



# Common Birds

a film by Silvia Maglioni & Graeme Thomson

## Common Birds

2K HD | Colour, B&W | 84' | Dolby SRD  
Ancient Greek, Silbo Gomero

**Directors/Writers** Silvia Maglioni & Graeme Thomson  
**Producer** Eugénie Michel-Villette, Les Films du Bilboquet  
**Co-producer** Silvia Maglioni, Poteau d'Angle  
**Image** Thomas Favel, Panagiotis Vasilakis, Graeme Thomson  
**Sound** Mathieu Villien, Yannis Karamitros, Silvia Maglioni  
**Editing** Laurence Larre, Silvia Maglioni, Graeme Thomson  
**Sound Editing & Mix** Thomas Fourel  
**Music & Sound Design** Graeme Thomson  
**Colour grading** Yannig Willmann

## Main Cast

Rinio Kyriazi  
Tassos Raptis  
Kostas Vassardanis  
Ana Luz Arteaga  
Kico Correa

**With the participation/support of** Ténk, CNC, Le Fresnoy, CNAP, Pictanovo, SCAM, SACEM, Drakkar Films, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers.

## SYNOPSIS

No longer willing to pay for the debt, two Athenians, Tassos and Kostas, decide to leave their city. Guided by mysterious crow calls, they walk through the urban landscape until they reach a zone of passage from where they are spirited to an ancient forest: the realm of the birds.

Here they meet the Hoopoe, half-bird half-woman, who becomes their translator. The birds live by sharing their resources amid the magical forces of the forest.

While Kostas is enchanted by these forms of life, Tassos wants to persuade the birds to take power by building a wall around the sky. The encounter between humans, birds and forest will be illuminating for all.

Some 2,500 years after it was written, an experimental adaptation of Aristophanes' *The Birds*. Between a contemporary Athens marked by crisis and the ancestral forest of La Gomera, Ancient Greek and Silbo Gomero (an endangered whistled language that forms part of a long tradition of resistance), comes a tale of flight, loss and reenchantment in a space of refuge where new alliances can emerge between different species, temporalities and languages.



**A conversation with** Silvia Maglioni & Graeme Thomson

### **What was the starting point for the film?**

Our films often begin from an encounter. In this case, the encounter was double. First there was Aristophanes' play *The Birds*. And then the primary forest of La Gomera, and of course the whistled language of Silbo Gomero.

### **What attracted you about Aristophanes' play?**

In many ways *The Birds* is an extremely contemporary play: on one hand you have two citizens refusing to pay the debt, looking for an alternative form of life, and on the other you have an ecosystem, the realm of the birds, that functions without money through the sharing of resources and that welcomes all kinds of fugitives.

We are strong believers in the power of anachronism, how an ancient text can reveal aspects of the present in a more intensive way, generating unexpected events. As a motor for the film, Aristophanes' play could help us to see better the harsh effects of financial capitalism and the debt crisis in particular.

### **How did you work from the original text?**

We didn't adapt the whole play. We were mainly drawn to the first part, which we transposed to a contemporary context. Moreover, we wanted to introduce a couple of modifications. Firstly, by adding the journey of the two Athenians who are leaving the city (which is only briefly evoked in the play). And secondly, by finding a specific language for the birds that could help us "decolonise" their speech (in the play they have to speak like humans).

### **So the Athens part is a kind of "prequel"... How did you select the locations?**

We think of it more as a prelude. In a musical sense. A prelude composed of sounds of the city: people, machines, traffic, crows and other birds that accompany the actors as they walk. And a saxophone (that we recorded with the improviser Cathy Heyden). It's an ode to desertion, to refusal. We wanted to film Athens today, to show some of the signs of the crisis as they are inscribed in the urban landscape, from the neighbourhood of Exarchia, which has preserved the memory of decades of struggle, to the refugee camp of Eleonas to the abandoned stadiums of the Hellenikon Olympic Complex. But the journey is not without its moments of irony.

### **The two characters don't speak during their Athens walk.**

Yes, the film announces this at the beginning. *Two Athenians oppressed by debt got tired of speaking and began to pay attention to the crows that were hovering around the city...*

We imagined that Tassos and Kostas have decided that there is no longer any point using a language that has lost most of its force. In this way, we could also give the opportunity to the city to "speak" for itself: visually through its walls, its graffiti... and all the sonic layers and textures. The crows speak too, as do the ghosts of past struggles, like in the riot scene.

But we shouldn't forget that in our prelude Tassos and Kostas have not yet entered the text. So in some sense they have not fully become *the characters* (whose dialogue only begins in the forest). They are partly playing Aristophanes' characters and partly just being themselves: precarious actors adrift in Athens in search of a text.



### **Why did you decide to use the original Ancient Greek?**

We've always been interested in the notion of "dead" languages. In the very moment *you speak* a dead language, it comes back to life... so it's more like living-dead, a zombie.

Using Ancient Greek appealed to us for two main reasons. Politically, it seemed in tune with a tale of two men refusing debt. A language that has no currency, "no exchange value". But at the same time, and this is the poetic reason, a language that could be revived through the voices and bodies of the actors.

