

***'When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art.' I write it because there is some lie I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.'***

*George Orwell, 'Why I Write', 1946 i*

## When I sit down to write: On two films by Samuel Stevens

by Stephen Connolly

The artist filmmaker Samuel Stevens has made two works exploring issues of migration as they manifest in contemporary Spain. *Sin Papeles* (2005) relates the encounter of the artist with a site of migrant resistance - the Santa Maria del Pi Church in Barcelona - host to a hunger strike by migrants in 2001. *Atlantropa* (2009) features a voiceover spinning a loose narrative around a fictional bridge - spanning the Gibraltar Straits to connect Europe and North Africa - as the film visually explores the infrastructure of the Spanish - Moroccan frontier.

Migrants themselves are not granted a voice in either film: individual narratives of voyage and displacement are

i. George Orwell, Why I Write 1946 [http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e\\_wiw](http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw)

not the focus of Stevens' work. His subject is instead how issues of migration reveal the boundaries and exclusions of the economic and legal frameworks of the EU, and how he; as artist making work, and we; as audience and witness to this work, are enmeshed in and compromised by these same socio-political frameworks. How these two films articulate these issues, and are productive of new forms of knowledge, is the subject of this essay.

The quote above appears as an introductory dedication to Stevens' film *Sin Papeles*. Its source is Orwell's essay *Why I write*, and the context is the author surmising his adoption of this position in consequence of his experiences in the Spanish Civil War.

Orwell's identification in the same essay of four essential motives for writing will be used to probe and explore Stevens' work. In particular, the relational themes of Stevens' films respond to the suggestions of Orwell as an engaged social commentator.

***(i) Sheer egoism. Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc., etc. It is humbug to pretend this is not a motive, and a strong one.***

Later in his essay, Orwell remarks 'writers are vain, selfish, and lazy.' Stevens does not share these traits – but given he has not chosen to access or represent the narratives of migrants themselves, he is at the same time

hyper-aware of the vanity of authorship. In response, he deliberately undercuts ego by the tone and content of the textual narration or 'production diary' in *Sin Papeles*, and identifies hubris in the text of *Atlantropa*. Both strategies acknowledge Orwell's most primal motive, and in combination and context with the image track of the films, hold it in suspension.

The narration of *Sin Papeles* is part of an editing structure of restricted visual and sonic information. Images of the Santa Maria del Pi Church and its environs are shown in silence, and in counterpoint to location sound accompanying black screen. Text, as subtitles to image and as title text on black frame, narrates a production diary - or auto-commentary - on the activity of making the work:

I was looking for something,  
I was in the area making sound recording of  
things I wanted to draw attention to.  
As I turned the corner into Placeta del Pi,  
I was confronted by a crowd of people  
And I made a sound recording outside a  
small arched glass door, a side entrance to  
a church.

*Sin Papeles*, 2005

This 'split' presentation of images and sounds is qualified both by the constancy of the textual narration, and by the implicit designation, by the text, of the depiction as material gathered by the artist; as 'stuff collected' and thus yet to undergo transmutation into 'artwork'. The transpar-

ency of this record circumvents the ‘value-added’ aspect integral to ‘artistic’ production, and conditions a desire for metaphor.

In the passage above, Stevens describes his response to the presence of a crowd: suggesting he was ‘confronted’ by people, from whom he turned away to attend to recording sound. The subtle segue from crowd to the built environment belies the human focus habitually assigned to a filmmaker, and subtly undermines his existential authority, also implied by his status as the producer of the filmwork. The text also assigns some importance to Stevens’ exact positioning on the ‘site’ thus inferring the ‘document’ he is acquiring is not neutral - it has an ‘angle’ or perspective.

By these means, questions normatively asked of films, such as: ‘What can this image mean?’ amongst others, are redirected to issues of context and relationship in the work. ‘Why is this image included’ and ‘Why is this image presented to me in this way’ assume cardinal importance. Questions of legitimacy, central to both the politics and the lived experience of migration, are thus deeply embedded in the articulation of text and image/sound in the film. The audience is less a supplicant to the puzzle created by the artist; and is instead engaged as a participant in a discursive field demarked by the work. A social relationship to images and the ideas thrown up by the work is generated.

