

Didn't Something Happen There?

The Power and Face of the Masses: An epic documentary film about social unrest in Greece and a somewhat more subdued chronicle of Podemos (Panorama)

By Grit Lemke

Cinema is always political but there are actually two works in the Panorama section of this year's Berlinale that focus directly on real political movements. If anyone is worried that a subject like this would be tackled in German film, then don't worry, it isn't – it has taken a Canadian to turn our gaze to Greece (oh yes, remember: didn't something happen there?). And the way in which Sylvain L'Espérance does so is breathtaking in large stretches of the five (overall long) hours of *Fighting through the Night*.

The tone of the film is set by quotes from the works of Greek authors, such as Yannis Ritsos, and the eponymous poem written by Tassos Livaditis while he was imprisoned on the island of Makronisos during the dictatorship: "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 huge fire already sets, The world ablaze." It is a voyage through the night and the night is on fire.

Between 2014 and 2016, the filmmaker spent time on the peripheries of Greek society, with those who have reached rock bottom. And, yet, still have much to lose. Because, as the film makes very clear, it is now about nothing less than their dignity. When that is in jeopardy, rebellion is not far away. The result is this great epic about the courage of desperate people: the cleaners who lost their jobs to cutbacks and occupied the entrance to the Department of Finance for 300 days. The doctors and activists who set up a network of unofficial clinics, working on a voluntary basis to look after those who no longer have access to healthcare since the public system collapsed. The unemployed dock workers, who intelligently discuss the pervasive growth of fascism in the country. The members of the Roma community, who had built a settlement and lived in peace until their houses were destroyed by bulldozers serving the (likewise flourishing) property market. The people living on the streets, such as the erstwhile sailor, who continues to dream of the sea even though he has lost everything. Migrants in different but always miserable situations: young Afghans, who hide from the police in derelict buildings. A man from Africa, who was a herdsman back home and now collects old clothes from the rubbish bins of Athens so that he can sell them. A man who fled his country because of political persecution. And, in the third part of the film, all those who arrive by sea only to become the new underclass.

L'Espérance resurrects what was once a distinguishing feature of documentaries: he gives a voice to those who do not have one. He sees them. He lets them tell their stories without interruption, without editing. The length of the film is perhaps justified for that reason but, unfortunately, may still be a deterrent to all but the most dedicated film buffs and will make its distribution in cinemas more difficult than it already is for documentaries. It is unlikely to reach the cleaning woman or the dock worker, which is a great pity then it is precisely they whom the film allows to stand out from the masses. Although it simultaneously gives the latter a human face, too – in incredibly stirring scenes, when the crowds gather on the streets and, above all, when they break into song. As they sing together, a sense of power is unleashed that is allowed to unfold throughout the film and gives us an idea of why it is somehow more difficult to start a revolution in Germany.

In Spain, the solidarity of the masses enabled the meteoric rise of Podemos. Film director Fernando León de Aranoa followed the head of the left-wing party Pablo Iglesias and his team for over a year. When a film is promoted as being 'up close' and offering a 'glimpse behind the scenes' based on 500 hours of filmed material, caution is generally advised. *Politics – An Instruction Manual* has emerged as a decent chronicle of events, which does not gloss over the infighting and struggles over the direction of the party, but neither does it come close to the poetic force of L'Espérance. The images are too random and the dialogue too formal. An interesting film nonetheless that raises the serious question as to why here in Germany we have allowed the [right-wing] AfD to be the only political party offering an alternative for the country. At any rate, it is definitely more interesting than the usual self-satisfied relationship nonsense that otherwise fills the screens – so, go to the cinema and join the revolution, comrades!