

Cinema e globalizzazione

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Soldiers on an Invisible Front
The General Will of Companion S.
by Filippo Del Lucchese

The series of collapses in the communist regime in Eastern Europe is amongst those that short term memory, in the West, has most willingly repressed from many points of view. Think back to the rhetoric of the freedom of movement. Even today, the inside of the Berlin wall museum, one of the most visited museums by tourists in the new capital, is largely organised with 'escapees' in mind. Dedicated, that is, to the most imaginative, unexpected, creative and uncontrollable attempts at escape to the West, not always with a happy ending.

For years, rhetoric in the good West against bad communism played on this variable, i.e. the right to mobility, freedom and possibility to choose an economic, political, social and ethical regime in which to live. A right that Walter Ulbricht's regime denied from 1961, raising precisely the same wall that most, in the East as well as the West, rightly hated it with a passion and contributing to knocking it down, even if it was for different reasons.

However, not everyone thinks the same way today. Wall fallen and then, as a consequence, communist regimes became finally free from a choice that was seemingly conquered, at the very least. The 'curbed salary', in the words of Yann Moulier Boutang, seemed to have torn another of the channels which always attempted to limit desires, surpluses, wish to escape and the hope to improve one's own living conditions. Globalisation had reached a new level. Mobility and migration, to which globalisation had not attributed anything but substantial elements, manifested themselves more and more intensely after '89. Hence the rhetoric for Western virtue and apologies for liberalism (against communism) hurriedly reflected upon. New walls were erected, even more difficult to cross, more hated and more lethal than ever before. For the 'poor' subjects of the enemy regime, the strength of Europe was protected well from the wish that still represented a beacon of civility and liberty in the extreme: wanting to be the pale image hanging from the wall like a faded poster. The rhetorical threat of invasion, loss of cultural roots and new small countries quickly takes up the space of freedom of movement. The wall has fallen, new walls!

But an entire social and political system tied to the wall was to fall. A system and a regime that created control of mobility – of the idea if not the people – their own *raison d'être*. It's this universe that, with hindsight, Eyal Sivan and Audrey Maurion investigate in *Aus Liebe zum Volk* (For the Love of the People), a documentary of extraordinary intensity. Sivan and

Maurion have already worked together (the former as a director, the latter on the set) in the reconstruction of the Eichmann trial. In the Specialist (1999), they shot images of the processed Nazi officer, from which Hannah Arendt, commenting for the New York Times, constructed 'the banality of evil', one of the concepts to have great fortune in philosophical and sociological politics in the 20th century. In this documentary, the two directors return to this theme (also present in Route 181, that Sivan produced with Michel Khleifi). Throughout the diary and notes of a Stasi officer, composed during the violent months which preceded the fall of the wall, the reflection of Herr S. unfolds around some of the most stringent philosophical and political ideas of modern Western society: the exact control, the struggle against the subversive and 'terrorist enemy', the adherence to the values and principles of good in an endless struggle against evil.

The voice off (Axel Prah) recites the notes of companion S. with cold and clear cinism, accompanied by images from the Stasi archive. Images from security TV cameras, enquiries from confidential files, shot with a hidden investigatory camera. Foul images retrieved from memory, similar to those which later inspired videoart. Slow, cold, actionless, and often motionless (deserted streets and courtyards, empty corridors, or else busy squares in a constant monotonous swarming metropolitan city), under which dullness the directors invite us to discover the heart of the regime, the reason for that system, naturally encouraging us to reflect on the present. The element of an unsurmountable interest theory brings in the concept of banality of evil (even after criticism from Slavoj Zizek, who prefers insisting on enjoyment instead, not at all evil, of the slave driver and the torturer, be it in Auschwitz or Abu Ghraib). It is an invitation to *déplacement* of a glance: to talk about another to talk about yourself, to catch the evil of another through the look of an anatomist to reveal the evil hidden inside, to catch the unsurmountable ambiguity of human nature.

The invitation from Sivan and Maurion is explicit. The titles opening the film intermix images from Alexanderplatz's videocamera with the head offices of current war zones, the convulsive shouting of the Berlin multitude in '89 and the words of George W. Bush declaring war against Afghanistan in 2001. After contextualising, which counts as a theoretical point of reference, we are brought to meet Herr S, who accompanies us for 2 hours of the film. We end up understanding companion Schwarz and his motivations without sharing even a gram of his extreme pushiness. We end up understanding why it is about us and our times, of post '89 and the years of infinite war of which the diligent and disillusioned officer tells us about without really knowing it, but sensing it: <<they will need us - he writes, convinced and irritated by his won unpleasant destiny - our knowledge, our skills, our instinct>>. Just as the winner of World War II did, instinct and the technical, scientific, social and political skills of the Nazis were needed for anticomunist roles (i.e. the Mafia against Facism in Southern Italy).

