



[Territoire Perdu]

Lost Land

Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd

Synopsis

Straddling a 2,400-kilometer-long wall constructed by the Moroccan army, the Western Sahara is today divided into two sections – one occupied by Morocco, the other under the control of the Sahrawi National Liberation Movement's Polisario Front.

Drawing from stories of flight, exile, interminable waiting and the arrested, persecuted lives on both sides of that wall, this film bears witness to the Sahrawi people, their land, their entrapment in other people's dreams.

In an esthetic that sublimates the real, *Lost Land* resonates like a score that juxtaposes sonorous landscapes, black-and-white portraits and nomadic poetics.

Press Kit

Director's statement

About *Lost Land*

After directing most of my previous films in the Western Sahara - *Nemadis, the Years Without News / Faraway Roots (Racines lointaines) / Drowned in oblivion (Le Cercle des noyés) / The Dormants* -, it seemed obvious that I should make a film on the Sahrawi people, their land, their entrapment in other people dreams.

Coming out of a nomadic tradition and culture, most Sahrawis have lived in exile, on a small piece of desert in Algeria, since 1976. Today, there are close to 700,000 survivors living in those refugee camps.

Under Spanish occupation until 1976, their land has since been subjected to wars – between the Sahrawi National Liberation Movement (Polisario) and Mauritania, until 1979, and between the Polisario and the Kingdom of Morocco until today. All that despite the fact that the World Court has granted the Sahrawi people the right to self-govern.

In 1989, the Moroccan army completed construction of a 2,400-kilometer wall cutting across the Sahrawi territory, to put an end to Polisario ambushes. That wall, under intense military surveillance, has allowed Morocco to occupy and exploit part of that territory ever since.

Since 1991, a cease-fire has held both camps in a war of waiting and attrition, with no political solution to the conflict coming to light and without any concern from the international community.

As a filmmaker, I wanted to show that situation –unknown for the most part, and only slightly known to those who remember the conflict as it was reported prior to the end of the Cold War.

This film project came to life three years ago. To launch it, I made several location scouts to both sides of the wall. Originally, my idea was to piece together the history of the Western Sahara by way of the topographical layout within the Sahrawi territory.

During those location scouts to refugee camps and the part of the territory under Polisario control, I had the opportunity to encounter many Sahrawi people. Becoming witness to the accounts of their exile, their connection to the land and to the territory as nomads, I realized the extent of their confinement. A physical confinement, but also a confinement of thought and of the imagination.

It also became obvious that I had to construct the film geographically, from the refugee camps and zones under Polisario control. In other words, to ceaselessly move closer to the wall, yet never cross it. To show how the Sahrawi people imagine the territory under Moroccan control, yet never set foot on it.

While the film's subject is political, my idea has always been to allow the source of that conflict to be revealed via the cinematic form – narratively, as well as through sound and image. I am indeed convinced that the strength of a film resides in its ability to sublimate its intention into its esthetics and provide the viewer with a place from which he can move forward by way of thoughts.

The human experience of images and sound

If this film began to take shape after the completion of my documentary, *Drowned in oblivion* (*Le Cercle des noyés*), which was shot on High-Definition video, I made another film – *The Dormants*, shot in Super-8 – before beginning production on *Lost Land*.

The experience of shooting *The Dormants* in Super-8 was fundamental to my cinematic path and decisive for the filming of *Lost Land*.

Indeed, shooting with a hand-held Super-8 camera revealed itself to be a way for me to extend the sense of my body through the gesture of filming, to allow that inner tremor of feeling, and not just intellect, to become incarnate in the images. That's exponentially even truer when – as is the case with celluloid – the number of reels is limited and, consequently, the act of filming is a ritual.

From the very beginning of production on *Lost Land*, my intention was to mesh the images of bodies and faces with the images of spaces.

