EUROPEAN IMAGERY

Allegories in Film to Think about Europe

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Fotograma de 'Lazzaro Felice", Alice Rohrwacher

Money moves in the shadows.
Le Havre, Aki Kaurismaki

When the law isn't just, justice must come before the law.
Film Socialisme, Jean-Luc Godard

Recent years have seen the release of films that take an allegorical look at present-day Europe [1]. Alice Rohrwacher's *Lazzaro Felice (2018)* deals with a community of sharecropping peasants who work for a Marquesa under a form of voluntary serfdom. This isolated community is easily controllable: indeed, they have become so used to their condition that they have forgotten their enslavement. 'Set them free and they realise they are slaves', as the Marquesa puts it. The second element keeping them isolated is the fear instilled within them. Their worldview is that given to them by the Marquesa, who sets the boundaries of their existence. Managing fear and ignorance are an extremely useful means of control. The appearance of the Marquesa's son, however, leads to the discovery of the deceit. The police end up freeing them, but they have spent so long as slaves that they are unable to imagine any other way of life. In their pilgrimage to who knows where they come across a seedy businessman who recruits workers using a Dutch auction-based form of labour exploitation. Together with migrants, refugees, and others, they form part of the

flotsam of society, a pool of cheap labour that will, in exchange for a bed of straw, sacrifice their lives in the name of work.

Those who have lost their family and name in wretched exile are the most malleable, the easiest to exploit. There is no need to bargain with an 'I' or a social microstructure like the family, only with despair. The former sharecroppers, deciding to flee from all of this, move to the capitalist city of banks and pitilessness, of the black market, of bureaucrats, of the indifference of having to live with the fact that men are, by nature, suspicious before a predatory system that devours the economy and one's liver alike, and creates feelings of guilt as an indispensable tool for the system to work. Lazzaro, the lead character, is a holy fool, always at the mercy of others. His power lies in his absence of malice, but this also gives him the quality of not belonging to any place or time, of being an anachronism, someone from far away who, for that very reason, cannot stay. Witness and martyr, his innocence makes the everyday sinfulness of financial Babylon all the more intense.

The second film is Albert Serra's *The Death of Louis XIV* (2016). Its underlying taboo is who may amputate the king's leg, an issue that is by no means trivial. With its gloomy half-light, parties and long, pain-wracked nights, the palace is a labyrinthine charnel house home to both the dying and the opportunist. The king is suffering from gangrene that is slowing killing him, but the group of experts surrounding him (technocrats and men of learning) are unable to diagnose what ails him. Despite their fine words, they are incapable of saving their '*Sire*'. After his passing, they begin to carry out his autopsy, at which they comment, 'We'll do it better next time'. Unintentionally, in both cases they depict the Europe of the IMF, the ECB, financial advisors and markets, which treat the continent as a corpse, making debt and exploitation its focus and playing with the experience of loss of people, as pieces to be sacrificed in a passing game.

Beyond these allegories, two other directors have often dealt with Europe: Jean-Luc Godard and Aki Kaurismäki. With a theatrical approach that is at once reminiscent of the works of Chaplin and Fassbinder, yet completely unmistakable, Kaurismäki is surely the most humanistic filmmaker alive, after the recent death of Agnès Varda. The lead characters of *Le Havre (2011)* and *The Other Side of Hope* (*Toivon tuolla puolen*, 2017) conjure up the parable of the Good Samaritan in a world in which bureaucracy, cruelty, hate, and indifference have put a name to everything.

In *Le Havre*, Marcel Marx hides an African boy at his home with the complicity of everyone in one of the port city's poorer districts. The news features Calais' refugee and migrant camps, also known as the 'Calais Jungle' which were created informally in 1999, but which gained wider notoriety (due to the abuses taking place there) in 2015 and 2016. The film uses a monologue by the character Chang to give voice to the 'reconstructed identities' of those who have had to flee their home, leaving everything behind, creating a false identity

to cross borders and start again from scratch in an atmosphere of hostility and recurring violence.

In *The Other Side of Hope*, Wikström gives shelter to Khaled, a refugee from the war in Syria who is on the run from the police, who wish to repatriate him on the grounds that the situation in Aleppo, his home city and one of the most devastated by the war, is of little importance. One of its most eloquent scenes is that in which, to obtain a residence permit, Khaled explains to his interviewer everything a Syrian has to go through: his house being shelled without knowing who was in it, having to bury his entire family, paying the mafia to be able to leave the country, risking his life at various borders, sleeping in jails, and more. The interviewer asks him if he would like to take a break, and he answers, 'why?'. This 'why' is important as if the refugee suffers from the twin hell of not being able to live in his country with his people and also being unable to mourn this loss.

