

Zraki Vrag (The Air and the Devil)

Exhibition of **Dionis Escorsa** at **KCB** of Belgrade, Serbia, 2019.

Interview with **Arto Ushan**, curator.

Entering the exhibition, we find ourselves on the path amidst moving images and the sounds they produce. However, there is also a cinematic situation to be discovered, where an observer can relax in a theater seat and watch a film from the beginning to end. What kinds of disposition suit your works better than others, in your opinion?

All the pieces in this exhibition are narrative linear videos, created to be seen in cinemas since they have a beginning and an end. Exhibiting cinema in a museum is an option that can play against the cinematic nature because the viewer may find that a piece has already started and needs to wait for it to resume to be able to understand it. This disadvantage is counterbalanced by the freedom to be able to go over them at will and with a series of fruitful contrasts and contaminations that can be produced among them, both sensorially and symbolically, depending on the space.

I perceive some of the works that we see in this exhibition as documentary, although they are not. Some, on the contrary, I see close to the fiction cinema, despite their experimental nature. How do you understand what aesthetic characteristics to use when you start creating a new work?

I tend not to hierarchize aesthetics, allowing each scene of my films to have its own differentiated style in order to produce successive contrasts that enrich the language. But at the same time I have to force each one of them to maintain a rhythm and a plot coherence. At the end, I allow several different styles to take part in the same film, something similar to what James Joyce did with his Ulysses.

Speaking of narrative, it is the element which can reduce your freedom within the process of film making. How big is the role of dramaturgy in your works?

I started out painting figurative paintings. The process of arriving at the films that I am doing now began when photographing my paintings for a catalog. I understood that I could continue painting on the photographs and that this process of intervention on the copy implied a certain distance from the original that could be repeated successively, giving a temporary dimension to the images. This led me to work with installations in which pictorial animations were projected on photographs. In fact, the reflection on stasis or permanence as a support for permutation has conditioned all of my work. Over time, I've been introducing narrative

elements into my pieces, but this point of departure still affects their dramaturgy.

You don't separate these two artistic practices, painting and film making, don't you?

In many cases, I film as if I were painting a picture and this has several practical implications: I consider my films as a succession of fixed scenes and I try to make them, like pictorial images are, as self-conclusive as possible, both aesthetically and symbolically. Thus my films become puzzles of isolated meanings that I juxtapose looking for thematic contrasts and plot rhythms; in the same way, one can arrange paintings in an art gallery. This can sometimes have the opposite effect and convert the whole film into a series of "transitions" that will not lead to any knot or outcome.

And what happens in this case?

I accept it like this. I think that reality never uses classic dramaturgical layouts, but rather is based much more on a multiplicity of chained dramas. I understand what I present in this exhibition as an organic body, mutable, and inter-readable, somehow in the way of Roberto Bolaño, whose novels share protagonists and subplots, never end and need to be read in their totality.

Please tell me about the works you've made in Serbia.

The oldest piece of the exhibition, "Room Service for Bombed Buildings," was conceived during my first visit to Serbia in 2000, a few months after the NATO bombings, to meet the family of the artist Vahida Ramujkic, my partner at that time. "Room Service" is the formalization of a naïve thought that came to my mind while driving by the Kneza Milosa, contemplating the ruins of Generalstab. I never imagined that Colonel Zoran Zavic, head of the military communication department, would allow me to shoot this impossible document. Beyond their tragic desolation, the ruins constitute the vestige or the footprint of past events, the substrate from which all historiography, every museum, and therefore all cultural construction is created. In this way, I consider any image as the ruin of its real source. And somehow, to elaborate an artistic point of view consists precisely in cleaning those ruins. All the other pieces shown in the exhibition, which I have been developing over the last 15 years, are in some way debtors of this notion of a tragic "past that escapes," always formalized "a posteriori", about which I can only speculate.

The feature film "Y" is the core of the exhibition. How did you get the idea for this work and how did you make it?

"Room Service for Bombed Buildings" was the origin of a process of work on the

consequences of military violence, which led me to produce other short films such as "Rear Views," about a lost bullet that kills a car driver, "The Sight of Dead," about a couple of children who find a soldier's body floating in a river, "La poca casa," an abstract dream about guilt and "Panic," illustrating the abandonment of an unwanted baby in a forest. Around 2007, I started on a trip to accompany Bojana Jelenic, Vahida's grandmother, to visit her birthplace, Primislje, located in the Croatian region of Kordun, a territory devastated by the war. In collaboration with Vahida Ramujkic we shot extraordinary material there, which we have used in several ways. Only later I found that most of what I had recorded since "Room service" could as well be seen as scenes (or chapters) of one same film because they shared the same themes and treatment. Then I need 5 more years to develop "Y" by shooting more scenes based on the new plot that resulted from this "sum" of registers.

What is then "Y" about?

"Y" is a feature film that describes a ruined territory that is gradually repopulated by refugees who return to it from an exile of war. The two protagonists, a man who lives in a cardboard box and a woman who only owns an old van, simply sleep during all of the movie. Almost all we see is their dreams, terrible nightmares that revisit their affective and family constellations, destroyed by war. In the course of the film, the respective dreams are gradually merging and end up confronting each dreamer in a tragic re-enactment of a military rape. For me, "Y" is a kind of empathic speculation, through dreamlike distance, about the psychic alienation that produces war, both in victims and in aggressors.

Rape has a big symbolic importance here. Does it become a symbol of war in this work?

"Y" revolve around the description of a rape understood as a weapon of war, a fact that often implies a genocidal dimension in which the aggressor inoculates his "genetic memory" in the womb of the enemy. The child abandoned by the protagonist of "Y" is at the root of the psychic break of the whole film, since the woman does not admit the innocence of the baby and extends herself the crime suffered. There are many theories that defend that humanity is an organic whole. In this context, the famous sentence "War is a disease like typhus" by the writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, would be inaccurate. War is fueled by conflicts between cells that belong to the same body. It is then an endogenous disease, such as genetic, degenerative or autoimmune, but also as a mental one. The association between brain and government leads us to assume that the last one is the most appropriate. War is therefore a mental illness of collective consciousness. The multitude of psychological sequels that it produces are part of its expansive echo and contain the seed for its sprout. In "Y," the mixture of dreams between the soldier and the raped woman symbolize "the moment of contagion" of this mental illness. It's the impossible moment in which she dreams about the rapist's family, that is, about the family of the father of her son, and abandons the baby.

Tell me, in order to finish this interview, why do you do art? So to say, the ultimate reason for making the films that you make?

When considering this question I always think of a sentence that Alexander Kluge was always repeating: "I film in order to rescue reality from its indifference." At the same time, I completely agree on something Louise Bourgeois once wrote: "Every artist who deliberates on the so-called "meaning" of his work, usually only describes an accessory aspect of a literary nature. To find, if such a thing is possible, the core of his primal impulse, we cannot consider anything else than the same work."