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Foreword by Piero Spila:

Creative disobedience

One day many years ago, Charles Dickens sat in an elegant coffee shop in London and, as if hypnotized, he kept staring at the glass door: MOOR EEFFOC (Coffee Room, read from the street). In a biography dedicated to this great English writer, G. K. Chesterton states that that episode would “bewitch” and partly condition Dickens’ literary destiny. The reality that he believed to represent with so much accuracy, in the end could also be seen backwards, but distorted. It’s a more or less plausible anecdote that, however, seems to allude to the “leaps forward” made by art and its protagonists. The rule-breaking of the avant-garde, scandals and challenges. The paint dripping on Pollock’s canvases, Schoenberg’s polytonal dodecaphony and, to stay in the world of cinema, the all-out war against the “*cinéma de papa*” by the nouvelle vague or the indomitable non-reconciliation of authors like Straub-Huillet. On the one hand, violent, unyielding transgression, on the other, a way of contradicting a simple habit, which risks becoming routine.

Having made the necessary considerations, this book by Andrés Rafael Zabala applies the principle of disobedience to the language of cinema, offers some examples and organizes almost a stock hypothesis, starting from the mysteries of optics experimented by the Lumière brothers and the surrealist games of Man Ray and Duchamp to get, with the shake-ups by Bunuel, Godard, Kubrick and many others, to the open and fortunately still unexplored possibilities of new technology.

It is a useful and even fun book, because it is built around a contradiction: he talks about linguistic disobedience, describes and legitimizes everything that is “out of the ordinary”, but he never forgets the formal rules from which film starts, the shared basis of a cinematographic grammar without which nothing would be possible. Just as any excellent teacher, Zabala knows that it is possible to transgress only by knowing and practicing what already exists, and

the more this is accepted as valid and essential, the more its being overcome will become valuable.

The consequence is that in the history of cinema the most formidable innovators have always been those who knew the rules best: Jean Renoir was a revolutionary just like Robert Bresson, who by his sheer will continued to give more importance to the effects than the causes (*A Man Escaped*, *The Devil Probably*), or like David Lynch who inside the rules of the noir genre enjoys subverting every narrative (*Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*).

It is not by chance that in this book, the great innovations introduced by the avant-garde as well as the small challenges faced in the daily work on set or with the editing bench are remembered. The cameraman who in turning off some projectors discovers the dignity of natural light or the editor who in the editing booth, leaving extra frames that any colleague would have cut, gives the sequence an unexpected epic feel.

A true artist is always the first to recognize when the language with which he/she expresses him/herself lies or has become insufficient. And it is exactly this that Zabala's book speaks of, of those authors who have decided to be disobedient not out of ambition or to impose their power a little more, but because they know that what they have to say cannot be said otherwise. Alfred Hitchcock, in *Rope* (chap. 4), decides for the first and last time to tell the story of one of his films with long takes, and does it not to denounce the theatrical nature of the script or the claustrophobia of the staging, but admirably to emphasize the loneliness and villainy of the characters, the moral checkmate of a lesson poorly understood and betrayed. And Akira Kurosawa, in *Rashomon* (chap. 3.5), tells the story of a rape by multiplying the versions and points of view not to contradict reality, but on the contrary to enhance it with its elusiveness. And this is how Jean-Luc Godard, with *A bout de souffle* (chap. 7.2), and Stanley Kubrick with *Dr. Strangelove* (chap. 6.2) disobey the rules.

Andrés Rafael Zabala recounts all this with didactic happiness, speaking of the golden ratio with regard to the composition of the frame, of Aristotelian units and how these rules are broken with regard to the structure of the story, of the extraordinary "sound

disobediences” by Charles Chaplin and structural disobedience by Orson Welles. To explain the “180° rule” and the scandal of “crossing the axis”, he uses *Gilda* by Charles Vidor (chap. 5.2) and then *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* by Sergio Leone (chap. 5.3) but in doing so, he does not limit himself to describing the technical aspect of the question but suggests the extraordinary expressive possibilities that derive from it. Because disobedience is never definitive and never an end in itself, it serves instead to open doors, to give light to dark corners, and to try to go beyond. It’s a starting point, never a finishing point. And this is true both for those who write cinematography lesson books, and those who teach cinema or patiently accept to learn about it.

I happened to meet Andrés a long time ago, when he was a student, and again, years later, as an cameraman and director, and finally as a cinema teacher. I have always admired in him his curiosity and desire for knowledge, his pleasure in doing but above all to question himself every time, knowing that learning and experimentation are inexhaustible sources of knowledge. Then there is his passion for cinema and desire to better exercise its language.

Speaking of disobedience and transgressions, I am reminded of Mark Rothko, the great “painter of soul and light”, who invented colors to paint not what was there (and what he already knew) but what was still unknown. In a cinema now living in the era of the great digital revolution (an added code more powerful than sound and color), the question to be asked is no longer that of André Bazin, *qu’est ce que le cinéma*, but that of those who want to continue to escape towards the future, to imagine the cinema that will be.