Addressing authorial vanity in a different register, the voiceover of *Atlantropa* directs our attention to the project of that name:

The inspiration behind the Gibraltar Bridge was an earlier vision to re-locate the Straits at the centre of a pan- Euro- African area.

Although the Atlantropa project did not become a reality, from 1927 until his death in 1952 the German Architect Herman Sörgel campaigned to realize his plans to create a new continent by partially draining the Mediterranean Sea.

Europe and Africa would be connected through land reclamation and the construction of a series of large bridges across the Mediterranean basin.

*Atlantropa, 2009*

Herman Sörgel's scheme was grandiose and utopian, yet in keeping with ambitious projects of other architects in the mid-twentieth century. Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin (1925) envisaged bulldozing much of central Paris north of the Seine and replacing it with sixty-story cruciform towers in a grid pattern set in parkland. In response to the cities of Algiers and Rio de Janeiro, the Swiss architect imagined immense curving housing blocks tracing the sea-shore, topped with freeways for traffic circulation. ii

Echoing Le Corbusier's highly visible practice as an architectural provocateur, Sörgel publicised his Atlantropa scheme at every opportunity, receiving support from ar-

ii. Le Corbusier : [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le\\_Corbusier](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Corbusier)

chitects, a sympathetic hearing from politicians, and invitations to exhibit at world fairs. He set up the Atlantropa Foundation in Munich in 1945: at this moment his scheme bore comparison in scale and scope with the Marshall plan for rebuilding Europe. Atlantropa briefly interested the nascent United Nations. However, despite his efforts, by his death in 1952, Sörgel's dream was slipping from serious political consideration. iii

Stevens' *Atlantropa* is inspired by the Sörgel project but proposes a Gibraltar Bridge and weaves it into a fictional narrative of a crossing built, then abandoned, in consequence of the controversy over its meaning and use. The voiceover text, faithful to the spirit of Sörgel, positions the bridge as a technological solution to political and economic issues, the ethical and consensual dimensions of which are ignored.

It was intended as a symbol of unity between Southern European and North African States to resolve pressures created by immigration into Europe through economic collaboration.

*Atlantropa*, 2009

In this bland evocation of 'symbol' embedded in bureaucratic rationale, the bridge is set up to fail as generative of further meaning associated with 'unity'. At the

iii. Herman Sörgel, <http://www.datum.at/0406/stories/1905573/> - (German)

same time, it is impressive in scale and ambition: ego made concrete.

**(ii) Aesthetic enthusiasm. Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement. Pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story.**

Andalusia is large area of Southern Spain on the northern shore of the Straits of Gibraltar and is mostly uninhabited.

This region is the main corridor of entry to Europe from Africa as the Spanish mainland comes within only 11km of the neighbouring continent.

The roads are barren and ill kept making it hard to enter the region other than by small plane.

*Atlantropa*, 2009

Aspects of the voiceover text in *Atlantropa* recall Buñuel's *Las Hurdes: Land Without Bread* (1933), a film ostensibly aiming to document the life of this remote area of Spain. In *Las Hurdes* the use of voiceover commentary as a vehicle of impartial information, is radically subverted: for instance, 'At the entrance to the town, we are welcomed by a choir of idiots,' as the camera depicts a group of villagers. Later: 'Strange, but we never heard anyone singing in *Las Hurdes*', an exposition of lack which mirrors the film's title.

These unsupported statements, non sequiturs, and many more incongruences in the commentary have led Las Hurdes to be suggestively labeled a work of “ethnographic surrealism”, a fusion of art and anthropology and aligning it with the surrealist movement of its time. This fusion of disciplines “attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness - the unexpected”<sup>iv</sup>.

As a framework for voiceover as a creative element in film, a surrealist text can respond to the polysemic nature of meaning in images. These possibilities are also explored in *Atlantropa*:

The image of this landscape is widely recognised as a civil and peaceful land.

Unusually strong winds given the name La Venta are frequent in the Straits of Gibraltar.

The wind drives many of the people who live here insane and most commit suicide because of it.

