LES INVISIBLES

A F I L M B Y  S E B A S T I E N  L I F S H I T Z


Tell us about the origin of this project and its evolution, the research.

The film has several origins. One of them involves photography. I’ve been collecting amateur photographs for a number of years, and one day I happened to come across a photo album of two elderly women, very bourgeois, very “old France”. And yet, something about the images made me think they might be a lesbian couple. I bought the album, and on closer inspection, my hunch turned out to be right. After that, I found many other photographs of openly homosexual men and women from various time periods. What surprised me most was the freedom with which these people were expressing their desires during times when society was far less tolerant. I started wondering whether homosexuals from these generations had led happier lives than history would have us believe. I wanted to look back over the past 60 years, talk to homosexuals born between the wars and ask them what life had been like for them. In parallel, another idea emerged. I didn’t want the film to focus uniquely on the past, quite the contrary. I also wanted to take a look at the lives of older homosexuals today, to film them in the present, to see what it’s like to love and to age for homosexuals over 70.

Tell us about the casting process. How did you seek out potential interview subjects? What was your criteria for making your final choices? Was it a difficult process? How much time did you spend pre-shoot and shoot with your final interviewees?

I spent two years seeking men and women over 70 who would be willing to tell me about their lives in front of the camera. I wanted unknown people from a mixture of social backgrounds and regions, to bring as much diversity as possible to the film. The trick was finding people who were capable of bringing their stories to life, creating a “narrative monologue”. During all those months of preparation I met so many incredible people. The film represents only part of my research. I had to narrow it down or the film would’ve been six hours long.

Tell us which years you wanted your interview subjects to focus on and why you wanted to focus on these years.

I wanted to trace the evolution of French society from the post-war years to the present through the angle of homosexuals’ lives. Minorities provide a very interesting angle through which to examine the values of an era. How they are accepted or rejected reveals much about the morals and levels of tolerance in the overall population. These men and women tell us what it was like to be different and evoke the struggles they had to lead in order to raise the collective consciousness. The gay rights movement, along with the women’s rights movement, have gone a long way toward advancing society. We owe them a lot. Based on their age, the participants in the film were particularly active, some of them even militant, during the sixties and seventies.

The French title is Les Invisibles (literally The Invisible Ones). Tell us what this is in reference to.

The media has no interest in old people, and that goes double for old homos. The gay press focuses almost entirely on people in their thirties, as if after that, we all get sent to the junkyard. And
yet, everyone ages. I find the invisibility of the elderly incredibly unhealthy, it only serves to heighten our fear of death and aging. Aging homosexuals themselves seem to accept this fate by withdrawing from their social lives. The word “invisible” thus seems to me particularly accurate in describing these men and women who are absent from view.

Although “invisible”, tell us about how your interviewees were still part of an important collective struggle.

Many of the lives told in the film were lived largely on an individual level, outside of any collective struggle or political movement. Making claims or demands was not an option. Many of these homosexuals waited a long time before revealing who they were. They often had to improvise when faced with the people in their lives. The vast majority had to adapt as best they could to situations that would arise with their families and friends and in their professional lives. Secrecy and discretion were commonplace. But we also learn that there were surprising levels of tolerance across the different social backgrounds. Though it wasn’t until the revolutionary movements of May 1968 in Paris and throughout France that groups began to form and demand the decriminalization of homosexuality, equal rights, etc...

Tell us what your approach was in terms of filming the interviews, choosing the locations.

I wanted to film people in their homes to let the places and objects around them speak. Nature also played a big role, it symbolizes a certain form of fulfillment in the film. The beauty of the landscapes and the interiors contrasts with a certain cliché of homosexuals living in the country, this idea that they are isolated, hidden, depressed. I discovered that homosexuality was actually quite present in rural areas. It simply isn’t on display, that’s all. As I listened to all these people, I was struck by how much each life resembles a novel, and I tried to communicate that sensation through music and the use of cinemascope. I deliberately used elements from fiction filmmaking within this documentary project in order to establish a point of view and make the film as expressive as possible. The beauty of the images creates a distance with the journalistic side of the film, bringing us closer, I hope, to cinema.
Men and women, born between the wars. They have nothing in common except their homosexuality, and their decision to live openly at a time when society rejected them. They’ve loved, struggled, desired, made love. Today they tell us about their pioneering lives, and how they navigated the desire to remain ordinary with the need to liberate themselves in order to thrive. They were fearless.