### **How did you meet your Greek actors? What kind of preparation work did you do with them?**

We met them in Athens. When we saw them playing in various theatre productions, we thought they were quite complementary yet also very different, which was what we were looking for. Getting to know them better we realised that they could also bring a documentary feel to the film.

During rehearsals we tried to get them to distance themselves from a sense of familiarity with language (which they would have with modern Greek). Ancient Greek is a huge sonic universe to explore. The fact that Silvia had studied it at school helped but we were not concerned with finding the "right way" to pronounce it. It was more like science-fiction in a way...

Working in a small theatre in Athens we often asked the actors to improvise or reinvent the sonic potentials of certain words and the rhythms of speech of the original text. Meanwhile, we would record and note down things, in order to put together a kind of score for the shoot.

Sometimes it became like a music coming as much from the future as from the past. A language at the borders of language.

### **The film deals with some urgent political questions through poetic invention.**

For us, a cinema of poetry that nonetheless remains deeply anchored in the materiality of life is an act of resistance.

It seems to us that the most urgent political question of the moment is how to renew our social and political imagination. With *Common Birds* we wanted to make a film that would open up new areas of perception, a different rapport with time and space, a relation to language that goes beyond mere communication. And to create a space of refuge and listening, in alliance with fragile forms of life that risk extinction.

### **At the moment of passage to the forest, the realm of the birds, the film shifts from black and white to colour...**

For this moment, we wanted an explosion of green. And the colours of the Laurisilva forest are mesmerising. The idea was that this passage would coincide with the first words pronounced by Kostas, as though the voice were literally "breathing colour" into the film. In some preparatory work with our DOP, we decided that the best way to convey this was a slow forward tracking movement.

As for Athens, we always knew we wanted to film it in black and white, to find the sculptural quality of its walls, the light, the earth. And perhaps also an homage to Pasolini's *Uccellini*, which was inspired by Aristophanes too.



### **The Hoopoe is a key figure in the film...**

The Hoopoe is the figure of metamorphosis, a human who has been transformed into a bird.

In our film she is half-bird half-woman, a hybrid, interspecies. She is torn between her bird and human side, a situation exacerbated by the arrival of Tassos and Kostas who pull her back towards the memory of the language she once spoke... That's why we decided to give her the role of the "translator", she is between worlds.

With the actress, Rinio, we wanted to create an unstable, mutant character whose voice never settles but veers between human and bird registers, speech and song. Rinio is a great improviser who also had training in experimental vocal techniques, some of which draw upon the ancient tradition of funeral lamentation. Which give an added poignancy to her rapport with the dead language.

### **How did the idea to film in the primary forest of La Gomera come about?**

Silvia's father is a passionate amateur botanist. Hearing his tales and seeing his photos of the Laurisilva Forest gave us the desire to organise a trip to explore the island.

Apparently, during the Tertiary era, this luxuriant ecosystem covered much of Europe and North Africa but it is now virtually extinct, except on La Gomera and a few other places (that's why it's protected by Unesco).

When we first went there, we immediately saw this unique forest, shrouded in a milky sea of cloud that descends among

the lichen-covered trees, as a kind of border zone between earth and sky, which was ideal for the realm of the birds. We had to shoot the film there.

### **Was it then that you discovered Silbo Gomero?**

Silbo is one of the few surviving whistled languages in the world. Just like the forest, it is a protected species in danger of disappearing.

We had actually first heard this extraordinary language very briefly, without knowing what it was or where it came from, in Susan Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie*, a film that orchestrates voices of the last speakers of extinct or endangered languages. The absence of image there was an aid to our dreaming the world in which Silbo circulated.

During our first location-scouting trip to La Gomera we met an amazing *silbador*, Kico, who would eventually play one of the birds and who helped us organise the cast.

Kico told us that Silbo was the language of the original inhabitants of the island and during Spanish colonisation it was forbidden and suppressed, yet it continued to be passed on orally through the generations as a kind of vernacular resistance. During the Spanish Civil war and the Franco dictatorship, though officially banned, Silbo was used as a code language among resistance movements and fugitives.

A whistled language of resistance, somewhere between speech, music and birdsong. It was perfect for our film.



### **How did you meet the people of the island who play the birds?**

We had the idea that our bird-choir would consist of more or less nine children of different ages and two or three adults, one of whom would be the chorus leader. But to make this kind of film takes time. We had to get to know the territory first, get to know the people, build up a sense of trust, a real connection to the island and its culture.

After several trips, we managed to set up a series of workshops in a school in the south, in Playa de Santiago, working in collaboration with teachers of music and Silbo.

We explained the main lines of the film and then Graeme had the idea to transpose whistled phrases from Aristophanes' text into musical notation, that could then be played on other instruments.

These experimental workshops also functioned as a kind of informal casting, and the selection happened very organically, working between music, improvisation and the phrases from our script, that we gradually translated into Silbo and rehearsed in the classroom...

By the time we began shooting we just needed to bring the kids and the result of their work into the forest. What was great was that the children had a very natural rapport with the forest where they would spend time during summer camps. Even during a particularly torrential downpour, when we had to take shelter and cover the equipment, they were completely unperturbed. Actually, they became even more motivated.