*Atlantropa*, 2009

This bizarre juxtaposition of weather and suicide is strategically inserted as a qualification of the opening assertions of the voiceover text. Its inclusion indicates the commentary of *Atlantropa* is always to be considered as

iv. James Clifford has coined the term Ethnographic Surrealism *from*: James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 148.

incomplete, as unable to exhaust or contain meaning suggested by the image. Within the wider context of the work, this inclusion signals the remit of the film will extend to issues of social-economic survival.

In a different register, towards the close of *Atlantropa*, the commentary supplies information directly contradicted by the image. For example claiming ‘Beyond the limits of the Southern enclave ... People have very few consumer goods’ over a shot of a 4x4 vehicle moving along a hillside road; and suggesting the factoids ‘Infant mortality is high, while life expectancy, literacy, and education are all low.’ are collaborated by images of children carrying books and an elderly woman with shopping. Stevens sourced these statements in the commentary from the websites of NGOs active in the aid and development fields in Morocco; organisations with an interest in portraying the relative deprivation of the area.

A momentary affect of estrangement – a rupture - from a normative relationship between commentary and image is induced by these surrealist and unsubstantiated turns in the voiceover, a distancing complemented by the sonorous and authoritative performance of the text. To complete this surrealist turn, Stevens embeds in the text the bland, coded discourse of political communiqués and resolutions, transforming the voiceover into an act of mischievous ventriloquism.

**(iii) Historical impulse. Desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity.**

Stevens studied at the University of the Basque Country in Bilbao in 2001. At that time, the Basque separatist organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) was highly active and the environment he encountered was politically charged. On a visit to Barcelona, Stevens encountered what seemed to him to be an eviction from Santa Maria del Pi Church, which was the end of a migrant hunger strike. Near the end of his time in Spain, he visited Morocco and leaving Tangier, witnessed migrants attempting to dodge the harbour guards and board the ferry to Europe, a scene later to form the opening shot of *Atlantropa*.

If for Orwell, participation in The Spanish Civil War ‘turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood’<sup>v</sup>, Stevens also regards his time in Spain as politically sensitising and formative, decisively shaping his artistic practice. For Stevens, both films are returns to important sites of experience. Orwell invokes positional quality to ideas – a scheme of balances and/or personal choices between predetermined ‘views’. More pertinent to Stevens’ practice is a scheme suggested by Badiou, placing experience and subjectivity in productive tension. In Badiouian terms, the film work could be understood to have a relationship

v. George Orwell, Why I Write 1946 [http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e\\_wiw](http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw)

of ‘fidelity’ to the ‘event’ of the initial experience, and the process, that which fidelity produces, is a ‘truth’ – a break or rupture from that which pertained before the event. Badiou goes further ;

I call the ‘subject’ the bearer of a fidelity, the one who bears a process of a truth. The subject in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely non-existent in the situation ‘before’ the event. We might say that the process of truth induces a subject. vi

A ‘Desire to see things as they are’ inhabits the visual form of the images in *Sin Papeles*. Stevens’ camera frames the external walls of the church and the neighbouring streetscape, and at the same time observing people passing the church. For the most part, these shots do not frame details, or exhibit a focal point or set up an axis of compositional tension or energy in the frame. Neither does the film offer a comprehensive view – or ‘master shot’ - of the church as an autonomous structure. The views are modest and commensurate with a point of view available to any lingering pedestrian. Stevens’ camera is registering information without seeming to prejudge meaning.

This method of depiction in *Sin Papeles* amounts to a reflexive pictorial strategy, not only emphasising the engagement of form with content but also the relationship between observer, the act of observation, the image and the

vi. Alain Badiou, *Ethics; An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, transl. by Peter Hallward; New York: Verso, 2000

pro-filmic. The final act of the film making process takes place within the observer, reflecting the embedded nature of the church in the urban fabric of a residential district of Barcelona as the original source. This connection is also present in the text of the film, as sur-titles over the images relating Stevens experience are intercut with texts reporting the hunger striker's struggle and its context (derived from activist internet documentation). In text as in image, these parallel facts generated by Santa Maria del Pi as a site: personal, subjective, experiential; social, political and historical, are intertwined and cast in relationship.

