

Distressful is the freedom –

The Portrait of the Fighter as a Young Man

Movie Reviews

By Maria Andries

November 2010

The Portrait of the Fighter as a Young Man is not a historical film. It is a consciousness and memory exercise. It reminds us that we always have a choice, today, yesterday, 50 years ago. A century ago or a century later. We can choose. Between freedom and the rest.

Not only the subject is new, but also the storytelling way. Constantin Popescu takes us out of the tragedy of our flat to the natural light, in outdoor, and he gives up the traditional rule of the three units, of time, place and neurotic action. The story of the Resistance in the mountains breathes differently than the Chekhovian province. It has an almost non-Romanian breathing, inhuman.

If there were no testimonies, diaries, graves, you would say that the director has invented everything, just because the public's consciousness required a basis of comparison. Between those who made the hell bearable (and to whom we pay homage, by cannon volleys) and those who denounced the hell as hell (and about whom we are speechless, how a dissident said). They should be first in our minds, so as to talk about them. But the few "lost" ones who opposed the communist regime were dispatched to the edge of thought, as a kind of heroic myth strange to the Romanian nature, like a chimera of our own history outside the history. Constantin Popescu's film brings them to our eye level, sprawled in grass, with tough souls, like children's. It follows, along tenebrous paths, John Gavrilă Ogoranu's group and outlines a portrait of collective hero, whom I abandoned, because of pragmatism or resignation. Nothing pathetic, nothing of a crushing grandeur. Some students with guns and haversacks, waiting the Americans to come and put an end to the "trash." Sequences of war alternate with sequences of torture, from the battlefield to the cell and back again, among complicity fir-trees, to make clear what they have to choose between. They are haunted by militiamen, they hide in woods, in barns, they endure the hunger, tremble with fear,



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shiver with cold, kill and commit suicide, not to fall alive into the hands of communists. Sure sign of life as well,, they doubt. They doubt that their resistance is of any worth. Torturers, of course, do not doubt even for a moment.

Like in Soderbergh's Che the scenes are dated, like in a front log. There is a revolution routine, there is also a resistance routine. The filming in black and white, from a "dreamt life", break, like waves, against the right angles of the story. On the one hand, the dungeon and militiamen, on the other side – the gunfire and death. Between them, squeezed, these images like out of nowhere, of the enemies of the ladybird people.

"The Fighter as a Young Man" and Joyce's artist in his youth are alike: unable to make a compromise with themselves. No rift between thought and deed. As if the choice is decided in an inaccessible area of the being but it is then required at the surface with the power of revelation.

The film shows what the option of being free actually consists of, during the communism and beyond. It means nails pulled and families sent to the Canal, it means to feed on bark and to despair, to howl, to go mad, but not to surrender. It means to get, eventually, like Rilke's Jesus, there where nobody can follow you any more. Of all the mountains in the world to climb quite Mount of the Olives. The motto of the movie, from "The First Duino Elegy", warns about that: " Torturing is any angel!". Heartbreak is his "call". Distressful is freedom.

It isn't a historical film. It's a film about us, the nowadays' ones, who still pretend we had no choice. That we have no choice. All the philosophy, ideologies and thoughts of the world, including patriotism, can be summed up, ultimately, in elementary things, in natural gestures. "I want to be able to look into my child's eyes!" "the warrior in his youth" justified .You can live that way, without a hitch. But some cannot.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxF8mwjJVec&feature=player_embedded

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The Partisan Being – *The Portrait of the Fighter as a Young Man*

Movie Reviews

By Violeta Ion

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Constantin Popescu jr. began his career with a memorable film about the 1950s anti-communist partisans in Romania, and I'm saying that not because he ordered testimonies and documents which depict a real, dramatic case that happened in our regions, but because he presented their resistance without inflating artistically the scenes. For instance, the pathetism was removed in favor of the few moments of tenderness. This is a film that presents the facts "in the cold light of reason", attitude that young people who escaped in the mountains had to adopt in order to avoid going mad. This is the attitude they inspire to you as a spectator, so as not to have expectations of a different nature of what is called resistance in the mountains. The film presents the scenes with the partisans fighting under the direction of Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu, alternating to training sessions in the Security offices, right to illustrate the distorted and perverted ideology that brings moral mutilation.

The movie also points out another idea: that the young partisans who fight for freedom, are not awaiting their villagers, but the Americans. There is no breath of fresh air for them in the forests of Făgăras, there is only the thin wire of the radio wave that announces the death of Stalin at a given moment. "You are waiting for God", the torturer tells his victim from prison, a priest who does not want to give up faith at all, "and you", he says to a partisan who had had the misfortune to be caught, "you are awaiting the Americans. Well, tell me where is God, where are the Americans now? "

In what concerns the Americans, the inquisitor is right when he says that Americans are too busy to be interested in the future of a nation that is hiding of itself among the groove, and as it regards God, he was right in front of him, his face full of bruises and with a strong character that did not allow weakness in front of the committed physical horrors.



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Răzvan Vasilescu plays the role of the torturer, with that ability that prevents a false note in his speech, or rather in his monologue. For his monologue is the monologue of a sick man, tormented by the heat of his own hell with no ideal, because not even the domination that he serves does not seem to bring him something better instead.

The whole movie is a continuous runaway in the mountains, in order to survive. We do not have, as the American movies do, a Morse code alphabet and friends settled in various border points which should show a clear goal, with changing situations or a leader to try and assume the power, in a way or another. It is simply an escape from the system by poor means of fighting, with frightened friends who let their store room be emptied, with parents who do not understand why their children have to suffer: “You kids, what did you do?” asks a mother who has seen her son being shot by the soldiers. Because the soldiers were also just some “kids” and they served the oppressor state, with no courage to train their arms against it.