As Julien Gracq wrote in his work, *Carnets du grand chemin*, there are two ways of looking – like a far-sighted person who has to step back to see, or like a near-sighted person, who has to move closer to see more clearly. In working from those two points of view, I wanted to better record the relationship that unites the Sahrawi people to space, to the land, to the territory.

If the shoot went on for several weeks, only a few hours of footage was actually shot. Shooting economically is a directorial choice. To me, it attests to the necessity of filming only in a state of *awakening*, of care, of vigilance, which sharpens the gaze to the point of being ceaselessly in search of the *unique, essential* image.

At the same time, once I made privileged connections with the witnesses, I recorded their stories of life, disappearances and exile, right on the spot. The idea was to conserve, by way of those recordings done in a real-life situation, the feverishness that inhabits the stories people tell for the first time – or almost – giving their breath, their hesitations as much importance as the words themselves.

The film's sound design was developed in two stages.

During the actual shoot, pure and isolated sounds, typical to the desert, to its barrenness, its winds, were recorded. Those sound source elements were then replayed through speakers in cavities (prisms, glass globes...) and rerecorded in a transformed state.

After that – in Lozère, France this time – the ambient sounds from the Western Sahara were reworked in natural echo chambers (caves, potholes, fireplaces).

It was important to me that the film's sound be set apart from the real, evoking a mental universe, becoming a form of thought, born out of solitude and loss of memory.

The film's editing process was a bit like knitting. Meaning, editing the image at the same time as the sound narration, with the idea that each sound that was chosen induces the image that follows, and vice-versa.

But an even more beautiful experience was born out of all those cinematic activities. And that was meeting men and women in the Western Sahara and being able to envision a film with them – to dream it, to long for it, like a kind of rebirth.

Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd

A Meditative Militancy

In Pierre-Yves Vandeweerde's filmography, *Lost Land* (*Territoire perdu*) is the last chapter in a trilogy that began with *Drowned in oblivion* (*Le Cercle des noyés*) and *The Dormants*. Those three films are anchored in the Sahel landscape, as well as the filmmaker's personal life. But they're connected by a reflection on a history that urgency and immediacy have abandoned, by a poetics of humanity – the dignity of living and surviving, of knowing how to die – and finally by stylistics and a vocabulary that creates “signs,” as Roland Barthes would say.

Bearing witness to the world presupposes a gaze and a memory, once you leave behind the world of information, news and front-page headlines. Who remembers the Oualata prison near the Mauritania border? Who still talks about the Sahrawi people, trapped in the sands between Algeria and Morocco? Or the Polisario struggle that's dragged on since 1975? Or that 2,500-kilometer-long wall that merges with the dunes, yet is guarded by sentries as fixed as rocks – a forgotten illustration of the “Tartars' Desert”?

Camels as “incipit,” the first image, first sequence, introducing a still trembling and open story. Penned in, shackled, they go in circles on the sands and in the winds. Like the men who are also prisoners, they are nomads condemned to immobility, chased off their land when Morocco demanded possession of the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony.

The long story of exile and loss isn't going to convey any informative antecedents, any ideological stands. Just voice-over narratives. Stories of flight and death, of interminable waiting. Factual, discrete, terse accounts, like bones. Coming from both sides of the wall – halted or persecuted lives. It's not about a stream of words but sequences that share their tragedy with the omnipresent wind, the conductor of a resonant score, a recitative in two voices.

Shot in black-and-white, *Lost Land* is built on contrasts – contrasts that convey zones of emotional or reflective resonance, not unexpected forms or narratives. Shots steeped in a blinding light, the obscurity of tents; empty images of a stony grayish desert, alien to the esthetic sweep of the dunes. And on this landscape with a lost horizon, given over to the void and the hostile, men and women, closely scrutinized, faces in close-up, a long litany of unsmiling images, impassive, arrested in a sleepwalker's present. Young soldiers held in the absurdity of a war without combat; elderly men seized in the folds of their wrinkles or their turbans, skin and fabric indistinguishable; crouching women, the Fates, without cursing, yet guardians of the missing.

