

In their hands

A film by [Vincent Detours & Dominique Henry](#)

Directors' interview by Pierre Duculot

Where does your interest in psychotherapy for torture victims come from?

Our interest in psychotherapies comes from the radio documentary *Quando empieza la noche* we made in 2004. It's about a left-wing militant arrested and tortured under Fujimori in Peru. After this programme, we asked ourselves questions about torture and its purpose. We observed that this is a controversial subject especially since the Abu Grahیب prison scandal (American military tortured Iraki prisoners). In the name of the war on terror, a line of speech justifying torture started to come through in politics and in the media, but also in television series such as 24.

You have drawn much from the work of ethnopsychiatrist Françoise Sironi-Guilbaud...

All of our films start from documentation. Here, Françoise Sironi-Guilbaud's book *Bourreaux et Victimes* (Torturers and Victims) has been one of the starting points of our research. The hypothesis mentioned in the book is the following: the problems of torture victims are not internal to their psyche; they are not intrinsic to the victim. Françoise Sironi-Guilbaud's psychotherapeutic approach takes into account that, a destructive treatment has been inflicted on these people deliberately and a part of the therapy consists in getting the patient to understand that. She seeks to give them the words to speak about it, in order to break the isolation they often fall into because of this trauma.

Your film talks about the victims, but also about the torturers...

Françoise Sironi-Guilbaud has devoted herself to both! She shows that behind the making of a torturer, there is a process of dehumanisation which is somewhat similar to that which the torturer then imposes on his victim: this often happens by a traumatic process which aims to take him out of the group he belongs to in order to then re-integrate him into an elite political police or into some service of this sort, which is outside of the law. It's a bit the same thing, reflecting what he will inflict later on his victims except that these are not re-integrated anywhere. They are dehumanised, because it is required that they return to their original group to cause unease, confusion and fear.

Why have you included in your film excerpts of Duch's trial, one of the worst torturers under Pol Pot?

We were shooting our film at the same time that Duch's trial was taking place. Various meetings with Françoise Sironi-Guilbaud, who was expert psychiatrist at the trial, enabled us to follow it closely. We discussed with her during the therapy supervision sessions at the Appartenances centre in Lausanne. We found that the pictures of the trial brought interesting material to treat the subject of «torturers». In addition, it's a major historical trial. We were able to create a parallel between

individual stories of the ordinary people that we filmed during psychotherapy and the «History» of a major criminal against humanity.

During the film, we leave the psychotherapists rooms on occasion for some still shots of the backs of victims who are contemplating the waters of Lake Geneva.

These shots were planned from the first versions of the scenario; we imagined them as pauses between chapters. At the beginning, we wanted to film the patients either at home or in an anonymous way in Switzerland, in a crowd in Lausanne. This turned out to be very complicated, because most of them were asking for asylum and were very reticent to allow themselves to be filmed outside of their therapy sessions. Certain patients are afraid of being arrested, deported and sent back to their country of origin where they risk being tortured again. In the end we chose water, with all the symbolism that it means for everyone. The lake, is polysemantic. For each viewer it has different connotations: exile, travel...

The testimonies shown are all very powerful and they offer very contrasting views of the different stages of the therapy. Did you have difficulty putting them together?

Accumulating material over a long time meant that we were there each time at the right moment. The therapists made the first contact with the patients. It was most important that our presence did not interfere with the therapy. We explained the subject of the film to the patients, why we were making it, the way we were going to show it... We explained to them that they could say no at any moment, before, during or after the sessions...

In contrast with Dr. Nagesh, where the doctor is always facing the camera and the patients have their back to it, you film here the victims as much with the face hidden as without.

There was no set rules with regards to that. It is not a formal exercise. In fact, you first need to know if the patients accept to be filmed or not. We are not imposing anything, it's really their choice. The Bosnian patient at the beginning of the film, for example, wanted to show his face. The Serbian family also accepted too. There too, it was important because there was an interaction between the husband, the wife, but also between the psychologist and the translator...

Was there any reticence from the therapists?

A little everywhere in Europe there are centres that offer psychotherapy sessions for torture victims. We did not get the authorisation to film in Brussels. Fortunately, we were lucky that the therapists at Appartenances accepted. They have a very wide therapeutic scope (psychologists, psychoanalysts, ethnopsychiatrists...), and were right away enthusiastic with the idea. All went well during the entire filming, despite the risks that they were taking professionally speaking: to let us film them working means exposing themselves to judgements and views of other psychologists. They did not appear to worry about that... on the contrary. They found that our presence brought something else to their therapy.

Many sessions needed the help of an interpreter. You also took the time to film them. Why?

To be able to work at Appartenances, the interpreters receive a training for the interviews on how to manage emotions. They are constantly supervised so that they can explain how they feel. The interpreters choose or not to get involved: some just want to be intermediaries, but it is not always easy to hide one's feelings. They are people outside the therapy, while being completely immersed in it. Our choice was to show their reactions; there are several sequences where we see that what they say is their choice.

The characters of the film have the profile of ordinary people...

In a centre like Appartenances, the probability of meeting a major criminal or victim who would have been, for example, a prominent politician is very small. Torture generally concerns totally normal people who are sometimes not at all politically involved or otherwise very lightly so. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. 99% of people tortured were not done so to obtain information. Today, torture is used more often to spread fear, to impose power. Reliable information is not gained by torturing: victims are ready to say anything to stop suffering.

We get the impression that the people filmed were not aware of your presence any more. How did you manage to get them to forget that you were there?

You need to be the least intrusive as possible. We are there, that's all. If the patient accepts our presence, it's because he is conscious of the importance of his testimony. We are two on the set. For most of the therapists, it's easier to adapt to our presence. They are mainly clinicians who are used to working with others in their sessions. At the end of each session, they asked us what we thought. There was a real exchange.

You filmed an impressive amount of rushes. How did you do the editing?

In fact, we first worked from writing. We made transcripts of all the sessions that we filmed. At the end of the shoot, we read them again, then we made a selection. During this time, Luc Plantier, our editor for quite a few films now, watched the material and organised it. Then, we confronted our selections. Then, Luc and Dominique established the structure of the film and chose the characters... Then Vincent came with a new view point on the first version. A little later, the producer Denis Delcampe did the same. This bringing together of different points of view is very enriching in our minds.

The subject is a strong one, the testimonies painful. However, we have the impression that there is a place for hope in the film ...

There are in fact certain therapy sessions at the end which leave place for some hope: There is for example this Bosnian patient who says that he feels better one afternoon. He talks about children, about the future... of what he can pass on. The process of starting a psychotherapy, even if it is very hard, is optimistic in itself. That's the strength of the film. It is not a film of testimonials where we are amassing horror stories. We are in a dynamic of healing.