

An interview with Chus Gutiérrez, director of Return to Hansala

David Walsh
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The WSWS interviewed Chus Gutiérrez at the recent Toronto film festival. (See “Toronto International Film Festival 2008--Part 3: Mike Leigh’s *Happy-Go-Lucky*, Terence Davies’ *Of Time and the City*: What the filmmakers now see”)

David Walsh: Of course this was based on a real event, the mass drowning of Moroccan immigrants in 2001, but how and why did you decide to make this film? Was it the impact of one event, or a cumulative process?

Chus Gutiérrez: I read this story in the newspaper in 2001, and at that point I had made another film called *Poniente*, which was also about immigration, in Almería, an agricultural region. When I was finishing that movie, I read this news story, and I said, Oh my god, I should have done this one! Since that moment I couldn’t get rid of that idea. And now in 2008 I made it. I couldn’t get rid of that story ...

DW: What in particular made such an impact?

CG: For me, the story of the clothes [the drowned immigrants’ clothes that were taken back so the dead could be identified] was very symbolic. This was the most telling detail, this was a resume of the situation. No one could recognize you by your shirt, because maybe you have 20 shirts like this, or 20 people have similar shirts. Nobody would know you that way. But in this case, with one T-shirt I could recognize my brother, my husband, my father.

DW: And that detail was true?

CG: It is true. And when you go to Hansala, you see the houses. There are only carpets, cushions, no furniture. You see the clothes back in the corner, in one suitcase, the clothes of the entire family. You can recognize an individual by his clothes; it’s true, it’s not an invention of mine.

DW: What was the filming like in Morocco?

CG: We were lucky, because we had a great production manager there, a woman. She’s Spanish, she’s married to a Moroccan film director. We didn’t have any problems. People were very friendly, very receptive. It was very easy to shoot there. We were scared because you always think ahead of time—Oh, we’re going to find so many problems—but it didn’t happen. We brought the problems.

DW: How did you cast the film in the village?

CG: That was a long story. When I started to investigate, to find all the elements, I made a first trip and I arrived in the area where most of the young guys came from. It’s a very rural area. It’s inland, quite far from the sea. Most of the guys don’t know how to swim, that’s why they drown so easily.

When I got there the first time, I got very close to Hansala, but I didn’t quite get there. But during the trip I spoke to many people. I found that in Spain there was a group of people working with the inhabitants of Hansala. Because they had such a big tragedy there. In one boat, there were 13 men from that village. So people in Spain living close to the tragedy were very touched by the event and they traveled to Morocco to offer their condolences.

When I got back to Spain the first time I contacted these people, they talked to me about Hansala. I went there with them.

DW: Did you audition different people?

CG: Oh yes, we did a very big casting. We tried everyone who wanted to be in the movie. But we did something quite beautiful. They are very organized now. They started an association. We worked with everybody there. The women were cooking, we were with all the extras. We had local production people, we’d brought translators. The whole village was working with us.

Half of the crew were women, and I was the director, a woman, and the production manager too; the real bosses on the set were women. So for the first time there, women were paid for working. Of course they do a lot of work, but they don’t get paid normally. There was a women’s revolution after we left. They told the men that they wanted to participate in the society. They created their own association.

DW: Is the economic situation the same as before? Are the young people still leaving?

CG: The conditions are the same. But in this town, because of the tragedy, nobody else emigrates like that. They leave in other ways, but not in boats.

DW: How did you decide to make an undertaker the hero of the film?

CG: The real story was like that. When I read the news, I went to see the real character. He's something else. He makes money off this. He's a very special person. He's trying to survive like anyone else. He's not a saint just because he's dealing with dead people. It's business. I got very close to him, in an emotional way. He had gone to Morocco many times. I always say that reality is much more fascinating than film. He is very different from my character.

DW: Did you consider making a documentary about this? Why did you choose fiction?

CG: I like fiction, I like stories. What is the point of making films? Emotionally you get much more involved. I like to make fiction, because you put people under the skin of the characters, which is something you don't get with documentaries, no?

With documentaries I think you are freer, strangely enough. With fiction films, you can manipulate more, but at the same time you are more constrained, because the story has to follow a particular path, the dialogue is more controlled.

DW: We live in a globally integrated capitalism, where information and money are allowed to cross borders, but people are not. North America, Europe are creating fortresses to keep the poorest people out. What is your attitude toward the European Union policy on immigration, and the Spanish government's policy in particular?

CG: I think it's hypocritical. I'll speak about Spain, which I know better. We are in an economic crisis now, but previously, for years we were growing economically, and growing and growing. Why? Because we had immigrants coming in to work, getting lower salaries, and businesses were not paying taxes on the workers. That's why Spain got rich. Who's taking care of our kids? Immigrants. Who's taking care of the old people? Immigrants. Who are doing all the dirty jobs that we really need?

The politicians use this in a bad way. When there is a problem, it's the fault of the immigrants. If we are in a crisis, the immigrants have to get out, because they are taking our jobs. But before, we were using them as we wanted to. So it's terrible, in my opinion.

These terms are terrible, "illegals." Who can say you are "illegal"? You are a person. For me, it's terrible, it's garbage. It's very unfair.

And we are lucky because we are in the right part of the world at the right moment, but things could turn around in a moment. You could be that person, that immigrant, and you should be able to realize that and feel that. That would make us much more compassionate.

Nobody ever seems to ask themselves, why would people

leave their homes? I was living in New York for years, it wasn't easy to leave my home, my language, to leave somewhere where you control things, where you know the body language. It's not easy. Nobody wants to do it. Nobody does it on a whim, nobody does this capriciously.

It's all political, the propaganda about immigrants. Nobody talks about simple things, that no one wants to leave their country where they feel safe.

DW: Do you think these tragedies will continue?

CG: Oh, yes, forever. Forever and ever. Nobody's going to stop this. We have these border crossings in the north of Morocco, land crossings, in Melilla and Ceuta [Spanish enclaves on the North African coast]. Twenty years ago, it was no big deal. People came and went. When we started to get richer, they built a fence. More discreet than a wall. People were jumping over the fence. In 2005 a lot of people who were waiting took a big jump, like 200 people. A massive attack, according to the news. A big scandal. They made a bigger fence, more difficult to jump. It won't stop.

People know that if they go by boat, they may die, but they go by boat, and some die. So nobody is going to stop that. Like the border with Mexico. How many years has that been going on?

DW: In dealing with social problems, how do you avoid oversimplifying matters, formulas?

CG: As a filmmaker you are telling stories, you have to implicate your audience. Like I said, I like fiction. You want to tell a human story. You have to forget all this intellectual stuff, and tell a story. You try to clean the story up, go to the characters.

It's difficult to make movies like this. Everyone respects it. I think it's a good movie. But commercially, it's a nightmare. Do you think in the States they would like this movie?

DW: Yes, but whether or not they'll have a chance to see it is another question. There's a de facto censorship.

CG: That's the problem. Even in Madrid it's difficult to see good movies.



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