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A TRAGIC VIEW

I

Fritz Lang's American films start off as if they had no beginning, as if something had been decided on and launched inexorably, in our absence, and we were astonished witnesses to its final explosion. *In medias res*, the expression used in narrative theory to describe the entrance of the reader or spectator in fictions that are underway is, to all intents and purposes, insufficient and imprecise since the point here is not that actions are activated, but rather that the end is *imminent*. Thus, the furious pace, the climax, the intensity that the first Langian scenes often have. As if we were at the same time expelled from comprehending and plunged into the *maelstrom* of events. The content of these actions is, in addition, terminal: violent murders, accidental deaths, hopeless traumas and, as a result, their *staccato* pace has little to do with the gradual, calm intonations in the American films of the classical period. Some random examples illustrate such comments.

Rancho Notorious (1952) starts off as the harmonious finale of a classical film, with the kiss between a couple in love – an illusion that will barely put off the ephemeral nature of the farewell between these two young people. The lethal chain is immediately unleashed: some bank robbers enter the shop that

the young girl is looking after, they rape and kill her: "Nothing has been saved from her", the doctor chastely tells her premature widower. Incredulity becomes a rictus, a grimace of violence flashes across the needy lover's face, and from such a heartrending gesture the urge to wreak vengeance will arise, enough to string together the entire film around a tragic rage. *While the City sleeps* (1956) unravels its action before the generic: a disturbing young man climbs some stairs, delivers a package, unlocks the apartment where a beautiful woman lives... and waits; the young girl heads for the shower, but she is surprised by a noise and she turns round towards a camera impassively moving in her direction: a scream... and death. The whole narration stems from this gentle breeze.

The opening of *The Big Heat* (1953) interrogates the public with a revolver on a writing desk, suggesting an avalanche of questions and deductions; there will be no time to formulate them as a hand suddenly comes into view, the weapon is made ready and is pointed upwards; a thundering noise on the edge of our field of vision, a smoke cloud then a body plummets to the floor; in the end—the plane had already opened up—a woman stealthily goes down the stairs and walks, without the slightest worry, towards the dead body completely hiding the inert body; her gaze uncovers a card; she reads it, picks up the telephone and introduces herself as "Tom Duncan's widow". So many unknown factors, so much uncertainty, so much yearning for knowledge to enter into the fiction! *Moonfleet* (1955) suggests an idyllic spot in which a child figure evolves: suddenly, the child is petrified at a statue of Red Beard, with his bloodshot eyes; a powerful image that unleashes a traumatic setting: a hand dragging itself around like a spider, the terrified flight of the child, an abrupt interruption. The image now opens up in a hermetic, frozen composition: six faces in a state of ecstasies, eyes open powerfully lit up, looking at the camera... a child's nightmare! This suspension is to open up the story. *Cloak and Dagger* (1946) sets us in the dead of night, on the border in the South of France, towards the end of the Second World War; someone, in a clandestine manner, is spying under a bridge; in a modest café, some mysterious characters are making signs in an undecipherable code; it is impossible to be recognized in this labyrinth of glances and eloquent silences; thereupon, a pursuit, a coded telegraphic message about to be sent (a tireless term alluding to Langian starts), an unfinished sentence, a shooting and a death. This is the driving force behind the film.

Man Hunt (1941) was first shown in Germany shortly after the outbreak of the war: amid the impenetrable silence of the dense woodlands where the sun's rays can hardly penetrate, the camera follows the footsteps of someone who, stealthily, carries a sophisticated rifle; not a word is spoken. He takes up position on the ground and gets the telescopic sight ready, he carefully scans around and, all of a sudden, on a distant terrace, but magnified by the glass sight – Adolf Hitler comes into view. The man squeezes the trigger. Click. Nothing. An ironic greeting. Suddenly, he looks pensive and his body switches to automatic: he draws out a real bullet, loads it into the chamber and aims again, this time decisively, to change history, to invert its course, as if Lang's fiction had performative powers over the dramatic History of the West at war. Something gets in the way: what had been possible just a few seconds earlier will now be held over for ever. The film deals with this holding over. The casuistry could continue, albeit with no other limits than Lang's filmography.

Furiously paced, voracious, labyrinthine starts. It is as if the spectator were exiled from fiction prior to penetrating it, as if the producer or the image maker were denying him that paternal hand that often acts as a guide in Hollywood fictions. It is extremely odd since all these films were conceived and produced in the Hollywood environment and nobody was taken aback by them. Nonetheless, Lang did not have to wait for his North American career to prove himself to be so inclement: the two episodes of *Die Spinnen* (1919-1920), both parts of *Doktor Mabuse* (1921), *Spione* (1927-1928), *M* (1931), *Das Testament des Doktor Mabuse* (1932-33) start off in a very similar manner: with a collage of dramatic actions, violent crimes on the limits of credibility, inconceivable chaos, anxious waiting resolved in deaths... There is no let up among such examples. Suffice it to say that Lang, almost plenipotentiary, who had ruled in Weimar Germany, takes his bags to America with a jar of his essence; an essence whose appearance was lessened or concealed in various narrative structures, in other genres or spectacular customs. But a far cry from disappearing. It is a reiterative, oppressive, persistent world view and, in its masterful touches it is almost unmoveable.

