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Festival Review
75th International Film Festival Venice

Variations on the Theme of Violence: Multifaceted Representations of a Ubiquitous Phenomenon in New Films

At age 75, the *Mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica* in Venice is the oldest film festival worldwide. It usually shows not only art-house films that can be seen only in repertory cinemas but also bigger productions and blockbusters that will be released in European cinemas over the coming year. Held from 29 August to 9 September in 2018, this anniversary event presented a collection that was rich and demanding for scholars of media and religion. In this review, I focus on the two programmes I watched as a member of the Interfilm Jury: the main session *Venezia 75 Competition* and *Orizzonti Competition*, a programme of art-house productions from all over the world.

The film selections in both categories covered a broad range of topics, styles and genres, but one issue could be found in almost every work – violence. Many of the films in the main competition and *Orizzonti* offered detailed analysis of the many facets of violent human relationships: violence on an individual and collective scale, violence within families or nations, violence in conflict zones or everyday life. Seen from this perspective, Venice Film Festival 2018 offered a great opportunity to reflect on ideas and concepts related to representing violence as a ubiquitous phenomenon in human relationships. This review is conceived as an overview highlighting selected works and their particular contribution to articulating violence.

VIOLENCE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

A number of films focused on violence within families. In these works, the family represents the focal point of broader social relationships. Ozen (The River, Emir Baigazin, KZ/PL/NO 2018) provides a portrait of a family composed of a violent father, a weak, indifferent mother and five brothers, who all live in an isolated house in a desert landscape. The father keeps the family in complete social isolation through a system of self-sufficiency that demands huge physical and psychological exertion. One day, a peculiar young figure brings the family

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Fig. 1: Film Still Ozen (The River, Emir Baigazin, KZ/PL/NO 2018), https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/orizzonti/ozen-il-fiume [accessed 30.12.2018].

into contact with technology and the contemporary world, which plunges its members into a vortex of feelings, fears and menaces. The film highlights the strength of the violent familial bonds with an almost immobile camera that impressively but disturbingly reproduces the father's absurd attempt to keep time still (fig. 1).

In the Estonian drama Tchelovek kotorij udivil vseh (The Man Who Surprised Everyone, Natasha Merkulova / Aleksey Chupov, RU/EE/FR 2018) the family becomes the stage for a violent transformation of the protagonist, a courageous state forest guard. A loving father, cheerful partner and caring son, Egor discovers he has a terminal cancer. The fight against illness and death is represented in parallel with his gender transition. More than his illness, his transition exposes the protagonist to the crude violence of a whole social network. The film combines careful social analysis with surreal moments of a healing ritual. The body is exposed to all kinds of violent and destructive external and inner forces.

Two further films investigate the relationship between domestic and social violence, although they have less in common on the narrative and stylistic level. Frères Ennemies (Close Enemies, David Oelhoffen, FR/BE 2018) follows the development of two men who as children, growing up in a suburban neighbourhood, had been as close as brothers. As adults, one works as a police officer and

Fig. 2: Roma (Alfonso Cuarón, MX 2018), https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/venezia-75-concorso/roma [accessed 30.12.2018].

the other becomes a delinquent. The thriller explores violence and friendship as two sides of the same coin. Extreme violence characterises everyday life in an area where hope does not seem to be possible; the balance between love and destruction marks the existence of both men, the promoter of justice and the promoter of crime. Werk ohne Autor (Never Look Away, Florian Henckel von Donnersmark, DE 2018) explores the relationship between systematic violence in familial and societal relationships in Germany during the Nazi era over three generations. The body of female family members is the place where systematic and personal violence is perpetuated. The film, which is not very convincing in its narrative or stylistic strategies, articulates the struggle between the destructive power of violence and the liberating energy of love and artistic creativity. Even when using stereotypes and naive assumptions, the film looks for ways to resist and break the chain of endemic violence that can be manifest in a political system or hidden within the intimacy of personal relationships.

