91 37 97
a.damiani@docandfilm.com

GORKA GALLIER

+ 33 6 30 99 72 06
g.gallier@docandfilm.com

HANNAH HORNER

+ 33 7 70 15 96 69
h.horner@docandfilm.com

