

## Porthos' hesitation

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**BOU, Núria and PÉREZ, Xavier. *El tiempo del héroe. Épica y masculinidad en el cine de Hollywood*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2000.**

In *Vivre sa Vie* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1962) the philosopher Brice Parain tells the following story: “Porthos, tall, strong, a bit rough, hadn’t thought once in his whole life (...) Then, one day, he has to put a bomb in the underground, to blow it up. He does it, he places the bomb, lights the fuse and runs away, naturally. And while he’s running he suddenly starts to think\_ What’s he thinking about? He’s wondering how he can put one foot in front of the other. That’s occurred to you too, no doubt? Then he stops\_ running, walking; he can’t, he can’t go any further\_ The bomb goes off, the tunnel falls on top of him. He holds it up with his shoulders, he’s strong enough\_ But in the end, after a day, two days, I don’t know, he’s squashed, he dies. In short, the first time he thought, he died.” That metaphorical tale of the transformation of the mythical hero into a thoughtful, fallible man —linked to the transition from myth to *logos*— may serve to illustrate or summarise the subject of the essay by Núria Bou and Xavier Pérez *El tiempo del héroe. Épica y masculinidad en el cine* (The time of the hero. Epic and masculinity in the cinema): the different relations the Hollywood hero has had with his temporal condition, from the invulnerable agility of the acrobatic hero in perpetual motion —as in the films of Douglas Fairbanks— to the silent, static rituals of the twilight subject who is the protagonist of the latest echo of epic cinema, when the hero has frozen in an attitude —whether melancholy, perplexity, uncertainty or anxiety— generated by acceptance of the ephemeral nature of existence. Bou and Pérez’s main achievement has been to study the formal value of those attitudes, the gestures and tones, the gazes and silences, the feelings expressed or veiled, locating them in both the serious and the light passages, in what the characters do not say and do not do as well as what they do. They avoid taking refuge in a —definitely debatable— analysis of the global lines of content and the most obvious stylistic resources, a critical method which has sewn up the classical and modern periods of cinema. To return to the passage about Porthos, we might say that Bou and Pérez have been concerned to observe the “way” in which he stopped running rather than the fact that he did so.

Although these lines are the fruit of a reading or meditation with no academic substance, no critical apparatus, whose only wish is to issue an invitation to the book or provide a personal footnote, it seems appropriate to briefly mark out the scope of the critical operation described. In the texts written in the last twenty years, there have been few instances of a deep determination to “rethink” the history of the cinema. Criticism of films or film-makers has undergone a slow process of solidification, whose effects we have not yet been able to assess. I am afraid that one of the consequences of using the same words to talk about Eisenstein’s “montage of attractions”, Welles’ “depth of field” or Bresson’s “Jansenism”, while forgetting to look for new revealing aspects of their films, has been to embalm the canonic directors. That in turn has given rise to the confusion and clumsiness with which the film-makers emerging from the universities have worked, simply imitating the masters. The educational value of a book as didactic as *El tiempo del héroe* lies in its capacity to take a horizontal look which enriches the study and creation of cinematic forms, thus freed from their watertight compartments. This is not a study of forms in the style of Wölfflin, but an approach to the less strident or striking signs, the acts which are hinted at or not seen, and the materials that make up the images, in a gentle formalism which Bordwell would appreciate, even if it were done less systematically and more impressionistically. This gaze enables us to refine the chronological and aesthetic separation and look for ramifications, echoes, rhymes, meeting points or symmetries that pervade the movements of the cinema, the poetic strata that have still to be discovered. At this point we should say that the recurrent motifs that pervade the text indirectly or beneath the surface are the “stuff of dreams” which, according to Prospero, are life itself: tears, man’s place in the desert or at sea, looking at the father or the teacher, emotional healing, blood wounds, cigarette smoke, the tone of words, the cadence of songs, silences, shadows. Any one of those motifs enables us to sketch a chain of associations: hence the offer of marriage made by the officer played by Gary Cooper in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* to a spectral shadow thrown onto the wall of a barracks is picked up in *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* by the shadow of Olivia, the niece of the widowed Major Allshard, “cast silently onto the gravestone of Captain Brittles’ dead wife so that, when he turns his head and sees the girl (a radiant young “double” of the wife he is remembering) she, with tears in her eyes, offers him a simple basket with beautiful cyclamens” (p. 167).