The articulation of the devastating effects of social and familial violence and the subversive, strong and effective power of love is the main topic of Roma (Alfonso Cuarón, MX 2018), the festival's masterpiece. The film, which has an autobiographical dimension, mirrors the atmosphere in Roma, the district in Mexico City where the director grew up. Winner of the Golden Lion and the Signis award (and numerous awards at other festivals worldwide), Roma is a

detailed and powerful portrait of female relationships in a broader family where traditional hierarchies and male power fail to provide order and stability and generate physical, psychological and systemic violence in all aspects of life. Breaking social conventions, the female members of a middle-class family, who include two young indigenous women who work as maids and nannies, have to face crude relationships of violence on many levels of their lives. With unbreakable solidarity and thanks to their capacity to overcome prejudice, they succeed in facing suffering and death and opening up a space of hope. The narrative is strong, without any sentimental concession but very transparent in transmitting a feeling of commitment and profound love. Furthermore, the film is impressive on the aesthetic level. The black-and-white images, which may suggest recollections of the past, use a broad range of visual metaphors. The gaze into the microcosm of the family mirrors the observation of macrocosmic connections (fig. 2).

VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The role of violence in shaping social relationships is the leitmotif in three outstanding productions from different cultures. The Tibetan film Jinpa (Pema Tseden, PRC 2018) is situated in a dreamlike vision. The protagonist Jinpa, a lorry driver, meets a wayfarer with the same name on a vast plain. The film explores the reflections of these two figures, who are trapped in chains of vengeance and violence. Finally, they succeed in liberating themselves from this heavy heritage. The film demands an active interpreter who is ready to engage this poetic but still hermetic work where cultural stereotypes and habits are broken on the narrative and aesthetic levels. Soni (Ivan Ayr, IN 2018) is the name of the female protagonist of an Indian drama that focuses on violence between genders in institutions and families. As a diligent policewoman, Soni tries to be guided by justice, equality and solidarity. Her chief, Kalpana, supports her. The two women fight together against violence, indifference and the arbitrariness of habit. The challenges that Soni deals with in her professional life are reproduced in her private and intimate domain. A fresh and in no way banalising analysis of social violence is presented in a comedy set in the middle of the most paradigmatic and complex conflict of the present time. Tel Aviv on Fire (Sameh Zoabi, LU/FR/BE 2018) traces the production of a soap opera in Ramallah. The protagonist has a job as an apprentice on the set of the successful TV series *Tel Aviv on Fire*, in which a charming Palestinian spy flirts with a Jewish officer. The protagonist, who crosses a checkpoint every day, becomes involved in an intricate network of constraints on his real life and his position as a screenwriter on the set. In this brilliant piece, which won the award of the Interfilm jury, playful jokes and the serious dimensions of social violence are intertwined in a captivating way;

Fig. 3: Film still Tel Aviv on Fire (Sameh Zoabi, LU/FR/BE 2018), https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/orizzonti/tel-aviv-fire [accessed 30.12.2018].

humour aims here at opening up an alternative perspective on the conflict between Muslims and Jews, who in this film consume the same entertainment on television (fig. 3).

STATE VIOLENCE

A closer look at violence perpetrated by state institutions characterises a wide range of works shows at Venice, such as Sulla mia pelle (On my Skin, Alessio Cremonini, IT 2018) or La noche de 12 años (A Twelve Years' Night, Álvaro Brechner, ES/AR/UY/FR 2018). The former recounts the real case of Stefano Cucchi, who died a week after his arrest in 2009. The young man, who was involved in the use and sale of drugs, had been brutally beaten by the Italian police when he was arrested. Nobody officially noticed the prisoner's serious condition until he was found dead. The drama reintroduces the case as representative of abusive state violence and contextualises it in a social situation where it is barely possible to maintain trust in institutions and the state. La noche de 12 años reconstructs the imprisonment of three Tupamaro fighters in Uruguay in 1973. During the military dictatorship, the prisoners were isolated, tortured and heavily mistreated for 12 years. The film follows the profound and traumatic transformations of the protagonists, who are dehumanised by this long-lasting,

extreme experience. One of the three, Pepe Mujica, later became president of Uruguay. Both films depict with great precision – in different times as well as against diverse cultural and political backgrounds – the destructive impact of arbitrary state violence upon citizens. On the aesthetic level, the body of the victims is presented as the field where the brutal annihilation of the prisoner is performed on both the physical and symbolic levels, with the camera often very close to the naked, wounded bodies of the protagonists. The bare body, therefore, becomes a strong filmic metaphor for the fragility of the human being facing uncontrolled state violence.

