

Visualantics / timely presents:

# HOLD ON TO HER

Belgium, 2024, 80 min.

## PRESS NOTES

**A film by Robin Vanbesien**

**World premiere**

Berlinale 2024

Forum Expanded



## CONTACTS

### Producers

VISUALANTICS | Steven Dhoedt

+32 (0)2 361 51 65

[stephen@visualantics.net](mailto:stephen@visualantics.net)

[www.visualantics.net](http://www.visualantics.net)

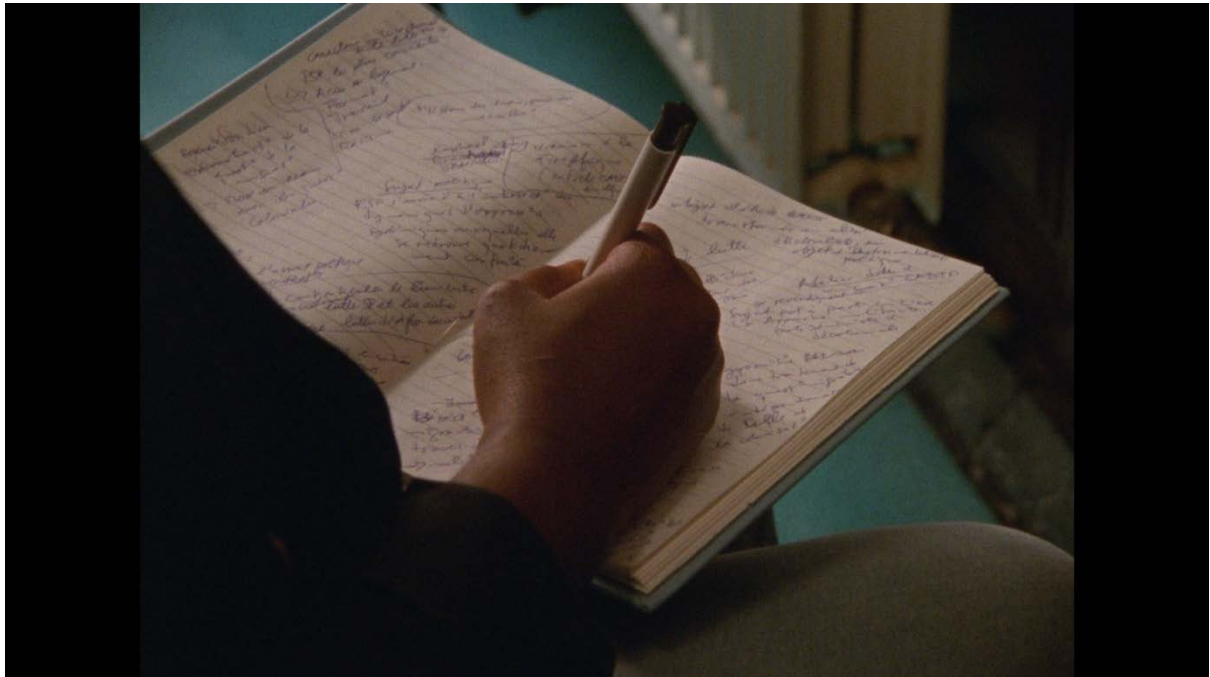
### Publicist

NOISE Film & TV | Kai Hermann

+49 152 534 509 55

[kai@noisefilmpr.com](mailto:kai@noisefilmpr.com)

[www.noisefilmpr.com](http://www.noisefilmpr.com)



## **LOGLINE**

Robin Vanbesien's 'hold on to her' traces a lived social infrastructure of care, solidarity and struggle that addresses a recent case of police and state violence in the context of migration border control in Belgium.

## **LONG SYNOPSIS**

Mawda Shawri, two years old in 2018, sister of Hama, daughter of Phrast and Shamden, was shot dead by a Belgian police officer during a migration border control on a Belgian central highway.

In 2023, over 40 people, both undocumented and documented resident activists, assembled before the camera at *La Voix des sans papiers* in Brussels to stage a collective hearing of documents from and reactions to Mawda's case.

In this collective hearing session, the speakers acknowledge a ghostly haunting caused by police impunity and the state's lack of accountability. It is in their refusal of such a shortage of truth and human rights that they feel the need to explore beyond the official narratives. Together they produce the counter-forensic evidence of Mawda's deadly Channel crossing.

This collective hearing is supported by Vanbesien's audiovisual grammar, which foregrounds the opaque and the poetic. Given the inability to proceed within the dominant frameworks and the urge to imagine other possible worlds, this collective hearing challenges what is visible and audible. The film moves back and forth between the hearing and the site of the crime. This dialogue is imaginary: the collective inner world of the collective hearing is projected onto a landscape, which is at once haunting and mournful.