The resistance of the partisans was the daily resistance in front of death, pain, hunger and cold; maybe the most important thing was their strength to see their friend dying, with no minimum joy of their fight. Some of them were burdened with the idea that, in the end, what they do can only have a temporary importance that is put under the sign of failure and absurd. These are common dilemmas for people who are about to bend in front of the yoke of their own fate, people who doubt, who could suffer from fear in the same way they suffer from hunger, but who keep going their own way. Here, the director proved to be skillful indeed because he presented them to us as they really were, and he did not brave it out through a heroic and embarrassing rhetoric.

There is one more thing that demonstrates the unity of this film: the sobriety of the landscapes in the mountains, those mountains with greenery and coolness towards which we run today to relax, as compared with the sobriety of the characters touched by death and suffering. A transmutation of this sort can only thrill you and make you see, on a large scale, the value of the act of sacrifice. Nature is also “cold”, like the heroes she welcomes, nature is indifferent and hides dangers at every turn, nature cannot be even a warm grave. The pits that the partisans dig to hide themselves and sleep can accommodate people alive, but only the dead belong to history. Nature is a partisan being.



http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxF8mwjJVec&feature=player_embedded

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Meditating upon a particular type of film – *Stalker*

Movie Reviews

By Marian Rădulescu

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In the beginning was the flight. In the beginning, despite all grief, was the feeling that the world is yours. Or, to quote the song, the feeling that you are the “legendary Prometheus”. That no blight can swoop upon you. That you are somehow privileged. That you are in the seventh heaven. What a feeling! Bemusing and as lasting as unyielding youth!

But later on, when the virus of disbelief invades you, when you cannot lie to yourself anymore and you realize that not even you can cheat death, you try to salvage a crumb of your primary surge of life, a crumb of your youthful recklessness. A crumb of a child’s innocence. And when amid your family, when surrounded by little children you might just contrive to do so. When among them-the people of tomorrow- the siege of Time becomes more bearable. Among them, your Sisyphean struggle (one you cannot escape) becomes less overwhelming.



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Somehow the Stalker resembles Sisyphus, in that they share the same obstinacy, in the former's case- the obstinacy of bringing the hopeless into the "Zone". This character is actually the only one true to himself and to his belief - that of going all the way. As Tarkovsky put it: "only such a man could carry it off well". The other two characters(the Teacher and the Writer) are but walking corpses, haunted by the same virus of disbelief and "lucidity", defeated by their own boredom (or weariness or envy). The Ulysses-like Stalker wants to make them "believe" for the "miracle" (the metanoia, the thing that can still awake shame, "which shall save mankind" as Kris put it, in Solzhenitsyn's *Priglasenie*) to take place. Whom or What should they believe in? At this point Tarkovsky goes to no further length with the revealing of things. The quotations (taken from the Revelation and from the Gospel) chosen by the visionary director are- in Blaga's words-"epiphany-ridden" not "embellishing" like in the moralistic and propagandist religious films such as *Ostrov*. The room in the "Zone" is and is not an altar within a forsaken church. In the same way, the fish beyond the "threshold", as it seems to drown in a dark red liquid, might or might not stand for the Person of Christ who "atoned for man's sin". For those who feel at home when attending the High Mass the image Tarkovsky draws is as plain as it can be. Yet there are other people still at odds with the idea of liturgical dimension, due to the "unworthiness of the cleric" (as if this reason could account for such thing as shrinking from religious feeling). For these people, the building where the three travelers are heading is a building like any other. In the same key the spirituality of the film is a "common one" for both free thinkers and heterodox. Still, it is "common" without being "trivial", it is "universal", illustrative of this being the thousands of Tarkovsky lovers all around the world, regardless of ethnic, religious and political beliefs. Despite all, what lingers on is "Man's thirst"- nota bene - in a "post-Christian society", in a waste land following the absolute, the redemption, the reconciliation with the broken self.

The last scene bears the prize Tarkovsky intended for us- a glimpse of "perfection", of "irresistible beauty" and fulfilment. The Stalker's daughter is the embodiment of what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn writes about Janos, the Hungarian, in his "The Gulag Archipelago": "one of those whose essence is increasingly rare this age, one of those who felt nothing in childhood but the passion for reading". In this last scene we see her reading a love poem from a book. The glasses on the table she seats at begin to move. The sound of a nearby passing train grows louder and louder. As she looks at the glasses they begin to move, as if she were the one to move them (a supernatural telekinetic force or perhaps some kind of energy derived from the parable about moving mountains- "if you had faith the size of a mustard seed"). She actually looks rather absent minded, her thoughts astray. Should one shrug off the appealing idea that the scene is one of supernatural dimension, one would realize that something else is highlighted here. It is the



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“voice of the train” (an existential metaphor) contrasting with the “inner moment of poetry”. It is the first heralds of spring and the girl’s resignation as she is besieged by the roars of the train. Roars reminding of the fearsome K.G.B. Here (as it is the case with Solyaris) Tarkovsky preyed upon the affinity of many for “magic” stories by deliberately creating an ambiguous image. Thus, even if they don’t want or cannot perceive the deeply buried essence of things (this essence has more to do with reality than with magic, actually it is anchored in the “magic of faith”) the Science Fiction fans still get to be pleased.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CA0RfdeM8A&feature=player_embedded

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