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http://cinema-scope.com/wordpress/web-archive-2/issue-47/interviews-welcome-to-calais-sylvain-george-and-the-aesthetics-of-resistance/

Welcome in Calais: Sylvain George and the aethestic of resistance

By Jay Kuehner

The judiciously titled *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* (*des figures de guerres*) is prefaced by a crepuscular pan of imposing peaks (Mount Sinai) underscored by a cryptic quote regarding divine violence (from Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*), followed by a negative-stock image of the Pyramids before then cutting to the manicured familiarity of a public park. Hereafter the itinerant point of view and temporally fractured editing reveal an activity—increasingly common in France's northern port city of Calais, a mere 34 kilometres from England—of undocumented immigrants dodging police round-ups. If such initial footage, both candidly and clandestinely gathered by the director, seems less than exigent in its rhetorical procedure, it becomes unmistakably evident that this is the fringe where a war is manifest, and these refugees its figures.

The initial geography of legend assumes signification by contrast: stark mountains symbolic of arduous journeys suffered by innumerable migrants on their way to more potentially hopeful lands. And does the long view and fossilized earth signify an historical struggle as old as time immemorial, of exodus as an original, everlasting condition? The query is implicit in George's alternately impressionistic and vérité method, bearing witness to the sentient struggles of displaced persons as well as the environments that hold or reject them, or, more pointedly, the temporary residences resiliently carved out of inhospitable spaces. Where some see the dignity of survival, others see the debased fate of the pariah: a split that constitutes the critical interstice where George's camera takes up a vigilant position as a means of exposing liminal space and abject experience, bodies subordinate to state sovereignty.

With no fixed subject to follow—the very idea being antithetical to such an endeavour, given that several of his putative subjects take sudden flight, one disappearing by way of an unsuspecting lorry's underside—George trains his camera on whomever and whatever he can, tellingly circulating little beyond the shadow of a notoriously garish city hall and no further than the shore where freighters approach and recede just out of reach. As an account of living conditions among immigrants (mostly men from North Africa and the Middle East) in Calais over a period of three years (2007-2010), the film is non-dogmatic but deeply trenchant as well as avowedly sympathetic to its heterogeneous demographic of *nouveaux damnés*. Striking in the immediacy of its content and its formal texture—George shoots in black and white with a photojournalist's eye toward an aesthetic that's circumspectly iconic—the film takes an inventory of everyday rituals that prove unsurprising in their universality: men bathing and shaving at a riverside well, joining in prayer and song, preparing and eating meals in

hunched but communal fashion, bedding down as comfortably as humanly possible, and sharing memories of family and friends. In this sense *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* isn't foreign to French drama in general, just as its subjects, less invisible now by the record of George's camera, are marginalized but not endemically marginal.

The distinction ends there, however, for this is a chronicle with a capacity to sear even the coldest conscience (wherein the notion of xenophobic intolerance and nativist sentiment may be seen as a defense against the inflammatory hazards of empathy). One intimate and indelible sequence graphically frames hands willfully scarred and blistered (by razor and coal-heated screws) so as to evade detection, a sacrifice offered up to the camera as evidence of the renunciation of identity coinciding with the self-actualizing pursuit of a better life. The film is rife with the paradox of exile; of African vitriol against a racist yet catalytic Europe; of nostalgia for a home that couldn't be; of indignation and humiliation some day reversed by history, when Europeans may have to "migrate to Africa to look for a job" (in the words of one displaced man, spoken haltingly in—what else?—broken English).

Charged with an emancipatory ethos that reflects George's education in philosophy and as a social worker, *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* is nevertheless destined to partake in the intractable fate of so many of its refugees, consigned to an in-between state, ineffectual against state policies that deny elementary rights. The film may not change political policy but it may well awaken compassion, with George presumably engaging Serge Daney's under-realized imperative of 1973: "For film-makers of all leanings, in this near-open battle, in their very craft of film-making, a single problem emerges: How can political statements be presented cinematically? How can they be made positive?" To this end *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* works at destabilizing held perceptions of migrant peoples as a means of restoring their fundamental equality, not through the narrative substance of their travails so much as the observation of their bodies and milieus. Where the film's first part indulges a more impressionistic or intuitive account of living conditions in Calais—including the unseen director's own, which entails a voyeuristic position among the bushes while free to roam at will—its second part confronts more directly the imminent and well-documented destruction by French authorities of a migrant settlement known as "the jungle."