## INFO

2024 / Belgium / 80 min

Original Title: hold on to her

Filming locations: Belgium, France

Languages: Kurdish, French, English, Dutch

Shooting formats: 8 mm, 16 mm, and HD

Screening format: DCP

Image format: 16:9 (1.78:1)

Sound format: 5.1



## INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR ROBIN VANBESIEEN

**Why did you choose to focus your film on the case of Mawda Shawri, a 2-year-old daughter of fugitive parents, who was shot by the police as they chased the Iraqi-Kurdish family on a highway in Belgium in 2018?**

*For several years I have been working on films that focus on solidarity activism. I decided to focus on the solidarity around the case of Mawda Shawri, when this was at its peak, during the trial in 2021. At the time, I was puzzled by the seemingly widespread ignorance both in the media and public opinion in Belgium about the increasing number of deaths during fugitive crossings of the Channel. Sociologist Rachida Brahim points out how initial—at times deadly—police and state violence is systematically followed by a scenario defined by denial and gaslighting. This is, one might say, a second killing, this time for the family and friends of the victims. We know this from other victims of police violence in Belgium. But what makes the Mawda case stand out is not only that it involved a two-year-old girl, but that the attempts by the police and the prosecutor to cover up the truth were so blatant and flagrant. In this light, the counter-evidence that the activists were gathering felt extraordinarily necessary. With this film, I want to recognize how ordinary citizens can collectively reverse the gaze and point it at the police and the authorities, scrutinizing their actions for their scandalous lack of respect for human and civil rights as a result of the systemic and structural racism that apparently permeates all levels of these public institutions.*

**In the film, the case is gradually unraveled and illuminated through the voices of activists, lawyers and journalists, while the images show the presence of silent witnesses. A gathering takes place in the premises of a political organization dedicated to the rights of undocumented people (La Voix des Sans Papiers), who are among the listening witnesses. To what extent does the film reconstruct the hearings organized by activists in the two years leading up to the judicial investigation of Mawda's case? And to what extent does your film stage a forum in its own pursuit of justice? What kind of forum is it?**

*The Mawda case sparked numerous solidarity initiatives in the months and years following her murder, the most visible of which were Comité Mawda Justice et Vérité and #Justice4Mawda. These initiatives led to various forms of public gathering: protests, meetings, public talks. When I started thinking about the film in 2021, I started with the question of how to convey the collective imaginary of this broader intersectional solidarity. My first impulse was to make sure that the dialogues and words in the film came directly from the activists, so that what was said in the film would respect the integrity of their voices, positions and perspectives. As a result, I set up small gatherings and one-on-one interviews with about 20 members of these solidarity initiatives. All of this was audio only. The dialogues you hear in the film are either original excerpts from these conversations or based on them. For the re-recordings, I asked other activists to participate in order to widen the circle of collaboration on the film.*

*After that, I wanted to synthesize the multiplicity of solidarity initiatives in a fictional forum, where the dialogues would be played out on camera by a selection of activists. I felt it was crucial to refrain from a strict documentary approach, as such a collective imaginary should be able to transcend the situatedness of this case. Artistically, this would also allow for a more precise photographic staging of the activists. Eventually, the forum filmed in the summer of 2023 was composed of the people who had given the original testimonies together with the people who had re-voiced some of the original statements. Then there was the ensemble that created the vocal poetry for the film, and a large group of people—represented in the film as "listeners"—who are mostly undocumented activists from La Voix des sans papiers network in Brussels.*

*With this working method, I wanted to emphasize how cinema can serve as a space for collaboration with grassroots emancipatory work: to explore forms of social reassembly (in front of and behind the camera) that rehearse the capacity to collectively transform a situation.*

**As they listen to various accounts in French, Dutch, Kurdish and English, sometimes with different "migrant" accents—legal reports, stories fabricated by the Belgian authorities and the media, lucid analyses by lawyers and activists, as well as voices expressing anger and grief—the viewers are given plenty of time to observe a landscape of highways and their natural surroundings, including the sea waters that separate the French coast from the British destination. What inspired you to revisit the site of the crime with such meticulous attention to detail, using different filming techniques? What do these time-images convey to the viewer?**

*The dialogues focus on the forensic reconstruction of the case. So it seemed the most logical thing to do was to revisit the scene of the crime with the camera and thus give this narrative an image. But for me, as a filmmaker, it was central to first ask myself what it means to revisit a highway, which is often called a non-place, a place without memory. So, my first intuition was to explore with the cinematographer, Diren Agbaba, how we could try to capture on camera what it means to hang out there, to just be present, to pay attention to the many visual details of life on and beside the highway, to defy it as a so-called non-place. I began by using analog 8mm film, which corresponded to my intuition of exploring the image of the highway through poetic and opaque fragments. We quickly saw the potential of this cinematic approach, where the image gives presence while avoiding illustration. And so Diren and I began to explore how we could extrapolate this to the other sequences and scenes shot in digital HD.*