The drama Peeterloo (Mike Leigh, GB/US 2018) represents a different way of dealing with the issue of state violence. The focus lies on the massacre of people who were demostrating for democracy and women rights in Manchester in 1819. Hopes for change and equality were drowned in blood as the conservative forces retained power. Although the film is presented as a historic drama, it is striking because of its relevance today (as if intended for contemporary readers of the newspaper the *Guardian*, which was founded following this massacre) and its implicit reflection on the fragility of democracy. As in La noche de 12 años, it shows that institutional violence will be overcome and democracy established.

While these films approach the destructive impact of state violence from the perspective of the victims, The Favourite (Yorgos Lanthimos, GB/IE/US 2018) scrutinises the subtle rules of power and the use of violence for establishing hierarchies in an all-female historic drama set in early 18th-century England at the court of Queen Anne. The film is impressive for the acting, its costumes and camera. It makes a clear statement about the capacity of mastering [*sic*] and controlling cruelty as a powerful means of (female) power.

VIOLENCE IN WAR, TERRORISM AND GENOCIDE

The annihilating power of violence in war is analysed in the Syrian production Yom Adaatou Zouli (The Day I Lost my Shadow, Soudade Kaadan, SY/LB/FR/QA 2018). Alone with her child, Sana tries to give him the impression of a normal everyday life within a chaotic city where nothing seems possible anymore. The search for a gas cylinder is transformed into a never-ending journey between the different parts of the conflict. In this nightmare, people cannot escape annihilation. The film emphasises these destructive aspects by showing how the characters slowly loose their shadows, a poetic but incisive image for blurring the boundary between existence and annihilation, between reality and afterlife (fig. 4).

Kraben Rahu (Manta Ray, Puttiphong Aroonpheng, TH 2018) is a hermetic Thai narrative at the edge between everyday survival and otherworldly lights shining in the impenetrable forest where the bodies of victims of genocide are

Fig. 4: Film still Adaatou Zouli (The Day I Lost my Shadow, Soudade Kaadan, SY/LB/FR/QA 2018), https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/orizzonti/yom-adaatou-zouli-il-giorno-che-ho-perso-la-mia-ombra [accessed 30.12.2018].

lying on the ground. The lives of the protagonists, who are not situated in a social context, are represented as interchangeable. The film expects the audience to scrutinise the surreal and coarse portraits of the protagonists by focusing on the images and it refuses to provide narrative explanations. The existence of the characters depends on the fragile balance between (casual) empathy and submission to an invisible violence whose pervasive reach can be fragmentarily perceived.

In this series of filmic productions dealing with war, genocide and terrorism, 22 July (Paul Grengrass, NO/IS 2018) deserves to be highlighted as a positive and hopeful contribution which resists resignation and makes a clear statement in favour of democracy and solidarity as means to overcome blind and arbitrary violence. The work reconstructs, by means of fiction, the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Anders Behring Breivik in Oslo and on the island of Utøya. The systematic killing of the young people on the island and the efforts to elaborate the trauma in a public, democratic process are told from the perspective of an adolescent who survives the attack with severe injuries. The film offers a precise portrait of the physical and emotional impact of terrorism at the individual, familial and social levels. Furthermore, it can be read as a plea for the liberating power of public discourse and democratic procedures in overcoming violent annihilation.