Finally, *Sin Papeles* as a whole does not present an image of the hunger strike itself. The site of the strike, the church of Santa Maria del Pi, is the only trace of the protest, the event of which we must imagine. This absence, deployed in conjunction with, and in paradoxical support of, the theme of the protest, is thus transformed into metaphor by the work.

***(iv) Political purpose. — Using the word 'political' in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples' idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.***

On January 20th 2001 360 immigrants locked themselves in Santa María del Pi, a small central parish church in Barcelona, starting a hunger strike and demanding work permits for all illegal immigrants in Spain.

*Sin Papeles*, 2005

Midway through *Sin Papeles*, the camera finds a body not in motion across or through the square by the church like the others. Attentive viewers will make out a person as a bundle of grey clothing sitting next to the planter-defined enclosure of a restaurant screen left. The camera does not zoom or reframe to centre or position advantageously this figure – even if – in context – our interest as viewers is piqued. In a subsequent take of the shot, a policeman – or at least a uniformed official – is seen alongside the figure, bending over as if engaging with them.

From a UK perspective, the political project of European Integration generally manifests as distant, inaccessible, complex and irrelevant. In a UK context, EU migration issues generally coalesce on the social and economic impact of the (overwhelmingly) legal and fully documented workers from within the union itself. A wholly separate strand of issues pertain to migration to the UK from outside the EU, focusing particularly on the nations of the Commonwealth with strong ties to the UK. Overall, migration exists in two worlds for the UK, those legitimate, allowed in the UK for reason of utility, and those undocumented, estimated at 442,000 in London. vii

Spain forms part of the EU frontier with Africa, a major source of migration to the EU. Net migration in Spain in 2007 was 16 per 1000 inhabitants – almost five times the average of 3.4 per 1000 EU-wide. In comparison with

vii. [http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/economic\\_unit/events/immigration-london.jsp](http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/economic_unit/events/immigration-london.jsp) 442,000 (end 2007) is the medium estimate in Gordon Whiteheads presentation.

the UK (most recent 2002 – 3 migration figure : 2.5 per 1000), migration is a significant feature of Spanish society, and has become essential for the functioning of the economy.viii

To eat in the EU implies a connection with migrant and illegal labour. The economies of EU countries and thus the rights and privileges enjoyed by EU citizens, rests on semi-legal and exploitative labour practices and the denial of rights to migrant workers in the agricultural sector in particular.

This abstract denial of rights has been developed by the Italian Philosopher Agamben through the figure of the ‘Homo Sacer’ or ‘Sacred Man’, a feature of Roman Law denoting a man who can be killed without sanction. This condition of ‘bare life’ - a body exposed to violence yet exempt from legal sanction and protection, - means the individual is thus subject to unlimited sovereign power.ix

The contradictory figure of the ‘Homo Sacer’ throws into relief the co-ercive instrumentality of the political apparatus. Stevens says ‘I am interested in as much as two people can exist in the same society and be totally unequal and in some cases people have no rights.’

viii. <http://stats.oecd.org/viewhtml.aspx?queryname=18169&querytype=view&lang=n>OECD Stat Extracts : Spain; Migration comparison table.

ix. Giorgio Agamben, Heller-Roazen, trans. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

While shooting *Atlantropa*, Stevens was fortunate to extricate himself and his team from arrest by the Guardia Civil for filming the border fence marking the boundary of the Spanish enclave of Ceuta with Morocco. Visualising ‘fortress’ Europe in the image of the walls of the enclave, a fragment of Spain on the African landmass, is one of the many suggestive gestures of the film. Representing and revealing the existence of these structures, at the same time as implicating an audience in the production of the relationships they propose, is the work performed by Stevens’ art. His work is a call to re-consider the politically damaging complicities and distortions embedded in distanciation and concealment. As Stevens articulates directly in a paragraph of voiceover, which did not make the final edit of *Atlantropa* :

The image of life inside is an image, a system of illusions and beliefs woven to benefit those within it. It can be believed as it provides all those within it the life that is afforded to them and the desires of all those on the outside.

These practicalities deny them, the people beyond, of their own ability, existence.

And the practicalities inside are merely symbols that support the notion that we exist. Our life is sustained, and within these empty shells we live it.

*Atlantropa* (working script), 2009