What Scharz finds most intolerable, besides the unimaginable, is the raid of the unexpected and unknown. If the present is increasingly full of threat from the future, it seems to suggest recalling the words of Benjamin: chaos will be the characteristic of the new age. In the base offices of Normannestraße Stasi General District, Schwarz and his colleagues (and the wife, also employed by the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit) have worked to bring order, to offer a grid of comprehension and intelligence of a world of complexity and hostility. Since he was 20, working as grenzwache, a guard of the border, and the arrogant agents from Western patrols used to throw him empty beer cans. Ever since then, companion Schwarz wondered how it could be possible to live without ideals. From then on, he started to want to believe that communism would win: <<I had to believe it...>>.

Then, the diligent officer, not able to fulfil his dream of becoming general of the People's army, here and ally of the Red Army that stopped Stalingrad at an incredible sacrifice called Nazi facism, becomes an expert on security and prevention. Here we reencounter the triviality of virtue required for the part: meticulousness, stubbornness, discipline and devotion to the cause. Schwarz shivers in contemplation of the memory of the archives, and in its phenomenal beauty, aesthetical more than logical. . Everything was in its place, every sheet had its reason, every word a meaning. <<From the cover of the file we immediately understood what it dealt with, what danger the suspect presented>>. On the screen, images of the convulsive day, the 15th January 1990, when Berliners invaded the Stasi offices. A current that could never be stopped. The archives violated, burnt, scattered. Everything lies now in chaos and silence. Mountains of piled documents out of order, that make no logical sense. Something terrible has happened – say Schwarz – the orderly people, classified and catalogued, became a noisy multitude, << a mobile society>>. Mobile and uncontrollable. The most amusing thing, Schwarz insists, is that upon the invasion of our offices, nothing could be distinguished anymore. The controlled and the controllers, the enemies of the regime and the loyal. Indeed, even informers, spied and confidants were afraid of being discovered and participate, along with other citizens, in the raid of the archive to erase evidence of their connivance, to destroy our memory, <<to thwart our efforts>>.

Memory was <<our most powerful weapon>>. They knew it and still know it, more so now that everyone wants to erase it, repeats the ex-officer. <<My superiors had always called me only a 'companion', but now everything was almost at an end I suddenly became Herr Schwarz>>. The exceptional nature of this documentary is not only in the effective and meticulous description of the regime's collapse, but in the subjectivity forced to emerge from the officer-companion, clear presence of spirit and internal point of view captured in an extraordinarily effective way. Schwarz, for example, claims to have an energy and a vitality which was completely different from every foreign (Western) stereotype of the dull communist officer. Firstly, the emotive adherence: if our citizens had had the same motivations as we had as officers of the Stasi, communism

would have easily won. Yet still, the fantasy, more than any other quality, was our virtue. <<We had to create, invent, imagine thousands of ways in which traitors could work in the shadows, to conspire against the regime [...]. We had incredible resistance and fantasy, like no other in the country>>. They tried to imagine what might happen in blocks of flats, to the houses and rooms in every single apartment. The curiosity, for these particulars, of which makes every single existence in the anonymous mass of the big city, is one of the main characteristics, according to Schwarz, of his own character: <<a curiosity that will never lessen>>. We fall between pastoral power, describes Michel Foucault effectively during the courses at the Collège de France at the end of the 70s in particular, and the true and real jump of the paradigm impressed upon by technology, which has its own concept of surveillance, of biopower, of widespread control of the lives of single individuals.

‘Soldiers on an Invisible Front’ obsessively retells the chorus of a regime song, dedicated especially to the officers of Sicherheit, their work and daily sacrifices. Eyes fix on the barracks of Socialist Realism: ordered files of names, windows and buildings, ordered files of Trabant in the car parks, ordered surveillance files in the Control Room. <<We had the ambition of controlling the whole country>>, every aspect, even if there was no litter on the street. However, they also had the ambition to drive and educate the population in a loving manner since <<control is good - insists Schwarz - but self-control is better>>.

We begin to catch a glimpse of that so important thread in modern political philosophy, that interweaving of transcendence of sovereign power and immanence of pastoral power that always worked side by side. As much for Rousseau and his general wish that rises up from the vague mass of population as for the mirror image, it ‘boils down’ to questioning every citizen if their own wish is right, and if they might have somehow been wrong. Without quoting the Genevan philosophy, companion Schwarz well knows what is about because <<Some need it...some have to be constrained to be happy>>!

The film ends on the doubts of the officer-companion, who asks if he himself had done the right thing for the right cause. What is certain, today, is the unjust marginalisation. Stasi = Gestapo is seen in the corridor of the building, by now also abandoned by the noisy multitude. Today it has become impossible to find work because the first thing they ask is what you did in the past, and an ex-Stasi colleague is never accepted. Colleagues would go on strike immediately. It was the Stasi, concludes Schwarz, to be afraid of the population rather than the other way round. We could even have had discussions with nonconformists, we could have talked about their ideas, but their free circulation was intolerable. The enemies...they are and always will be enemies: Nazis, nonconformists, terrorists. . Released in 2001, this post ’89 film leaves you with the fears, doubts and paradoxes of the new millennium and the age of global war on terrorism. Therefore not the age of Schwarz: at least not if we do not want to conclude that they are the same thing, or at least not for certain

aspects that are so terribly and tragically similar....

English translation by Susannah Harrison

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