THE WESTERN AS A COMPENDIUM OF VIOLENCE IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

I conclude this overview on the topic of violence in selected films presented at the Venice Festival by mentioning two Westerns I count among the most convincing movies at the festival, The Sisters Brothers (Jacques Audiard, FR/BE/RO/ES 2018) and The Ballad of Buster Scruggs (Joel Coen / Ethan Coen, US 2018). In these films, violence is the language of communication in all dimensions of life. The law of the strongest is the only way to establish order and provide orientation in these dystopian worlds that push the boundaries of the genre into new territories. The Sisters Brothers explores the challenge and precarious tension created by the power of hegemony based on violence, on one side, and individual emotions and scientific innovation, on the other. Charles and Eli Sisters are the most cruel and most skilled killers of the whole West, but they are tired of their job and are looking for rest after a long life of crime. The encounter with a scientist who has a new chemical formula to find gold in rivers radically changes their views on existence and relationships. Inserting elements of comedy, the film wonderfully depicts the challenges of understanding and feeling at ease in a world that is transformed by innovation and scientific progress. The collection of short episodes in The Ballad of Buster Scruggs

Fig. 5: Film still The Ballad of Buster Scruggs (Joel and Ethan Coen, US 2018), https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/venezia-75-concorso/ballad-buster-scruggs [accessed 30.12.2018].

also investigates the fine line between violence and irony in the Western. This film represents variations on the motif of violence as a fundamental dimension of the human condition. Against the background of the conquest of the West, the human search for wealth and domination regulates everything; greed and hunger for power are represented in ironical ways, in landscapes where humans are more likely to be destitute than successful (fig. 5). The film re-enacts six short stories from an old book, and this premise confers a fictional and nostalgic character on the whole work that in fact represents a sharp and very realistic criticism of human society. Although there is an eternal struggle for violent domination and hierarchies of power, at the very end humanity is composed of equals: the film concludes with a carriage transporting a very diverse group of people beyond the door that leads to death.

AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION?

The cinema production of 2018 presented in Venice offers a rich cinematographic encyclopaedia of many facets of violence in diverse narratives, styles and genres. Violence is scrutinised in various ways – as social criticism, in the form of detached descriptions, irony and satire or through alienation. Religion is not always directly linked to the motif of violence; it can appear in the background or foreground and be associated with isolated religious symbols, with aspects of the narrative or with stylistic features. When it plays a central role, religion appears as an identity marker more than a whole symbol system. In the portraits of the scattered existence of protagonists in a violent scene, religion appears in a fragmented way. It is not an obligatory cause of violence nor is it an antidote to it. If we consider all those films as a contemporary artistic discourse on violence and power relations, the link to religion can be reconstructed by considering the human condition in a world where humans are represented as the perpetrators and victims of violence. In this sense, the festival can be seen as a laboratory in which viewers can engage with representations of violence as an inevitable dimension of societal coexistence. The audience becomes a fundamental part of this filmic experiment: it has to assume responsibility as an active interpreter of filmic fictions who seeks to cross the boundaries between invention, creativity and a sharp, critical audio-visual insight into the contemporary world.

FILMOGRAPHY

22 July (Paul Grengrass, NO/IS 2018).

Frères Ennemies (Close Enemies, David Oelhoffen, FR/BE 2018).

Jinpa (Pema Tseden, PRC 2018).

Kraben Rahu (Manta Ray, Puttiphong Aroonpheng, TH 2018).

La noche de 12 años (A Twelve Years' Night, Álvaro Brechner, ES/AR/UY/FR 2018).

Ozen (Emir Baigazin, KZ/PL/NO 2018).

Peeterloo (Mike Leigh, GB/US 2018).

Roma (Alfonso Cuarón, MX 2018).

Soni (Ivan Ayr, IN 2018).

Sulla mia pelle (On my Skin, Alessio Cremonini, IT 2018).

Tchelovek kotorij udivil vseh (The Man Who Surprised Everyone, Natasha Merkulova and Aleksey Chupov, RU/EE/FR 2018).

Tel Aviv on Fire (Sameh Zoabi, LU/FR/BE 2018).

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The Favourite (Yorgos Lanthimos GB/IE/US 2018).

The Sisters Brothers (Jacques Audiard, FR/BE/RO/ES 2018).

Werk ohne Autor (Never Look Away, Florian Henckel von Donnersmark, DE 2018).

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