

The Wild Pushes Back

... Sometimes when you're quiet the motorway sounds a lot like the waves of the sea.

Meseta: this dry inland plateau in Northern Spain, dotted with villages hundreds of kilometres from any coast, has been circumscribed by a strange kind of silence since that motorway was built. No more the trundle of passers-through or the fresh energy of new residents. As each inhabitant leaves, or passes away, the doors to their houses are closed up, each house peering onto the street in a blank-faced stare. The road in or out has become a track, swallowed by weeds for lack of traffic, expediting the villages' isolation.

I've seen people cry, because their memories seem to have vanished.

Inland: a word which might evoke the potential to feel bounded; cut off. And yet, or also, in the village of Fresno de la Carballeda in the plains beneath the Sierra de la Culebra, the film opens into a world of flows, cycles, connections, absences - and presences which evoke absences. In this 'silence' and 'isolation', each element has its own song and pitch and cadence.

*

We are in the air looking down. We are on the ground watching the passing plane, thundering. From the sky: the land parcelled up, its wild profile mostly overwritten. On the ground: the wild pushes back.

A hundred bells churn dust, sheeps' fleeces browned by the cacophony.

The emptiness of the village is the fullness of sound: thunder, cicadas, water.

At dusk a man speaks to his cows across the valley in their own language.

The darkness is real and total.

*

Meseta (Inland) is a film threaded through with many elements, and a multiplicity of POVs and temporalities. The structure is basket-like: a weave of many threads, looping. In that basket several lives are contained and interconnected – among them a farmer, an elderly smallholder couple and a shepherd. They eke out their existences on this dry plateau, criss-crossed by irrigation canals, burrowed under by wine caves.

Sheep, water, and aeroplane contrails appear time and again.

The sheep pass through the film, herded by the shepherd from a cacophonous opening to a homecoming finale before a storm. Cinematic transhumance, punctuated by a picnic brought to the shepherd by his wife. If you listen carefully, you will know that wolves live alongside them. The wild lives alongside them.

Water flows through the film, aurally as much as visually: carefully controlled, released into fields and gardens from a canal; sheets laundered in the stream. Villagers' time is managed around this water – when it will be flowing in a direction that can be used.

The constant presence of contrails overhang modernity and speed on this slow and nature-led world, where the digital is disrupted. The film opens and closes with the view of the *meseta* from a plane. In the middle, two young girls – the only two children in the village – lie in an ancient grave looking up at the sky and another plane passing overhead: fulcrums between pasts and futures. They are out looking for Pokemons with their phone, but there are none. *Because there's no one but us. And if there aren't people the Pokemon creators won't put any Pokemons here.* In a fruit tree CDs are hung to scare away the birds. *Windows 2000* is written on one.

Meanwhile the farmer's life is lived in a continuum between the real and the virtual. The shepherd's sheep graze under a viaduct. A tractor crosses it. Cut to the tractor cab with the farmer driving. Cut to the farmer at home playing a computer game where he is also driving a tractor, then walking through a forest. The farmer's virtual forest explorations cut to a similar POV in the real world, as if he has eyes in his knees. We watch him open a sluice to direct the stream to an irrigation channel. We pan from purpose (action, irrigation), back to the element itself exploring light, reflections, weeds, and flow: the wateriness of the water on its own terms. The soundtrack pulls us from just above the water into the water: immersion. Then there, like an apparition on the stream bed, is a discarded paella pan. Hints of past events - outdoor cooking perhaps, or use of the stream to wash up: humans connecting with the stream through use.

The shifting POV plays with time and space; makes echoes and patterns. It plays with scale too. Visual echoes complement the soundtrack. Crushing grapes with his feet in a cave, wine flows from the smallholder's toes like the irrigation to his garden. The rivuleted channels of the wine-making set up echo the rivuleted hills into which he has just walked to reach the cave. The frothing dark wine looks like the milky way in the dark night sky. All the while thunder rumbles outside.

Cicadas, always cicadas. Or flies. Or birds. As humans recede, a consistent presence of apparent non-human thriving...at least in the air, if not the rivers. *Now with the insecticides they use in the fields, fertilisers and all that, well...Finding a trout in the river is about as hard as finding yourself a wife.*

What is our baseline?

I had the very particular experience of watching this film upon returning from the events in Glasgow surrounding COP26. How do we see and value nature in the midst of an ecological crisis? How might we live alongside the wild without leaving it, or without it leaving us?

A response to the film *Mesata (Inland)* by Juan Palacios (2019), by Dumfries & Galloway based artist and writer Sarah Thomas. Commissioned to coincide with a screening of *Mesata* at CAMPLE LINE, November 2021

More information: campleline.org.uk/inland