

Is seriousness the curse of the documentary film?

Jean-Pierre Rehm in a conversation with kolik.film

(...)

KOLIK.FILM: Could be. But can you give an example of a film with explicit political issues?

Jean-Pierre Rehm: Of course. But you should not believe, I insist, that the validity of a contract and the way it is honoured depend on its object. And to answer your question, we could in fact take an Austrian film. The film in question is *Those Shocking Shaking Days* by Selma Doborac. It was discovered last year at the Diagonale in Graz and was selected for the FID Festival and, by the way, won two different awards. The film is both passionate and impassioned, austere and baroque at the same time. It's a "meta-film". It would seem above all to be about cinema, and more precisely the possibility for cinematic representation of a civil war like the Balkan conflict. A series of theoretical remarks in the form of questions are stated by a voice-over or in subtitles. Theory is thus the protagonist in this cinematic adventure. But as the film unfolds, it becomes apparent that theory, which is usually the guarantor of reason and moderation, is caught up here in a state of agitation or excess. It happens very quickly; the questions are profound, complex, and there are simply too many to respond or even remember, too many propositions to be sure of not losing the thread. What is happening? There is an overflow, an effusion of theory. Thoughts emerge, but flowing, gushing, like a bloodletting. And slowly then suddenly the viewer realises that this bleeding is not at all abstract and that the theory was stated in the form of questions because someone, a body, a subject, whatever you want to call it, was the worried originator of these questions. And that the film is therefore an autobiography. Someone (the director? a country? a mosaic of countries?) has been injured, and the thoughts are this haemorrhage spreading without restraint, painfully, outside the wound. A bruised autobiography (but extremely modest), grazed thoughts (but with a confounding analytic solidity), a contused film (but of astonishing ambition and rare courage; moreover, the most evident bruises appear in the choice of images, even a blank screen); everything tightly enmeshed, that's what the film has to offer, and the title, *Those Shocking Shaking Days*, doesn't lie. As you can see, this example shows that categories don't hold. On the contrary, it is they that are being shaken, quite legitimately, because in the last analysis it is about trying to give an account of the complexity of the effects of a conflict.

KOLIK.FILM: In view of this example, which is indeed quite eloquent, do you think that seriousness is the curse of the documentary?

Jean-Pierre Rehm: There is certainly a Christian or perhaps pained slant inherent in documentaries. This is no doubt the cross they have to bear, even if Selma Doborac's film avoids this completely, I believe, through its excessiveness and rigour: the madness is not serious but threatening, which is even more powerful! But we should not think that there is no inevitability. If you look at Roe Rosen's work, there is a universe and a tonality that replace seriousness with satire. Rosen is an Israeli artist who doesn't see himself as a film maker, but an artist who uses the medium of film among others, exploiting all of its registers: publicity, clip, talk show, musical comedy, burlesque, etc. His most recent film, *The Dust Channel*, which will be shown at the next documenta in Kassel and in Athens and had its world premiere at the FID in Marseille, is a great achievement of its type. In a Surrealist-like tradition, despite the place given to an excerpt by Farocki, the film is mainly about a vacuum cleaner, the Dyson DC07, famous for its efficiency and transparent housing—but only to better highlight the treatment of political refugees in the Holot retention centre in the middle of the desert. There is laughter, candid but also mirthless laughter. But laughter here is the acid that enables original and illuminating connections to be made.

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