Piero Spila

Piero Spila is Vice President of the National Union of Italian Film Critics (SNCCI) and director of the magazine “Cinecritica”. He has been a critic and essayist since the late sixties, collaborating in various publications. He is the author and curator of cinema volumes and monographs, in particular on Cecil DeMille (Di Giacomo Editore, 1985), Pier Paolo Pasolini (Gremese, 1999/2015), Luigi Magni (Eri-Rai, 2000), Straub-Huillet (Bulzoni, 2001), Gian Maria Volonté (Fandango, 2005 - Assisi Prize for the best film book), Bernardo Bertolucci (Garzanti, 2010/ Editions du Seuil, 2014). A writer and screenwriter, he teaches language and film history, collaborating with Italian and foreign universities.

INTRODUCTION

*“Transgression is not the denial of the prohibition, but its overcoming and completion (...) There exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed”*¹

Georges Bataille

In the history of art, long before that of cinema, many artists broke the, more or less definitive, rules created by their famous predecessors and their academies, motivated by their religious beliefs, by private clients or the State.

“Disobedient Directors” is an essay on how some directors, who by breaking the *180-degree rule* and several other *conventions or continuity solutions*, have managed to create memorable scenes and, sometimes, real masterpieces.

Other directors, however, have gone against the classical structures of the script, whose dramatic roots were founded in the *Three-Act Restorative Structure*.

Disobedience to the rules has always been a dangerous idea, but it has often represented the possibility of acting freely and independently for those who have responsibly decided to go further, regardless of whether it is a traffic offence, a lack of politeness in social situations or dressing in a different way to what the morality police dictates.

The *disobedient directors* I will deal with will not necessarily be only those independent filmmakers who, being outside the market logic of the film industry, have the good fortune to be able to operate in freedom and autonomy of expression, but I will also dwell on examples of directors of classical cinema, of great historical cinema, of arthouse cinema and of so-called *genre cinema*.

This is first of all to demonstrate how, in all these cinematic styles, *disobeying* certain rules, if you are able to do it, can create something very interesting. Moreover, this transversal approach is dictated

1 Bataille, G, “L’erotismo” (Milan, Oscar Mondadori, 1976), p. 71.

by the conviction that there no longer exist - if there ever existed - precise distinctions between what is an arthouse film and what is instead a genre film. In fact, I believe that, sometimes, there can be more creativity in a “commercial” film than in a “arthouse” one, which is perhaps just plagiarizing a thousand other *so-called* arthouse films. Cinema distinguishes itself between good and not-so-good films, and the best filter for distinguishing one from the other is neither festivals nor box office receipts, but the story being told. I will not look at filmmakers who have been *disobedient* in the content of their films (e.g. those who have denounced political situations but whose cinematography has been conventional). I prefer to focus on the cinematic language, beyond the moral message that the film may or may not convey. However, it will be difficult not to notice that the content and the form in which the films I will be looking at have been shot are actually strongly linked. These *disobedient* filmmakers in fact have very clear positions on social and political criticism, although we will see later that many of them want to disobey the rules of cinema to tell stories not only related to the social reality of their present, but to universal realities. However, credit must be given to all those who through cinema denounce dictators and oppressors even at the cost of their own lives.

Cinema is a particular art form because, in its main characteristic, that of being able to represent space and time, it is constantly confronted with other art forms. In the stories it tells, it is confronted both with the narrative and with dramaturgy, both at the base of each script. In framing, on the other hand, it confronts both the problems of painting and photography; in sound design, it confronts sounds and music; in set design, it confronts architecture, but not only that, also the outdoor environments depicted in the film; cinema confronts fashion through costumes, which take on a major importance in the creation of the characters proposed by the film; and it confronts the hair and makeup whenever the camera frames the characters in the film.

The director, as artistic coordinator of all departments (production, direction, direction of photography, set design, sound, costume, hair and makeup) will have to direct each of the heads of department to work in a single direction to make the film cohesive and achieve

that stylistic unity that characterizes all the great masterpieces of the history of cinema.

The director, therefore, can override rules or conventions of *different* natures, since the film is confronted with different issues, which implies that his *disobedience* can concern even just one of the departments. For example, there could be a film in which the screenplay, the set design, and the photography are quite conventional, but the sound has been treated in an anomalous way; or a film in which the sound design is structured in a classical way, but the scenery has surreal elements.

We will see, therefore, how many of the directors mentioned have circumscribed their *disobedience* to avoid compromising the audience's understanding of the film.

We will also try to trace the differences between *disobedient* choices made and *original ideas* had by the same directors, ideas that have not broken any rule or convention of cinematographic art.