*This approach led to images that serve as a holding environment for the collective hearings. While these images can certainly be haunting, they also appeal to the need to undo this necropolitical landscape, to imagine other possible worlds within this same landscape.*

**The talking in the film is interspersed with experimental chanting that seems to be improvised by some of the witnesses in the room. Who is singing here, and how does the chant partake in the forum?**

*I wanted to emphasize the importance of embodied vocal presence in the process of shared acoustic attunement during the collective hearings. I have been practicing vocal poetry myself as part of the Post Film Collective (a collective of artists with different means and access to artistic production due to their legal status). I had learned with my comrades how vocal poetry can bring a grammar to collective feelings. While developing the film, I initiated a new temporary collective of vocal performers. We began our collective process with a listening workshop held in the spring of 2022 at a highway rest stop that is an important part of the crime scene in the Mawda case. Here we explored the ephemeral act of listening in a place once charged with deadly police violence, but of which there are no visible traces. This led us down a generative path of remembrance, but not without play, imagination, and joy.*

**One of the leitmotifs of the film is the language we use to describe these instances. The protagonists meditate on the use of certain words, such as “migrant ,” and reformulate the situation of police persecution of migrants in more poignant terms: “humans hunting other humans,” for example. At moments, the film suggests faith in the capacity of citizens and subjects not to let Mawda’s case pass, either on a political or human level. Can a film echo or extend that same capacity to the viewer, in contrast to the pervasive sense of powerlessness in the face of police impunity?**

*I’m well aware that addressing racialized police and state violence in a film risks reproducing the pervasiveness of this “climate,” which can contribute to a depressing sense of powerlessness. Therefore, it was crucial for me to focus on the infrastructure of solidarity that finds ways to search for the truth behind this murder. As a filmmaker, my guiding principle is that my film can only expand on what the activists already hold. In my initial conversations with the members of these solidarity initiatives, I learned how they acknowledge that frameworks for talking about the causes of this systemic racialized violence simply do not exist. For the activists, however, this is not an impasse, but rather an invitation for imagination and rehearsal.*

*With this film I want to foreground the exceptionally humane, real, imaginative, and eloquent ways in which the collective work of counter-forensics and remembrance is carried out in these circles. This is exemplified in the passage where the activists name the power that language holds. Abolishing the violence inherent in current European migration policies can begin in very simple, hands-on ways: stop replicating, at any given moment, the words and terms that reduce or dehumanize people on the move. Personally, I stopped using the word “migrant” because for me it is a policy word. It’s a simple tool to make people aware of the fact that a humane relationship with these travelers in exile already starts in the language we use, something within our own bodily capacity.*

*What I hope this film can do is re-rehearse the thoughts, practices, and feelings that underlie these assemblies. Learning from these methods can help us to gather the resources that we need to collectively resist the inhumane outcomes of these European migration policies.*

## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

### Robin Vanbesien

As a visual artist and filmmaker, Robin Vanbesien explores modes of embodied knowledge and collective imagination engaged in social and political struggles. Through the notion of *ciné place-making*, he acknowledges the capacity of cinema to preserve, reclaim, or redistribute invisibilized memories, histories, and lived cultures, using a cinematic language that probes beyond the prevalent scenes of representation. He collaborates with situated emancipatory grassroots movements, exploring cinema as a space for social gathering and political engagement that rehearses the capacity to hold space collectively. In 2020, Vanbesien co-founded The Post Film Collective, which explores cinema as a form of speculative rehearsal and communal assembly. 'Under These Words (Solidarity Athens 2016)' (2017) and 'the wasp and the weather' (2019) premiered at transmediale and Cinéma du Réel. His first feature 'hold on to her' will world premiere at Berlinale Forum Expanded (2024).



### Filmography

**the wasp and the weather** | 2019 | 19 min

**Under These Words (Solidarity Athens 2016)** | 2017 | 52 min



## **PRODUCER'S STATEMENT**

The Mawda case is undeniably one of the darkest pages in recent Belgian history. Not only because it involved the senseless death of a two-year-old child, or because of the deliberate cover-up with which the authorities (police and public prosecutor) tried to avoid responsibility, but equally because of the shameless political framing that followed. It was utterly sad to see these parents accused and criminalized by the powers that be when they had just lost their daughter.

In early 2021, the Bergen court eventually sentenced the policeman who fired the fatal shot to 1 year in prison with a suspended sentence for involuntary manslaughter. The officer appealed, but was again found guilty in late 2021. However, he received a light sentence reduction of 10 months' probation and a fine of 400 euros. The Iraqi driver of the van was effectively given four years. The verdict follows the rhetoric of political framing and implies that the real culpability for Mawda's death lies with the human traffickers (and indirectly with the parents, the occupants of the van), not with the authorities or with a failing and inhumane migration policy that encourages desperate acts like this.