The razing of an inchoate community deemed criminal is met with protest from European social, health, and humanitarian workers, as well as requisite liberals who denounce the brutal police action as shameful, but the spectacle has universal implications as to what and whom are being protected by borders, the definitive polemic of the 21st century that questions the agency of disenfranchised peoples. There is a distinct impression, however partial in its selectivity, that many of the tattered subjects of George's documentary are refugees, contrary to the nativist conception of immigrant usurpers, first and foremost. This is born out in the film's testimonial content, which reveals a mood of indignation entwined with a plea for help: "We are suffering," implores one man. "What can we do?" Footage of unofficial graves of those who've perished along the way, juxtaposed with Calais' cemeteries of official dead, is sufficient evidence of attrition, casualties of a war fought in the name of national interest.

In the end, *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* offers little in the way of a solution, its agenda being rooted in a humanism that seeks to perceptually restore a time and space in which a

person's potential is held and recognized. If that which hasn't been seen cannot be recognized, per Serge Daney, then George's film offers a fiercely lucid gaze at a site-specific struggle whose shadow is cast universally. It is against the condition, testified to by one of the film's plaintive voices, of "neither living, nor dying; not animal, not human," that George refuses to be equivocal. Ultimately elegiac, the film's postscript returns to a landscape that suggests an eternal recurrence of expulsion and exodus, of struggle in perpetuity, and the eventual possibility of resurrection. This is a battle hymn that gnaws, restless with resistance.

Premiered at FIDMarseille last year, *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* has blazed a unique trail which has seen George as an artist-in-focus at Belgium's experimental Courtisane festival—where the film screened with live accompaniment by jazz legend William Parker—as well as winner of the international competition and FIPRESCI prize at this year's Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema. Here is an artist who has arrived, welcome or not.

CINEMA SCOPE: Given your background as a social worker and an emerging filmmaker documenting diasporic communities, was Calais and its inhabitants an inevitability? A calling?

SYLVAIN GEORGE: I decided when I was 18 to make films, but for many different reasons it took a long time to begin. Now I make the films I want to see, films that I feel are an emergency; they are necessary. I consider this my first film in a way, begun five years ago, while meanwhile I made several shorts and the feature *L'impossible – Pages arrachées* (2009). It's an improvisation on the subject of migration in Calais, too, a film in five parts in different mediums documenting as well the unemployed, the undocumented, and the student protests in 2009. The musical citations are culled from free jazz and punk, with literary allusions to Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Benjamin. With these films I experimented with forms, looking for a way to translate reality with the objective being to make *Qu'ils reposent en révolte.* All of my energy as a filmmaker was concentrated through this film, and now I am anxious to follow its lead.

My experience as a social worker was just that: an experience. I'm not convinced of the value of these jobs, which aren't really about building something with people having difficulties. Often it's to prevent a social explosion. Soon you are in a compromised position of wanting to help people but also working for social regulation, the regulation of people's anger: *against* the people. My project is to try to make some films about some subjects and events that I consider crucial today: questions of immigration, the suburbs, unemployed people, social movements and so forth, with a political view, and with rigorous research and innovation with the medium. (I'm influenced by the avant-garde, experimental, underground forms and music.)

This experimental approach allows for exceptions, and Calais is an exceptional zone, where people who are stripped of fundamental rights live a "naked life," stripped down to mere bodies. I don't want to take a didactic approach but rather attest to this reality, and take a position against the policies that create it.

SCOPE: Your footage of Mount Sinai as a preface to the film is cryptic—the matter of recognition is taken for granted, as is the unattributed Benjamin quote. Was this

obscurity deliberate? Does the reference of exodus provide a religious context to the film's proceedings, in which religion is present within but never imposed upon the film?