Fragmented by words that trace themes and form chapters and carry violence in their very meaning – “the camps,” “the wall,” “the resistance” – Pierre-Yves Vandeweerde's film speaks of the misfortune and injustice of a world and, in the same way that it explores the very nature of cinema, speaks about “Here and elsewhere.”

Jacqueline Aubenas

A few historical tags about Western Sahara

Western Sahara is as large as United Kingdom, situated between Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria. It is one of the most inhospitable regions of the world. Winds blow continually. Temperature can reach 55° C in summer and be as low as -5° C in winter. Only a few years ago, lots of nomads were still living in those harsh areas. Today, this territory is an empty space, without life, but the site of an endless war of attrition between the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro) and the Moroccan army, since Spain withdrew her troops in 1975 without real willing to decolonize the country.

The claims of this silent conflict are the right to autodetermination and independence for the Sahrawi people, and the right to annex Western Sahara to their country in the name of historical and secular links for the Moroccans. Exploitation of phosphates and petrol fields offshore are other obvious economical stakes.



From North to South, this territory is now crossed by a sand wall of 2500 km, built by the Moroccan army. High from several meters, it shelters an underground sophisticated system of batteries and radar screens. Any movement is detected in a field of 60 km. On a strip of 400 meters along the wall, barbed wires and mines make impossible any attempt to approach the edifice.

Staffed by thousands of Moroccan soldiers, this wall changed, as soon as it was built in 1989, a war of ambush into a war of attrition. Like the Barley line built by Israeli in Eastern Sinaï, it makes impossible any incursion of the POLISARIO Front in most part of Western Sahara.

On both sides, two types of Sahara are in conflict. At the West, the useful Sahara is occupied by the Moroccan army, by hundred thousands of settlers coming from the North, and by Moroccan, Spanish and foreign industries that exploit natural economical ressources (phosphates at Bou Craa, fishing in Dakhla and Laâyoune, petrol off-shore). At the East, the free Sahara, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), is a partially recognized state (mainly by a few African countries) that was proclaimed by the POLISARIO in 1976. The symbolic capital is Bir Lahlou, a Sahrawi village where a few buildings are used as Parlement, Ministeries and offices. The other free cities (Mijek, Tifariti, Zoug) are occupied by soldiers of the POLISARIO, as the rest of Western Sahara on the eastern side of the wall.

Beyond the free Sahara, in Algeria, about 160000 Sahrawi people have been living in exile since 1976, when napalm bombings by the Moroccan army forced the inhabitants of Sahara to run away. They live in camps of refugees, on the hamada of Tindouf, a remote region of Algeria. There is no asphalted road. Only planes flying from Alger can land. Life is extremely difficult and precarious. Survival is only possible thanks to the help of Algeria and non-governmental organizations.

As large as a French department, the camps of refugees of Tindouf tend to reproduce accurately, by the wish of their inhabitants and the POLISARIO, the geography of their lost land. Four provinces have been constituted, each one being composed of about ten camps and bearing the name of an occupied town : Laâyoune, Smara, Dakhla, Aoussert. In this territory of exile, on the Algerian ground, daily life has got itself organized. Schools have been built, as well as health centers, hospitals and military camps of the POLISARIO front.

In several places, on both sides of the wall, troops of MINURSO (Mission des Nations Unies pour le Référendum au Sahara Occidental) are present. Their mission is to prevent war to become effective and to set up a consultation of populations about having their country being incorporated or not into Morocco. MINURSO has been in Western Sahara since 1991. However, fifteen years later, this referendum has not yet happened.

Meanwhile, on the front line, on both sides of the wall, thousands of soldiers, of the Moroccan army or the POLISARIO front, are waiting. They are waiting for orders. They are waiting for the mistake, the faux pas, of the others on the other side. They are in a state of war, permanently under alert. Though they have not fought since 1991, they know or think that war may break out at any time and, in the opacity of sand winds, they look at the horizon peering into what they might never approach.

Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd

Technical informations

Original Title : Territoire perdu
English Title : Lost Land

Direction : Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd

France / Belgique - 2011 - 75' - B&W and Color

Production : Zeugma Films / Cobra Films

In association with : ARTE - La Lucarne

Coproduction : CBA (Centre bruxellois de l'Audiovisuel)

Photography : Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd

Sound : Alain Cabaux

Editing and sound Editing : Philippe Boucq

Direction assistant : Annick Ghijzelings

Mixing : Amélie Canini

Producers : Michel David, Anne Deligne, Daniel De Valck

Music : Richard Skelton

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Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd

BIO-FILMOGRAPHY

Born in Liège, November 13, 1969.

Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd is a Belgian filmmaker. His films belong to the reality cinema genre and, for the most part, have been shot in Africa – in Mauritania (*Nemadis, the Years Without News / Racines lointaines (Far Away Roots) / Le Cercle des noyés (Drowned in oblivion)*), in the Western Sahara (*The Dormants / Territoire perdu (Lost Land)*), in the Sudan (*Closed District*).

Conceived out of an encounter – and, at times, a confrontation – with reality, his work attempts to weave bonds between men and the world, between singular and universal stories. At once esthetic, philosophical and political, his films are explorations of the world and its stakes, of existence here and somewhere else.

After studying Information, Journalism and Communication, as well as Anthropology and African Civilizations, Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd worked as a teaching assistant on the Université Libre de Bruxelles' Faculty of Philosophy and Literature until 2003.

From 2004 to 2008, he developed and ran *Cinéma(s) d'Afrique(s)*, an annual documentary film writing and directing residency for young Senegalese filmmakers. That project was a joint effort between the French Community of Belgium, the Walloon Region and the government of Senegal.

From 1998 to 2008, he served as co-director of *Filmer à Tout Prix*, the French Community of Belgium's biennial documentary film festival.

Since 2008, he has been professor at the IHECS (Institut des Hautes Etudes de Communication Sociale), in Brussels.

Since 2010, he has served as artistic director of the *Fragments d'une oeuvre* collection published by Doc Net Films Editions, in France.

As of 2011, he will oversee the *Uncertain Viewpoints* section of the Etats Généraux du Documentaire film festival, in Lussas, France.

- TERRITOIRE PERDU (*Lost Land*) / 75 minutes / Super 8 / Color & Black-and-White / 2011

- LES DORMANTS (*The Dormants*) / 65 minutes / Super 8 & HD Cam / Color & Black-and-White / 2009

- LE CERCLE DES NOYES (*Drowned in oblivion*) / 74 minutes / HD Cam / Black-and-White / 2007

Official selection of the Berlin International Film Festival - Forum section

- 1st Prize, Ecrans Documentaires de Arcueil (France)
- FIPRESCI Prize, Fribourg International Film Festival (Switzerland)
- Ecumenical Prize, Fribourg International Film Festival (Switzerland)
- FICC Prize for distribution support, Fribourg International Film Festival (Switzerland)

- CLOSED DISTRICT / 55 minutes / Beta Digit / Black-and-White / 2004

- 1st Prize, Escales Documentaires de La Rochelle (France)
- 1st Prize, Quintessence Festival in Ouidah (Benin)

- Best Film on the Memory of Human Rights, 4th International Film Festival on Human Rights (Paris)
- Special Mention by the FIPA jury, Biarritz

- **RACINES LOINTAINES (*Faraway Roots*) / 16mm / 75 minutes / Color / 2002**

- 1st Prize, RECIDAK (Rencontres cinématographiques de Dakar)
- Feature Film Prize, Rencontres Cinématographiques de Cerbère

- **NEMADIS, DES ANNEES SANS NOUVELLES (*Nemadis, The Years without news*) (co-directed with Benoît Mariage) 52 minutes / Beta digit / Color / 2000**