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## LAND AND AUTHENTICITY

In the documentary *Gevar's Land* and the fiction feature *Assandira*, the protagonists' connections to the land they live in and on are often tenuous and under attack. The first documentary feature from Syrian-born, France-based film editor Qutaiba Barhamji is *Gevar's Land*, which looks at the titular hero, Gevar, who has fled with his partner and young son from Syria and has landed in Reims, France. Struggling to adapt and integrate himself into a society he doesn't know and barely speaking the language, Gevar finds solace in a vegetable plot he has rented where he can grow his own produce.

A neater metaphor for slowly taking root in a new land is hard to find, as Barhamji follows Gevar over the course of four seasons, as his seeds turn into seedlings in the shy springtime sun and then try to grow and blossom as the weather grows warmer — though a new winter will be right around the corner.

By making the radical decision to only film Gevar in his garden and at home, Barhamji not only creates a sense of focus but manages to articulate his metaphors with a strong sense of nuance and a more intimate sense of the protagonist's own feelings. Because we never see Gevar struggling at the Immigration Office, for example, we have to read a little more between the lines when he's at home talking to his partner, their son or to some Syrian friends or when he seeks refuge in his little green corner of heaven, where his vegetable plants don't always seem to want to collaborate either.

This allows the film to turn into a quietly affectionate portrait that stays close to the point-of-view of the hard-working but hardly loquacious family man. By keeping everything even vaguely smelling of red tape off screen, France and its laws and policies never threaten to take centre stage, which makes perfect sense because they often seem to make no sense to Gevar either. The fascinating paradox at the heart of the material might be that, to forget or at least be temporarily distracted from the complexities and frustrations of being a refugee in France, Gevar dedicates himself to trying to grow his own sustenance in this unfamiliar climate and earth, getting to know the land more thoroughly than many of his French neighbours.

*Assandira* is the latest feature from Italian filmmaker Salvatore Mereu, whose films are as intimately connected to his native island, Sardinia, as the novels of Nobel Prize laureate and fellow Sardinian Grazia Deledda. There are no refugees in *Assandira* but tourists and the damage they cause while supposedly looking for an authentic taste of Sardinia is the extremely topical

subject of Mereu's latest. Packaged like a genre film with detective elements, the film tries to get to the bottom of what happened at an agriturismo, a combination of a farm and a tourist facility.

*Assandira* is the name of an agriturismo that has been burned down and caused the death of Mario (Marco Zucca), who had been running the facility with his German wife, Greta (Anna König), a champion at luring foreign tourists to their little jewel of a farm. However, their bells-and-whistle version of a supposedly authentic Sardinian experience for their clients never convinced Mario's elderly father, the former herder Costantino (Gavino Ledda, the author of the autobiographical *Padre Padrone*, famously filmed by the Taviani brothers).

The irony of the current state of Europe is that tourism might be the one of the very few ways left for some rural areas to make some money but that this, in turn, requires structures and changes to the way these regions look and can be lived in that make them less genuine and thus less attractive for tourists. Chasing authenticity, *Assandira* seems to suggest, might be tourism's most problematic and destructive feature. But a solution to this problem seems impossible. Which tourist is willing to pay for something that they know will not be authentic?

*Assandira*, much like *Gevar's Land*, doesn't offer any easy answers as its protagonists dig into the earth and get their hands dirty. What is necessary to live an authentic life? Is authenticity defined by a place, by customs, by ideas or by something else altogether? How should people behave in places they are unfamiliar with? What new and unfamiliar things might constitute a possible enrichment of local customs and what, on the contrary, violates them? How easy is it to draw that line? These are just some of the questions that pulse through the two films, which are both keenly aware that the first step to formulating a possible answer is to simply closely observe what has happened and is happening. **BOYD VAN HOEIJ**