

ZWEI JAHRE KRISE

TWO YEARS OF CRISIS: FIGHTING THROUGH THE NIGHT

Kathrin Häger | 18.02.2017

A two-year crisis in Greece and its implications for society – a five-hour mammoth project by Canadian Sylvain L'Espérance in the Panorama section of the Berlinale.

When Sylvain L'Espérance turned his camera towards the red glow of the Aegean Sea and traced the illuminated houses of Patras in order to capture the first night-time impressions for *Combat au bout de la nuit* (Fighting through the Night), Greece had long been ignored by the cameras of the world media. In 2014, the Canadian director travelled through a land that had been shaken by (financial) crises and began shooting a film that is now celebrating its premiere in the Panorama section of the Berlinale, just as Greece is once again coming under the spotlight. For almost five hours, L'Espérance's documentary links individual destinies that at first glance seem to have nothing to do with each other and yet have a tentative connection. The combat, the fight that is taking place here in the dark night of turbocapitalism is one that occurs at the expense of the weakest: those who fall through the cracks of the system, be they entire countries or individuals fleeing the poorest countries of the world. The film alternates between different personal stories from a country that has almost been broken by the austerity measures imposed by the Troika – divided into three chapters, the mammoth project loses track of some of these (groups of) people, while others appear time and again.

One example is the cleaning staff, occupying the entrance to the Department of Finance after losing their jobs, while more and more passersby join in their cause: they meet with encouragement, and sing together. The scenes from the center of Athens are dominated by nervous breakdowns and people on the verge of physical collapse but also explosive attacks initiated by activists against the police who hide behind their shields and helmets. The city is also home to a young herdsman from Niger who rummages through the bins to find things that he can sell for a few euros at a night-time flea market. In another corner of Athens, children and burning rubbish bins are pushed onto the street to protest the demolition of a Roma camp. The crisis hits the poorest of the poor particularly hard; the camera lingers on their faces repeatedly while a voiceover tells us their stories. For some of the refugees, arriving in poverty-stricken Greece has been like jumping from the frying pan into the fire, where there is no way forward but also no going back. The third chapter is also dedicated to the people arriving on the coast of Samos by the minute in overcrowded dinghies before being packed onto huge ferries. Attempts to control the chaos, which L'Espérance captures with little dialogue, while verses by Greek poets are read off camera, gently superimposing the images.

In *Combat au bout de la nuit*, L'Espérance's main priority is to highlight the consequences of the problems that plague Greece, not their cause. Who exactly is to blame for the austerity is rarely mentioned. Once, the film listens in on a group of Greek shipyard workers at their local as they analyze the crisis, touching on many different topics: complaints about foreign companies and politicians, concern over the growing support for the fascists of Golden Dawn, even the self-critical realization that it was, above all, the Greek oligarchy that drove the land into crisis, the effects of which can now be seen everywhere. L'Espérance's camera frequently returns to the closed shop fronts; graffiti and 'For Rent' signs dominate entire street blocks.

Statistics on the numbers of people without health insurance and of salaries still unpaid only fuel the fear that, according to Alexandra Pavlou, the Greek people have to overcome in order to bring about what the country really needs: a total turnaround.

It is at this moment that L'Espérance's film is in danger of losing itself, as the director blindly takes up the stance of his main Greek protagonist, activist Alexandra Pavlou, who believes that her voluntary work in a community clinic should be primarily regarded as a political statement. Accordingly, the 'oxi', the resounding 'no' with which the Greek populace responded to the government's proposals for reform, was 'betrayed' when the 'no' was changed by Tsipras after the referendum to a 'yes' to what were purportedly unavoidable reform policies. That it was the Greeks themselves who profited for decades from the country's disastrous tax and pension plans is largely ignored by the Canadian director. While the film can certainly be criticized for this omission, the director manages to get around it, too, simply because the reasons for the crisis are not discussed in the film at all. Still, with the perspective of an outsider, Sylvain L'Espérance spans an impressive arch, covering two years of the crisis, which he attempts to capture through magnificent images rather than facts. Only towards the end does he allow a somewhat moralistic overtone to creep in that intentionally corroborates a suspicion voiced earlier in the film by one of the shipyard workers: 'If voting really could bring about any change, it would be abolished.'