The film also features the reality of a Europe in which some countries are witnessing the increasing popularity of extreme right-wing groups, a Europe that make technocracy a tool of xenophobia, that assesses people's lives differently depending upon where and which social class they are from. A Europe that gives residence permits to foreigners investing in a country, but that hides or expels those causing a crisis in the 'immune system' of a continent placing its faith in economic dialogue, financial power and the exploitation of its own poor.

Calais is also the city in which Austria's Michael Haneke sets his *Happy End* (2018). Haneke uses his portrayal of a family from France's *haute bourgeoisie*, obsessed (yet depressed) by its social class, to open a debate on immigration, racism and the general deafness of a Europe that makes a living from its own ruins and from ruining people. Haneke's France is undoubtedly the antithesis of that of *Faces Places* (*Visages et villages, 2017*), the penultimate film by Agnès Varda. Varda carries out a moral and sentimental X-ray of the French people by talking with and producing images of the individuals she comes across, with the help of artist JR. Varda takes part in a road movie that is also a farewell tour; she leaves images (a *pharmakon* for the memory) hung on the villages' walls, like someone leaving a trail of stones to be able to return home after dark. At one point, Varda goes to see her old childhood friend Jean-Luc Godard, who, true to his image as a solitary, misanthropic genius, refuses to receive her.

In his *Film Socialisme (2010)*, Godard yearns for the Europe of culture and humanism

('Europa was a German composer, a French writer, Italian singers!'). Like Kaurismäki, Godard also takes a look at port cities, his eye coming to rest on Odessa, a city of that 'neighbouring' country, Ukraine. The director contrasts the Odessa of *Battleship Potemkin* with today's city, where the epic has been replaced by the meekness of the tourist. Godard concludes with a crisis-hit Southern Europe, headed by Greece and Spain [2]. He reminds us that 'democracy' and 'tragedy' coincided in the Athens of Pericles and Sophocles, and that the price of freedom has always been 'civil war'. The film concludes with the phrase: 'When the law isn't just, justice must come before the law', which leads us to reflect upon the pitiful old age of a Europe reduced to its Nation States, with their out-of-date legal frameworks.

Godard's meditation on Europe culminates with *The Image Book* (*Livre d'image*, 2018), in which he speaks of trains from different films that embody trains from different periods, full of Nazis, tourists, lovers, refugees… The history of twentieth-century Europe is the history of intertwined destinies on the run, of permanent forced migrations. The film also focuses on laws, based on the writings of Montesquieu, who spent 14 years of his life writing *Spiritof the Laws* (1751), avoiding censorship, and one of whose themes (and one still unresolved in countries such as Spain) was the separation of powers (executive, legislative and judicial). He closes with a poetical reflection on Arabia and the relationship between Europe and the Near East, viewed through the fictional filter of exoticism and fable. In his conclusions, Godard is extremely categorical:

> 'Do you believe that the men in power, today, in the world, are anything more than soulless hypocrites? Why do we dream of being kings when we could dream of being Faust? But nobody dreams of being Faust, everybody dreams of being king (…). Even if nothing happens like we imagine it will, our hopes won't change. The hopes would continue to exist and a utopia will be necessary'.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYiqlVFV7ho

Against the Europe of power (for 'king', read 'political and economic masters'), the Europe of its people: against calculation, hope. As Pere Portabella put it in a conversation we had in the Fundació Joan Brossa on 1 April 2019: 'You must always leave room for the unexpected. Always'. This is, in fact, the message on Europe Portabella outlines in *General Report II: The New Abduction of Europe* (*Informe General II: El nuevo rapto de Europa*, 2015), which ends with the different 'Tides' and images of the public protests of recent years, which featured the growing presence of young people.

The films of Southern Europe are those that have best captured the crisis—economic, social and of values. In Greece, Stratos Tzitzis did this with *45m² (2010)* to speak of the lack of access to housing and work, something we also see in *Boy Eating the Bird's Food (2012)* by Ektoras Lygizos and *Wasted Youth (2011)* by Argyris Papadimitropoulos. The Romanian New Wave has also used hyperrealist allegories to examine extreme individualism,

corruption, the lack of jobs and opportunities that can only be overcome by searching for miracles or petty corruption. This is seen in Corneliu Porumboiu's *The Treasure* (*Comoara, 2015*) and Cristian Mungiu's *Graduation* (*Bacalaureat*, 2016).