For the role of the chorus leader, meanwhile, we were really fortunate in finding Ana-Luz. She has great cinematic presence and an air of inscrutable defiance that was perfect for the part.

### **Was it difficult directing actors in a whistled language?**

It was wonderful. Especially thinking how Silbo could become a form of sonic resistance to the humans' "cultural hegemony", especially Tassos' plans for the wall in the sky. Translating Aristophanes into Silbo pushed the text to an unforeseen orality, challenging the authority of its written form. And the *silbadores* could just whistle their lines without inflection or intention: one or two takes were all that was required!

### **One has the impression that the forest becomes a character in itself...**

Exactly. In *Common Birds* the forest isn't just a setting but an active, living, listening character, whose responses are as important as the dialogues. We wanted to film the forest so that it would be felt as something both close and distant, whose lifeworld the viewer would experience with the same intensity we had when we first went there.

Over three years we spent quite some time getting to know the forest and its moods, the sinuous trees and the lichens that looked back to a time long before humanity.



We were able to do preparation work in all four seasons, which let us make a variety of field-recordings and film in different lights.

But even during the shoot the forest was continually shifting in shape. Certain trees would appear or disappear according to changes in the light and weather. Our problem was first of all how to frame this cohabitation of trees, the wonderful way they make space for each other. And then how to find a place for the humans and the birds. And how to film all this at the same time.

In this respect our DOP Thomas Favel and sound engineer Mathieu Villien were amazing collaborators. Thomas has already worked on several films in different forests around the world and was able to use the constantly shifting light to its best advantage. We all somehow became part of the ecosystem. The forest was aware of our presence and paid attention to our needs. Plant-thinking.

### **After Filming Tassos and Kostas in Athens, how did the Greek actors react to the forest environment?**

It was a surprise for Tassos and Kostas, and the real disorientation they felt made the characters' sudden transportation to the realm of the birds more convincing: we discover the forest with them. For Rinio it was even stranger in a way, because she had to convey the sensation that she had lived there for an indefinite time, perhaps thousands of years. When the Greek actors met the *silbadores* something quite magical occurred. It's not always easy to put together professional and non-professional actors but on this occasion

there was a real synergy. The Greeks said that hearing Aristophanes in Silbo was a revelation to them...

### **Can you say something more about the way Tassos and Kostas change in the realm of the birds?**

In Aristophanes' play the two Athenians, Peisthaeterus and Evelpides, are friends with a solid bond. In our film, while there is a certain solidarity between Tassos and Kostas, we've chosen to introduce a divergence between the two characters that becomes more apparent as the film unfolds and especially when they enter the realm of the birds. While Kostas is open to mutation in his way of being, Tassos has more the spirit of a reformist who wants to "improve" things for the birds. Paradoxically, and tragically, he remains tied to the very model of society he is trying to escape.

### **The forest also plays a major role in your first feature film, *Facs of Life*.**

*Facs of Life* is another film of encounters. In that case between us, the thinking of Gilles Deleuze, his students and the video archives from the 1970s that triggered the idea for the film. At the heart of the film are the woods of Vincennes, where the University where Deleuze taught once stood. The University was created after the events of May '68 – and for a while it was a site of great intellectual and political ferment until 1980 when it was bulldozed to the ground and moved in the outskirts of Paris.



For us the woods became like a “zone” of memory and amnesia. Cinema has the possibility to invent its own territories, places that prepare a welcome for ghosts. Here we used a steadicam to try to capture the sense of a place as a field of charged emptiness.

**As in your other films, the sonic dimension is extremely important.**

For *Common Birds* the main question was how to give each part of the film (Athens and the forest) its own sonic character while constructing an overall movement that would function as a whole.

Graeme had the idea of an electro-acoustic composition that could place the elements - ambient sound, music, dialogues - in a relationship where they were continually interacting and feeding off each other.

For the Athens walk, the crow calls and klaxons suggested the idea of using a saxophone, that through extended techniques combined with electronics would mutate from a jazz-blues register to something more alien and unidentifiable as Tassos and Kostas approach the place of passage. The melodic material was inspired by a Marika Papagika song from the 1930s about a refugee girl. And this also provides the bridge to the second part of the composition, where the musical themes are taken up by other instruments.

In the forest, we recorded all the dialogues in direct sound to capture the special resonance of the space. This is permeated by a mix of electro-acoustic and electronic sounds, so the

different elements are always in conversation, responding to each other. In this respect, the languages of Ancient Greek and Silbo provided fantastic musical material to work with.

**Tassos’ proposition of the wall at the end seems indeed quite contemporary...**

When we read the play we were very struck by this image of an enormous brick wall around the sky. An idea as comically absurd as it is terrifying. And yet as a metaphor of enclosure, it's not so far from the political situation we are living in. In a certain sense the final part of *Common Birds* is an attempt to respond to this.

**You set the realm of the bird in La Gomera. But where exactly is this place?**

The birds’ final speech to the humans, whistled in Silbo, evokes a space of refuge with no walls or boundaries, that welcomes all kinds of fugitives. It’s an open question, perhaps it’s up to us to make it happen...