II

The feeling that takes a grip on us at these narrative start ups is that they are severed at the root in terms of the stories that come after. That is not exactly

the case. On the contrary, the starts suddenly immerse us in a hallucinatory climate that builds up strong emotions, appealing to basic passions in its characters and, by extension, in the spectator; destructive, disproportionate passions. These will take root in fictional protagonists endowed with a hyperbolic power. They are not human beings, but rather demiurges arising from the *shock*, from such a convulsion.

Here we have an interesting point. The demiurges that Lang put into his German films were so in their own right, i.e., by principle and in principle. There was no genesis of Haghi in the same way as there was no genesis of Mabuse, even less so of the mythical heroes of the Nibelungs or of the lords of Metropolis: their origin is particular to that of myth (even of that inverted myth known as science fiction) and neither film nor story could narrate it. Conversely, in the United States, Lang understood something decisive for its mutation and for the continuance of the ancient: the vital importance given by North American culture, invested with the values of its Founder Fathers, by its mythology of nature, freedom and democracy, to common man, as extolled in their own particular fields, by Walt Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau. That "John Doe" almost appealed to by common consent in North American cinema, which Frank Capra framed in a more conservative epic and by Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz (in his *Native Land*, 1942) who gave it a more revolutionary slant. The hesitation over the script for the first of Lang's North American films (*Fury*, 1936) bears witness to this. *Fury* was, it should be made clear, a social film conceived in the convulsed days of the Depression and the political radicalization of the Popular Front occurring in North America in the mid thirties. For this reason, we should not overlook echoes, in his voice, of such personalities, disparate as they are, as James Agee, Walker Evans, John Steinbeck, but also Archibald MacLeish, John Dos Passos, Lilian Hellman, Dorothy Parker....

Fury is out and out American: it speaks of lynching, of laws and their legitimacy, of the rights of presumption of innocence, of the North American Constitution, of populism and corruption in the political class; no less treatment is given to the influence of the modern mass media, such as radio, the press, in forming public opinion. So in the first versions of the script, the protagonist (Joe Wilson) had been conceived as a lawyer. This was confused with a member of a gang of kidnappers and, in a shady climate of strike-breakers, deflated populism and the

rise of fascism, he was lynched by an anonymous mass of locals. The effectiveness of the film lies in the about-turn taken by the director, as he himself referred to it on several occasions: Wilson had to be a worker, a man in the street, a John Doe, rather than a conspicuous or socially relevant character. The connection with American myths was also to be optimum.

Nevertheless, this "conversion" of the Langian supermen into the man in the street, into that, in a manner of speaking, ductility and apparent accommodation, is only the appearance on which the condition of the extraordinary is perpetuated, thus highlighting its lack of moderation all the more. So in fact, Wilson, the bland worker, the man in the street, goes through a very American inferno, of unfair lynching, he sees how his flesh is singed in the burning bars of a prison set on fire in which he has been locked away, and he emerges from the ashes of his own death to orchestrate, protected by the shade, a sinister, fatal ordeal: a legal case against those who had lynched him, resorting to the intermediaries of his family and the ins and outs of penal justice. They are all to be agents of his designs; in actual fact, they will be of his anger, of his thirst for vengeance. Wilson, the man in the street, is thus to be transformed into the new Mabuse from his obscure room, connected by the sound of his radio, from the word imposed on his brothers, on his fiancée and, in a fatal progression, on the district attorney, on the witnesses and on the judge himself, he will plot a sham of a court case against his paradoxical murderers.

Rightly we say paradoxical murderers since nobody is a murderer if nobody has been murdered, a *corpus delicti*. And Wilson is not dead; the intention had not failed, just the consummation. But the paradox goes one step further as it also involves a self-annihilation: to consummate his vengeance, Wilson has to condemn himself to be perpetuated while being absent, to not reappearing ever again. As the holder of the suggestive stolen letter that Edgar Allen Poe had imagined in his famous story, the use of which annihilates power, if Wilson wreaks his vengeance, he also commits suicide, and so he will never again be able to inhabit the land of the living. A devastating circle of passions, in the setting of justice, the demiurge has no other option, unlike Haghi or Mabuse, than to hand over his fictional attributes to one who really has them by inalienable right; or in other terms, to become reintegrated as a simple character of fiction, as John Doe, to the fictional world in which he arose to improper categories. However it was, the crossing was not to be in vain.

III

Fury and the heart of the film, Joe Wilson, illustrate the contradictory fate of demiurges in Lang's American films: their flexibility and their persistence, the determination and mimicry, both tangled up in a ferocious dialectic, forcing the limits rather than attending to mediation. It is precisely this that points out to us a complex cosmic view: subtle for its minute observation of the environment, for acknowledging the environmental particularity to which it is transplanted, but nonetheless tenacious and imperturbable.