In Spain, it wasJaime Rosales who looked at the crisis with *Beautiful Youth* (*Hermosa Juventud*, 2014). Someone who sums it all well is Costa-Gravras in his *Capital* (*Le capital*, 2012), a tale of a banker in a period of completely unbridled capitalism. The lead character works to achieve an 'International' of financial capital on the basis of firing workers and destroying people, 'robbing the poor to give to the rich', who will 'have fun until it all blows up'.

After the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, Bertrand Bonello made *Nocturama (2016)*, which changes the perspective on terrorism, taking that of a group of nihilist, restless youths. Given the lack of opportunities, many young people doubtless identify with the many

members of the population who have been institutionally humiliated. The violence suffered by the young is not that of oppression, aggression or loss, but that of debasement, that of robbery (it being their future that has been stolen from them), the fact of being ignored except on an instrumental level as potential consumers. After organising a series of attacks, these youths lock themselves into a shopping centre. The second half of the film takes place in this sort of nowhere land, based on consumption and luxury, where the youths wait and where they will die.

The cosmopolitan Europe of weekend breaks to its ancient capitals that coexists with the centripetal Europe that is distrustful of its borders and that feeds extreme nationalisms is no so different from such department stores: a gilded cage or an exclusive establishment where not everyone fits in, a maze of shop windows, of looking but not touching, a space divorced from what is going on in the real world, a mirage in which desire supplants willpower and consumer relationships or those of ideological propaganda replace interpersonal relationships; a place in which the individual, in strict isolation, becomes a thing alongside other things, an inanimate object.

These shop windows are not so different from the Europe Sorrentino depicts in his films. In his *The Great Beauty* (*La grande bellezza, 2013),* he combines the view of Rome's Janiculum hill with a chorus signing David Lang's *I Lie*, a group of Japanese tourists, including one who faints, and a rooftop party to the music of Rafaela Carrà in a grotesque multitude reminiscent of James Ensor's painting *Christ's entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888). The film's protagonist, Jep Gambardella, believes that everything around him is dying. It speaks not only of him, but of Rome and, in general, what it means to be living today in a historical capital of the Europe of cultural tourism that has melted down its origins into souvenirs that have turned History into a self-service conveyor belt of personalised moments divorced from any form of shared existence.

Sorrentino is influenced here by Fellini's *La Dolce Vita (1960)*, a director who provides a poetical description of a rudderless Europe in a scene from *Roma (1972)* in which some Roman frescos vanish from the catacombs due to a reaction with the air when some men open them up. This unintentional but nevertheless symptomatic mistake captures, in a nutshell, a Europe that has turned its heritage into a vaudeville show and its memories into a key ring. The difference between the Italy of *La Dolce Vita* and that of today is that, where once the sea dumped on the beach the corpse of a huge fish, today it washes ashore the cadavers of those who seek, in vain, to throw themselves at the tender mercy of the Capitoline wolf.

Ukrainian documentary filmmaker Sergei Loznitsa records, in his *Austerlitz (2016)*, tourists visiting Nazi concentration camps. People stroll around, camera in hand, attempting to capture a Kodak moment with the automatism inherent in the tourist's gaze. They wander about whilst their guides explain, in a listless monotone, how people died due to the effects

of gas or other equally inhuman processes. Loznitsa films the tourists and the slogan above the main iron gate: *Arbeit mach frei* ('Work will make you free'). In the end, what Loznitsa is talking of, overwhelmed by asking himself what all those people are doing there, is not only the evidence that Europe has been trying to enact a calculated disconnection between the memory of places and the actions of the present, but also how the figure of the tourist embodies this new working class that is always working, and where work finds concrete form in travelling, looking at, recording and uploading to the Internet a reality reduced to images of its ruins.

Europe has become a factory churning out and revisiting these ruins, a confirmation of the 'planetary folklore' announced by Edgar Morin in *Terre Patrie* (1993), a few short years after writing *Penser l'Europe* (1987), and which has ended up placing a price upon History itself. If one of European cinema's very first films was the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon*, Loznitsa gives us a view of people entering and exiting a new sort of factory. A factory of people (tourists) who meander around expropriated false memories and (we would add) a factory of people (migrants) who enter on the run, forced to flee from their own memories. There is a need to rethink and rebuild Europe on the basis of justice, not the law, of people and not the Nation States, of values and not prices, of memories and not souvenirs.

REFERÈNCIES

1 — The films selected are the author's own personal choice and do not represent any general or potential agreed narrative regarding Europe. There are multiple converging narratives about Europe, and this is one of the possible ones. Nevertheless, all the films chosen are significant, be this due to their director's track record, to their presence at leading film festivals, or to the awards or public recognition they have received.

2 — At the beginning of the crisis, the financial powers that be and the English-speaking press named the group made up of Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain after its initials: PIGS



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