GEORGE: Absolutely. The Sinai is a mythic landmark for immigration. With the pictures of the sun rising at the top of the Sinai at the beginning of the film, I try to play with some elements that are the foundations of our civilization. I play with a lot of pictures, motifs, and representations that we could have in our collective memory: immigration, exodus, and movement as liberty.

If it's not clear that it's a picture of the Sinai it's for two reasons: first, to create attention and inquiry. The effect of "estrangement" is a way to create a distance with a given reality, with the pictures that you can see very easily in the media, with the representation of particular subjects and events. And second, I don't want to be didactic. I prefer to work with suggestion and invitation. I use the citation of Benjamin in the same way: as a proposition, an invitation for reflection, an element of my point of view, but absolutely not of any definitive truth.

SCOPE: As the film settles into its location, from which it will stray very little, there are spatial and temporal shifts in the editing, as well as formal shifts in film speed and sound. Can you speak about this sense of disorientation: is it a consequence of filming over an extended period of time, or is this more strategic? The notion of "dissensus," to use Jacques Rancière's word, comes to mind, a means of destabilizing existing perceptions.

GEORGE: I wanted to examine the concepts of the documented and the archived, to create a tension between the historical and the immediate: a dialectic of near and distant is constructed and established. The more things are away, the closer they are. There is a kind of play here, a diversion, with images and representation. I am moving, reading a situation, unfixed, as opposed to the consensus that the dominant media tries to establish.

The use of black and white, the alternation of sound and silence, of slow motion and freeze frame, presents another way of working with distanciation. The fixed image is an attempt to capture something fleeting, to try to extract latent layers of emotion and reality, and to create some dialectical links between the present and the past. And the textural use of black and white is unavoidably metaphoric, as race is so clearly divided among people in the film. There's an aesthetic to the exposures that is consistent with the testimonials issued by migrants in which, on many occasions, they indicated that they felt burned, charred. The images of burned fingers are complicated; migrants are "marked" by immigration policies, "in irons," but here they are quite literally smouldering.

SCOPE: At times the film's point of view seems entrenched in the very marginal spaces in which your subjects inhabit or hide; I'm thinking of the scene where one migrant hitches a ride below a lorry and disappears from sight, and from the film entirely. In other scenes you shoot more candidly, for instance when we see the Ethiopians singing a devotional song together, or as another beds down for the night and shares his photographs. Your presence is deeply manifest in the film as a witness, but you're also erased from the film, unseen and unheard. Was this by design? And what does this

alternately voyeuristic/candid footage reveal of your experience of shooting? How welcome were you among your subjects, how suspicious were the police of your presence, and so on?

GEORGE: I'm always present in my films, even when I'm "invisible." Calais has become a landmark, and the policies against immigration can be seen in broad daylight, with the blatantly visible violence, the raids of camps and common arrests. I don't need to be clandestine. And you have the omnipresence of the media, and the organization of extensive police operations staged politically for purely electoral purposes. There is always a journalist around, and it's absurd, as if the situation was a television documentary that says, "Welcome to Calais!" Coming to this town I had certain images and representations already formed, gathered from the media that portrayed the situation of migration like a performance. There are very factual treatments, there are partisan views, and there are compassionate documentaries that portray migrants as victims. The cinematographic treatment—even in the name of experimental cinema—often seeks an aesthetic experience, for which the condition of the migrants is a pretext (to the romance of "revolution," the privileged fascination of poverty and suffering, life on the street, etc.). All of these representations still seem to originate from a position of "dominance" vis-à-vis the people filmed, and remain deeply unequal.

Now more than ever I try to follow rules that I obey as a filmmaker, which I've developed gradually: (1) Take time and care to be a part of something in the clearest manner possible, introduce ourselves, explain who we are, what we want to do, why, what kind of movie it is. (2) Spend time with people. (3) Take care to know when to shoot or not—a great film is also measured in terms of images that are "missing." (4) Do not film people without their knowledge, do not "steal" images. (5) Clearly state biases or political positions.

