

Sixty Spanish Cigarettes – Mark John Ostrowski (2015)

SEPTEMBER 18, 2015

There is something sublimely beautiful about Mark John Ostrowski's film *Sixty Spanish Cigarettes* (2015). Fifteen minutes into the film, an extreme long shot captures the sea and coast in the background. From the right hand side of the frame, a small boat comes into view. Ostrowski's camera stays with the boat and follows it. Even in this extreme long-shot, we can see how the boat is moved by the wind and the waves. The sun is shining from behind a few clouds, it seems. The image is not in colour, even though you would perhaps think that. Coastal images in colour are always superb.



But no. Ostrowski works against our expectations. He frustrates us. Scenes of blissful contemplation are interrupted by hard cuts to a black screen. Those contemplative scenes of land- and seascapes, for instance, feel like a carrot Ostrowski is hanging in front of our eyes. But he takes that carrot away as soon as we have almost reached a state of contemplation. We cannot contemplate everything at once. We have to give it time. We have to be patient in order to

reach this desired state. Ostrowski works well in alternating beautifully slow shots with a black screen, the latter making us hyper-aware of where we are. Paradoxically, *Sixty Spanish Cigarettes* is about movement, and yet it gives us no feeling of speed at all. We see the protagonist walking through several different (beautiful) landscapes, which reminded me strongly of those used in Albert Serra's *Birdsong* (2008). The clouds are brushing slowly over the hills, while the man is often dwarfed by the immensity of the landscape. He is alone, alone on his way to an unknown location. At times, he stops to light a cigarette. At other times, he simply rests. It is this solitude which gives us a feeling of slowness, a sense of pause. The repeated scenes of a man's walking through an empty landscape brought a wonderful book back into my head; *The Philosophy of Walking*. If you haven't read it, please do get yourself a copy.



Ostrowski's film shows the director's superb photographic eye. Many of his shots are beautifully composed. They could easily be photos in an album, or large prints in a gallery. To me, the visual beauty of the film was also its strongest asset; the viewer in awe of nature, in awe of simple but expressive architecture. Ostrowski's long-takes of those "photos" helped me to pause, to be in the present but also to wonder what the protagonist was really up to. I'm not entirely sure whether this is ever fully revealed in the film, but it is of little interest in any case. *Sixty Spanish Cigarettes* is more of an atmospheric film than about a set narrative persistently progressing within the film's 60 minutes running time. It reminded me of Martin Lefebvre's modes of viewing; the narrative mode and the spectacular mode. Many slow films, which most

certainly includes Ostrowski's film, operate very much in the spectacular mode, even though there is a narrative mode in all. But the narrative mode is suppressed in many instances to give way to contemplation.



I believe that the film could have been a tick shorter in order to make full use of its shots. I'm not entirely sure when this shot appears, perhaps after around 45 to 50min. There is a beautiful extreme long shot of a landscape at the coast, with the protagonist sitting on a rock or something similar. He has his back turned to us and is looking at the scenery, like us. I expected the film to cut there. It would have been the most fitting and most suitable ending for the film, but unfortunately Ostrowski did not cut there and kept going instead. The final images, to me, weakened the film slightly because they were not entirely necessary.

Nevertheless, with *Sixty Spanish Cigarettes*, Ostrowski has created a beautiful piece of Slow Cinema, which, regardless of whether or not he continues this slow journey, adds him to my list of directors to look out for in future. If the film runs at a festival near you, I highly recommend watching it!