

Kampf um Würde am Rande der Nacht

The Battle for Dignity on the Edge of the Night

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*Whoever thought that the subject of the ongoing Greek crisis had been exhausted in recent years through countless films and documentaries, soon learned otherwise at this year's Berlinale. The epic documentary film by French-Canadian filmmaker Sylvain L'Espérance, *Combat au bout de la nuit (Fighting through the Night)*, which was shown in the section *Panorama Dokumente*, offers profound insights into the reality of the crisis in Greece with a thoroughness and depth that has never before been seen on the big screen.*

The opening scenes of the almost five-hour-long film are breathtaking. The red-tinged sea rises and falls menacingly while a female narrator speaks off camera: *'What is there, shining in the dark? / Is it the sun? / A man is in flames / A man lights up the night / Standing at the gate, he lights up the night / They splashed him with gas and set him on fire / A great fire has set the world ablaze.'* These lines are taken from the poem *Machi stin Akri tis Nych-tas* (Battle at the Edge of the Night), which was written by leftist poet Tassos Livaditis in the early 1950s during his imprisonment on the island Makronisos. It not only lent the film its title but, along with other quotes, for instance, from Aris Alexandrou and Dimitris Alexakis, also sets the tone of the documentary. The night is a metaphor for the crisis and resulting depression that has affected broad swathes of the Greek populace, as well as the desperation of thousands upon thousands of migrants and refugees that have been stranded in Greece on their journey to Europe.

Sailor Spyros Keeps on Dreaming

Sylvain L'Espérance has been making documentary films for almost 30 years, primarily in West Africa. At some point he decided to follow the African refugees on their journey to

Europe, to Italy, Spain, and, last but not least, Greece, and just like them was suddenly confronted with the impact of the euro crisis and neoliberal austerity policies, with unemployment and the utter lack of prospects, with desperation, hate, and racism. Yet, wherever the threat of impoverishment and debasement takes hold, resistance begins to form, a sense of solidarity emerges, and, there, at the edge of the night, a battle for dignity breaks out. Between 2014 and 2016, L'Espérance frequently visited the marginalized sectors of society in the crisis-ridden country and simply pointed his camera at what he saw, following in the tradition of Direct Cinema, taking his camera into the night, but also shining a spotlight on the protestors who were the victims of the crisis. Among the film's protagonists are the 595 cleaners who were let go from the Ministry of Finance and occupied its entrance for 300 days. The doctors and activists who have voluntarily set up a network of community clinics in order to provide at least a modicum of medical care to those who are no longer covered by the state healthcare system. The unemployed shipyard workers from Perama, who discuss the prospects of the resistance movement, the limits of parliamentarianism, and the pervasive growth of fascism throughout the country. Roma, who are forced to watch as their decades-old settlements are torn down by bulldozers. The homeless, such as the sailor Spyros, who has lost everything and yet still dreams of the sea. And of course the migrants and refugees with various backgrounds and situations: young Afghans hiding from the police in derelict buildings. A political refugee from Sudan who is grateful to Greece for granting him asylum despite the hardship he still faces every day. A young man from Niger, who was a herdsman back home but in Athens has to rummage through the rubbish to find objects that he can sell. And, finally, in the third part of the film, those who crossed the sea and arrived on the Greek islands only to find themselves part of the new underclass.

Courage in Desperate Times

By doing so, L'Espérance gives a voice and a face to all those who would otherwise remain unheard and unseen. He listens to them attentively, lets them tell their stories without interrupting. A stark contrast incidentally to those in the key political control centers, be it the Athens parliament, Brussels, Berlin, or Paris, who are presented in the film as faceless technocrats, underlined for example by an excerpt from author Dimitris Alexakis that refers to

the specters of power. L'Espérance makes no pretense of whose side he is on. It is thus even more remarkable that the organizers of the Berlinale decided to include the film in its official program – especially at a time when Greece is barely mentioned in the media. Conversely, according to the director, the film was rejected by the documentary film festival that is due to start in ten days in Thessaloniki. Perhaps they really believed that the Greek crisis as a subject of film had been fully exhausted. *Combat au bout de la nuit*, a brilliant, poetic epic on the courage of people in desperate situations, proves otherwise.