

Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen



343 Perspectives 2012
video

Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen views the processes of globalisation through the eyes of men and women who have not benefited from them. In his documentary videos, he looks at locations that exist in the force fields of other, more prosperous places. For some projects he works with refugees held up at borders; for others, with skilled labourers economically marginalised by changing patterns of trade. In all of his work, he remains off-screen and silent, leaving his featured interlocutors to tell their own stories and so describing larger historical developments organically, through the accumulation of individual accounts.

His works are relatively plainspoken. At a time when many artists – Walid Raad, Renzo Martens, Omer Fast and others – are at once using and subverting the protocols of documentary film, Larsen works firmly within the parameters of the genre in his long, tightly edited pieces, which are closer in spirit to the many-stranded, richly informative documentary projects of artists such as Ursula Biemann and Allan Sekula.

Though he is known primarily for his works in video, he has also made installations, such as his well-received *Ode to the Perished*, which was shown at the 2011 Thessaloniki Biennial. A memorial to migrants lost at sea, it consisted of cocoon-like objects that were made out of Concrete Canvas (a material used to build emergency shelters), left for months in the Aegean to develop sea-corroded surfaces and suspended from the dome of a building that was originally a mosque. In recent years he has also made a number of documentaries in which residents of depressed urban zones such as Peckham in south London (343 Perspectives, 2012) and Saint-Denis on the northern fringe of Paris (*Tales from the Periphery*, 2010) speak about their aspirations, families and surroundings. Working to alter media-driven perceptions of neighbourhoods with large immigrant communities, these pieces

run the risk of replacing one cliché with another, the paranoid image of the riot-prone ghetto (Saint-Denis) or web of sink estates (Peckham) with a pat melting-pot narrative that has become familiar on the back of multicultural advertising, Olympics opening ceremonies and other displays of ersatz idealism. But Larsen averts the risk by selecting numerous local collaborators and letting them speak for themselves, thereby creating complex pictures of divided and evolving communities. In this he is aided by his knack for finding charismatic collaborators who are comfortable on camera – and for teasing out telling stories. The Ghanaian-British rapper Evans Owusu, for instance, lights up 343 Perspectives with his screen presence as he talks candidly about his time in a psychiatric hospital, about random police searches and his plan to open a takeaway restaurant.

But Larsen is at his best in works such as *Promised Land*, 2011, and *End of Season*, 2013, which look at the human cost of ever-tighter border controls in Europe (Features AM364). In these documentary videos, we hear the stories of migrants, people smugglers and borderland residents. Their accounts are interspersed with moody passages in which the camera surveys the towns, fields and waterways that mark or abut crucial borders in lingering shots accompanied by the eerie musical arrangements of Mikkel H Eriksen. In these passages, Larsen uses the full width of the screen to emphasise the flatness and openness of landscapes that are nevertheless closed to many who try to cross them.

Promised Land in particular is spellbinding. A three-screen installation, it looks at the fallout of the Afghan war and the disputed 2009 election in Iran by tracking a small number of *sans papiers*, including an Iranian opposition supporter and his 3- or 4-year-old son, as they try to find shelter on the beaches and in the derelict buildings of Calais while plotting their transit to the UK. They speak of the conflicts in their homelands, of the difficulties

they had in getting as far as Calais, of beatings at the hands of the French police and of failed attempts to get on to trucks and ships bound for the UK, also touching on the friendships and tensions that have developed among them – male camaraderie is an abiding theme in Larsen’s work. Some passages are nerve-jangling: the work features footage shot by two Iranian migrants themselves as they tried to sneak into the back of a truck in a secure parking lot at the mouth of the Channel Tunnel. Other passages, including one in which the same Iranian pair practise leg-ups between beach huts, are almost funny.

The more comical aspects of his situation are not lost on Hasan, the most articulate and camera-friendly of the refugees who appear in the work. After falling out with a group of fellow Iranians, he has been staying in a beach hut which is ‘safe, good ... like a hotel’, as he puts it, implicitly likening his own enforced stay to a tourist’s beachside holiday. Later, after two friends make it over to England, Hasan notes with self-deprecating humour that his own chances are hampered by his fear of water. He speaks on a mobile to a friend who has reached London and teasingly reproaches him for being out of touch, later wondering whether the life of an immigrant in the UK is all it is cracked up to be. Larsen does well here to counter the treatment of Calais refugees in the news media – which routinely portray them either as faceless victims or as lawless vagrants – with his own more intimate and sustained examination of their experiences.

End of Season considers immigration from a more tangential perspective, focusing not on migrants but on a small community that lies in their path, the farming village of Üyükütatar Köyü on the bank of the river Meriç in north-west Turkey. This stretch of the river, which marks the border with Greece, has served for a time as a transit point for migrants entering the European Union from the east. Towards the beginning of the work, a farmer points out that the fields along the Meriç are in a military zone and so cannot be reached without permission from the military police, while on screen a combine harvester spits grain into a trailer, a watchtower rising up behind it. This is one of a number of incongruities that are highlighted in the video: the river is at once a dangerous natural barrier to the migrants who try to cross it and also a crucial resource to the farmers who use its water to irrigate their fields. Larsen also implicitly compares the invisible movements of migrants with other, superficially more prosaic displacements. As the piece unfolds, it becomes apparent that the demographic profile of the village is changing as the price of rice falls, making the local crop less lucrative and pushing many young men to sell up and seek factory work in a nearby town. So the documentary traces various flows, the migrations that traverse the region finding echoes in the gradual exodus of young men from the village and in the seasonal movements of the Roma labourers who come to work in Üyükütatar Köyü, where they are well liked by some and harassed by others, including police officers who suspect them of people smuggling.

What makes works like these so suggestive is Larsen’s ability to outline economic and geopolitical shifts while attending to their implications on the ground. He shows how systemic



changes affect the lives of the men and women who are caught up in them, without reducing those lives to simple illustrations of the larger developments. Indeed, he relies on his collaborators, on men like Hasan in Calais and on the farmers and Roma workers in Üyükütatar Köyü, to tell the larger stories for him, those stories forming not neat and coherent historical accounts but complex narrative tissues that expose, in their clashes and slippages as much as in their revelations, the grotesque asymmetries underlying global exchange. ■

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End of Season 2014
video

Promised Land 2011
video

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