These rules, always subject to the realities of the material, are simple and obvious. However they are revolutionary because they involve certain ethics, and, of course, politics. The prevailing view in cinema and journalistic practices is that the ends justify the means, and that all means are good when it comes to getting a picture: palling around with migrants, monetizing interviews, hiding in the bushes. The production of the image is essential to the safe company that our culture has become. But by what means is the image obtained? Can we question its morality? For example, how is it possible that a reporter travelling by boat from Morocco witnessing a drowning is compelled foremost to broadcast the story without calling for help? Is it "cutting edge" to film the homeless in the corridors of the Metro without their knowledge or consent?

To me these practices and derivative products are absolutely unacceptable and I strive to be vigilant against them, whether to resist the "seduction" and the duplicity of a film or a documentary that apparently sounds very "interesting." This is less a moral question than a practical one as a filmmaker: film is a means without an end, it cannot foreclose itself, but build rapport, a relationship with the world, a link that affirms its uniqueness.

SCOPE: Was there any conflict arising from the fact that as a European citizen the fences and borders your subjects tried desperately to cross were open to you at will, lawfully,

and with little consequence? This raises a broader question of the director and his subject, of a politics at the very heart of your film, a politics of intervention.

GEORGE: My cinema is a means of preparing a fair-as-possible report with those likely to be filmed, and to hold myself similarly accountable. Having observed these principles, I've never encountered problems with my subjects. On the contrary, being able to build relationships of trust, or at least honesty and respect, allows for accessibility that turns "representation" into "presentation." This has relational, poetic, and political implications.

I'm clearly against all the discriminatory policies that the European Union develops against immigrants, so I didn't feel in conflict with myself when I was in Calais. Day after day it became clearer that the situation was unacceptable, and thus it was important to make a film that presents the migrants not as a generic entity, and takes a radical position. At the same time it was a global experience, expanding my life.

SCOPE: You also shot the film, and the texture and compositions are stark, indelible, necessarily aesthetic but ideally not gratuitous. What was your experience as the cinematographer? Can you speak too of this dialectic of aesthetics/politics, for example to reconcile the image of a bird's feather gently caught in sea foam washed ashore versus the reality of hunger among your subjects? In other words, are poetics and emancipation at cross purposes in the 21st century? Is the attempt to allegorize suffering a means of mitigating it?

GEORGE: Patches of ice, insects, spiders, stone statue with eyes gnawed by time, a can of cola, a sunset radiating, bird feathers, the belfry of the town centre of Calais, immigrants and onlookers, police: all are in close communication with each other as an environment and I aim to understand them with the same importance and intensity of attention. The goal is to present evidence at the scene of filming, where the question of how things correspond, communicate, and relate is revealed.

What is important is to rework the concept of humanism, to make the dialectical reversal and realize what could be the "true humanism": man is no longer "master and possessor of nature," he neither dominates nor instrumentalizes nature, it turns out to be his ally. Walter Benjamin used a wonderful phrase to describe this process: "to listen to the compliant outline of nature." The concept of creation associated with the first humanism described here supersedes that of pure destruction—a philosophy of justice.

SCOPE: *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* constitutes an act of awareness, of confrontation, of possible liberation, but in terms of immigration policy it may prove negligible in its impact. Is there an explicit goal with the film, for you, on behalf of your subjects, for audiences, even police and politicians?

GEORGE: The effectiveness, the finality of a film, is different than the political act, but the film does possess the capacity to change some things: the capacity to play with time and space. With a film you can deconstruct dominant representation, show that the migrants have singularity. Ideologies persist by these means, and can likewise be reversed.

When I try to attest to the reality of the migrants in Calais, about the current policies of immigration in Europe, I try to work on the short, middle, and long term. I make a testimony and an historical document that can concern some people today, and hopefully tomorrow. I just try to be with myself, and with the others. It's a question of justice as I said before, and also a question of beauty.