The book refers to the theories of Gilbert Durand (1), ideas which take on new tones when applied to film, and is enriched by a hermeneutic cinematic tradition which let in some light in its time and which even today can be read and conceived as a creative attitude. The traditional models —and this should apply to the philosophical essay which despises tradition or the film and art critics who do not pursue, or even look down on, any knowledge of the classics— are always regenerative if the eye that looks at them is attentive and sensitive. That is why Bou and Pérez use the “surplus” of a critical legacy which does not seem stagnant here, a latent legacy —and, as we have seen, not only a cinematic one: Bachelard’s essays are also important pieces in the scaffolding— modulating an analysis which is pioneering when it deals with recent films which, examined from that horizontal line or panoramic perspective, take on unexpected proportions. Pertinent reflections on the situation of the cinema in the

framework of the Audiovisual can also be detected in the commentaries, along the lines of Thierry Jousse's words about the disappearance of Bazin's "window open to the world" and its substitution by "generalised simulation", which link up with the hero's progress in his reversible passage from lightness to seriousness.

As a limitation or lack in the study, one misses a consideration of the technical framework in the constitution and evolution of film language, especially in the chapter about the acrobatic hero, when the conditioning factors that influenced decisions about *mise en scène* are barely assessed, and in the sections dealing with films that use "virtual images". I have no wish here to find fault with people who were —and still are — my teachers, still less since I am aware that they know more about those questions than I do (on page 26 they write that the new epic "was adapted to the kinetic possibilities of the new invention"), just as they have made a scientific study of *El tragaluz del infinito* (The skylight of the infinite) and written other essays on film genealogy, but I think it would have been appropriate to pay attention to the rigidity of the static shots animated by the internal movement of the actors, bearing in mind the heavy cameras that were used at the time, which were difficult to move, or to a still incipient montage that promoted relations inside the shots in order to talk about "the morality of a epoch which is also the morality of an epic" (p. 20) and the heroes' prowess in the frames. Other reservations have to do with questions of detail (for example, the classification of certain films; to my way of thinking, it is difficult to fit *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* into the "terminal group" films), which would be slow and tiresome. But most of all, the essay leaves open paths which I hope the authors will follow up in the years to come, and other analysts along with them. It also gives us valuable suggestions which leave a trace we perceive when, after seeing some of the films they comment on again or seeing them for the first time, we discover that they have already been pervaded by this new standpoint for interpretation. Moreover, we can complete or lengthen some of the paragraphs of the book. Thus, starting from the beautiful essay on *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, I would like to study the film from the idea of "irreversible processes", the scientific theories that situate man's perspective in a universe which is growing cold and becoming more complex, and an aesthetic analysis of the vastness of space in conflict with human beings' intimate awareness. After reading the book for a second time, I filled four pages with notes of that kind (2).

Lastly, elsewhere I have glossed the aesthetic quality of the essay, the smooth tapestry of words that characterises the text. I wrote that in the words of the book I could see the texture of film, the passage of time. I failed to say that such an effect may be due to the *écriture en abyme* that goes to make it up; phrases that slip swiftly towards what appears to be an abyss, stopping at the last moment or remaining suspended. Thanks to that, in this note I have been able to collect some of the ideas sparked by a "critical invention".

## Notes:

(1) Durand, Gilbert. *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire. Introduction à*

*l'archétypologie générale*. Paris: Bordas, 1970. A close reading of Durand's work has enabled the authors to unearth a line of analysis which is most enriching and useful for carrying out hermeneutic studies of film images. Moreover, the line is scarcely explored today and may lead to some most interesting glosses in the future.

(2) After writing this text, I saw M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable*, which confirmed how relevant and up-to-date Bou and Pérez's essay is. The film (which incidentally I think is a much better film than the director's previous one, *The Sixth Sense*) is a beautiful meditation on the precarious situation of the hero in contemporary fiction, at a time when the enemy is supposed to be invisible or faceless: the giant corporations, media conglomerates, etc. In particular it is about the need to return to him —“to have faith again”— through a feeling which is rare in the cinema today: fragility, of both hero and antihero. Shyamalan is a director who handles the subject matter of childhood —ghosts, heroes— and thus acknowledges the value of doubt, of the story that could come apart in our hands without the assistance of our ingenuity or enthusiasm. Moreover, he takes up Hitchcock's axiom that the more attractive the “villain” the better the film. In order to return to the hero, Shyamalan appears to be telling us, we have to start from degree zero of fragility through the antihero, in other words, to reach the most vulnerable spot of the human condition.