However, a film like *'hold on to her'* shows a different reality.

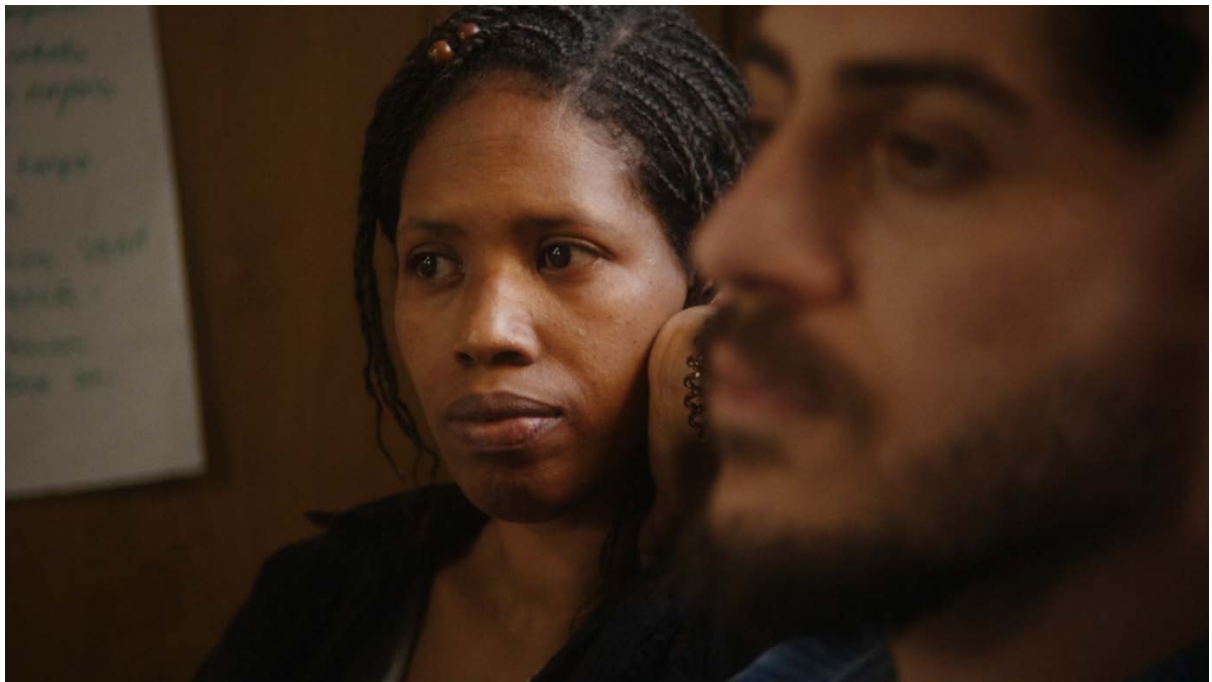
It shows a reality where there is room for empathy, compassion and togetherness, where it strives for social justice and calls for (non-violent) resistance. Films do not change the world, but they can be a catalyst for change. Like no other medium, film allows the viewer to identify with what is happening on the screen. *'hold on to her'* holds up a mirror and makes us think about how we can make a difference. As a producer and a filmmaker, but much more so as a fellow citizen and fellow human being, I therefore consider it almost a duty to collaborate on projects like this in order to counterbalance the prevailing discourse.

*Steven Dhoedt*

## **ABOUT THE PRODUCER**

**VISUALANTICS** is a Brussels based production company, founded in 2003.

VISUALANTICS focuses on international co-productions for a global audience. Strongly convinced that the story dictates the medium - and encouraged by a healthy aversion to formats - we look to work with established and beginning filmmakers with a unique vision, strong work ethics and common values. We pursue stories that offer rich emotional experiences, a window to the world, a journey to the past or future, a quest for knowledge and understanding each other.



## CREDITS

with **Aïsta Bah, Marcus Bergner, Thierno Dia, Henriette Essami-Khaullot, Mirra Markhaeva, Lázara Rosell Albear, Ahmed Rzgar, Naomi van Kleef, Khaled Zead**

writer and director **Robin Vanbesien**

producers **Steven Doedt, Robin Vanbesien**

director of photography **Diren Agbaba**

additional photography **Robin Vanbesien**

editor **Robin Vanbesien**

sound designer **Boris Debackere**

re-recording mixer **Thomas Ferrando**

colorist **Lennert De Taeye**

graphic designer **Goda Budvytyte**

in collaboration with **La Voix des Sans Papiers Bruxelles**

a production by VISUALANTICS

a co-production with timely

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