What is this world view? A view in which human beings, one among the rest, appear under the brilliance of a disproportionate power and are, at the end of the day, returned to the reality of their misery or inanity; a picture in which fate is imposed as being inescapable, much like a hallucinatory jolting, in the form of a nightmare, breaking down the balance that we assumed (although it was never presented), a passion whose taut nerve underpins the story up to his death... It is not difficult to notice, in all this panorama, a tragic universe: tragic irony (the nearer the demiurge imagines himself to be to the end of his misfortune, the closer is his final fall), a disastrous fate, radical negation of humour, determinism disguised under the appearance of a freedom of judgement and decision. Is this not how *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles began, with the plague taking over Thebes, although the tragic fault—*hamartia*—dated much further back in time? Was it not Seneca, at the same time, a tragediographer (a scenographer of passions) and a stoic philosopher (who studied them to dominate them as a "wise man") and on this apparent dislocation the existence of the two different identities was assumed for centuries?

Lang's films are, in my opinion, the closest expression to tragedy ever given by cinema. If in other cases, cinema has approached Greek tragedy in its subject matter (i.e., theatrically), as in the case of Pasolini, or even dealing with the forms of contemporary tragedy by other authors, in Lang, tragedy is a slime that is transported to modern societies despite its theme and characters. Human dreams, tension is deployed in a plot (that *mythos* that Aristotle defined so accurately), bristling with basic passions and, more importantly, giving the human being control over the helm of his life... if only briefly. Illusion lives on, and so too does nightmare. Never have the *peripeteia* (the change of the sign of the action, the passage from bliss to misfortune) or *anagnorisis* (the tragic recognition, of oneself, of the inanity of power over others) been so solidly incrustated on the screen.

Lang's last film to be made in the United States (*Beyond a reasonable doubt*, 1956) was a new reflection, almost in a loop tied in with the first film twenty years earlier, *Fury*. This film also dealt with the judicial system, with blame, crime, passion and how they are mocked by a clever criminal. It was not a film of that typically American genre "of court cases", often cultivated by foreigners. It was to no lesser extent a film on the mass media, in this case, television, the press and their relevance in North American public life. Similarities with *Fury* lead one to think about a claustrophobic testimony on American society, closed in on itself. Perhaps. But the differences are no less significant: the demiurge—Tom Garret—discovers a crime, analyzes it, leads himself to be blamed, judged and sentenced; alongside he tables the counter-evidence that demonstrates how all the proof pointing to him, one by one, had been artificially produced and, for that reason, are false. At the key moment, on the night before his execution, the string of counter-evidence has to come to light. But fate intervenes in a fatal manner by accidentally killing his companion and burning the photographs that bore witness to his innocence. Where is the suffering spectator to be found? Jumping in his or her seat, as Eisenstein would have it when writing the poetics of his *cinema-fist*, begging fate to intervene once again... to save his demiurge at whom, when all is said and done, the legitimate desire to demonstrate the irreversible errors of capital punishment was directed. And the spectator and the demiurge find someone, an agent, willing to battle it out for him. It is to be his fiancée, whom he had to leave when simulating the crime, it was no longer a farce, becoming extremely dramatic and final.

And the demiurge saves himself. He does this once he has gone through this terrible ordeal of his return to the universe of man, once he has paid for the injustice, which is a breeding ground for devastating fate. He does so... or is on the verge of doing so, since just at the end of the nightmare is it announced on the horizon (and with it, the term of fiction), we notice (a slip of the tongue is enough) that Garrett is the real criminal, that he has set up his play in the shade to be blamed, condemned and pardoned and, thus, not being able to be judged ever again for the same crime, as established in American penal law. An extremely sophisticated duplication; but more than that, reproducing itself to the infinite. Everything refers back to another scene: the evidence, certainly; the counter-evidence too ... but in the end, the real crime, the original scene, out of field, out of view and unknown. Lang's corrections to the script reveal his interest in sharing out the chains of know-how. Two columns separate "what the separator knows" and

what actually happens. And Garrett is condemned because the pardon is left unsigned, in other words, he is condemned, when all is said and done, by the very same inculpatory (forged) evidence that he concocted and that led the court to sentence him to the electric chair. Now, if the evidence were ironically false, the crime is, on the other hand, real.

This demonic, icy creation if ever there was one, has a certain peculiarity: the demiurge is inside (we see him act, we see him set the scene), and outside (his true setting is invisible). He plummets and fails to become integrated in a world of humans because his condition is that of a criminal: neither the condition of Professor Wanley in *The woman in the picture*, nor that of Joe Wilson nor of the lover in *Rancho Notorious* nor that of so many others were like that. For this reason, the initial scene where a convicted offender is led down death row to the electric chair to be executed (a scene personally dictated by Lang, varying the script at the last minute) entails something of a loop: it is the scene that is missing at the end, with Garret as the convicted offender and not as observer. Something has changed and something goes unscathed in terms of *Fury*.

Prophetic words sound out, words that, harking from the past threaten each of the futures that man has to live and that Greek wisdom raised to the stages of tragedy: "Let no one say happy until having reached the last of his days".

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