

In the Devil's Garden - Director's Statement (2018)

In September 2017 I participated in an educational program organized by Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), a partially recognized state in Northern Africa, and "Zentrum für Europäische und Orientalische Kultur" (ZEOK), a German NGO, whose aim is to promote cultural dialogue and human rights. The name of the program - "Solidarity Exchange" - speaks of its own. A seemingly ordinary life in the household of four sisters, Guha, Hedra, Lele and Moina; the life of care and occasional squabbles, made me experience the warmth of their relationship and hospitality towards me. Yet, while walking out of the door into the vast flatness of "The Devil's Garden", the need to join the call for "solidarity" with their invisible plight suddenly stroke me.

Inhabitants of this place recognize themselves as Sahrawis, the indigenous population of a former Spanish colony displaced in the 1970s by the aspirations of the Moroccan royal family in the Western Sahara. Being often compared to the Zionist occupation of Palestine, it is needless to say that the history of conflict is complex. There are, however, two key points. Firstly, the ruling of the International Court of Justice has confirmed the inalienable right of self-determination to Sahrawi people. Secondly, those who trample democratic rights held so dear for their own citizens are Spain and France - supporters of Morocco. In the Sahara desert, double standards rule. Instead of timely decolonization we have seen fifteen years of war, erection of the militarized sand wall, pretentious diplomacy, and one of the longest humanitarian missions in the history of the United Nations.

In my film I have used the principles of sensory ethnography in order to examine the acoustic and material qualities of the animal market environment. I have decided to highlight feeding, milking, waiting and slaughtering of goats and camels as the key activities which order this place. As the narrative progresses, and we see UNHCR water truck, "gift" sacks and old men mourning the loss of home, the audience discovers that the market is located in a refugee camp. And the night falls. Out of sight. Far far away. What we see in the first plain it is the man deciding over the faith of sentient beings, his companions. By looking with camels at their captors, I attempt to make a step towards establishing an animal's perspective. As such, the film revisits the old question "who am I to seize someone else's body, someone else's life".

There is a socio-political reading to it as well: the market and specific human-animal relations can stand for the situation between Morocco, Sahrawis and the "West". Undeniably, one is the eater, the second is being eaten, and the third is watching. Under such constellation Sahrawi "refugee republic" becomes a "sacrifice zone" through which the game of international relations is balanced at the expense of the disempowered. And you can speculate even further. Look around. The Capitalocene is upon us. What do you see behind the growing number of refugee camps?

To me what must be challenged through the arts and humanities it is the banality of taking.