

Down to the Grassroots

Documentary films in Forum and Panorama

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Documentary is a political medium. At least, it has the potential to be so. And tapping this potential is a long-standing tradition at the Berlinale.

Combat au bout de la nuit (Fighting Through the Night) in the Panorama section, for example, a four-and-a-half-hour film by Canadian Sylvain L'Espérance, hones in on the ongoing misery in Greece that receives barely any coverage in the international press today, while the political pages of the mainstream media are filled with other, harsher commentaries on the likes of Trump, Brexit, and Le Pen.

The film introduces people who have lost their homes; people who are working on a voluntary basis (and with international support) in an attempt to provide the citizens of Greece with services that are no longer guaranteed by the state: healthcare and medicine that even the unemployed can afford, for example. People who are protesting at job cuts and the policy of austerity that is choking the very life out of the country, because the sense of solidarity within the EU is not (yet) strong enough to facilitate an institutionalized redistribution of finances between the states. And people who have crossed the Mediterranean in an attempt to improve their living conditions but instead have become stranded in the midst of the Greek crisis.

Or, another film about a political grassroots movement from Spain, *Política, manual de instrucciones* (Politics, an Instruction Manual) by Fernando León de Aranoa, also screened in the Panorama section. Two well-crafted, densely packed hours. Where *Combat* focuses on breadth and drives its point home by highlighting the extent of the crisis through sheer quantity, relating case study after case study, *Política* is its aesthetic opposite: succinct, to the point, not a single image is superfluous. A political film that does not explore the reasons for the resistance on the streets but focuses on the genesis of Podemos as an expression of this resistance channeled through a political party. Simultaneously, it is a film about the unstoppable rise of Pablo Iglesias and his cohorts trained in political psychology: cynical, contemporary, revealing, and sobering.

The subtitle does not lie – this film is a guide on 'how to create a political movement and become the third-largest party in parliament.' They know how to deal with the media, these young men we see practicing catchphrases for speeches they are about to give before jeering crowds. They act in front of the camera or philosophize about politics: about the significance of interpretative authority, for instance, as whoever can control the narrative and stake out their territory in the minefield of politics has already won half the battle. And about the traditional left-wing parties who underestimated the power of talk shows, about their own TV appearances that backfired (and why), and about parallels to the liberation movements in Latin America, which were seemingly rather overestimated.

The camera follows the tactical maneuvering that accompanies the struggle over the direction the party should take, ultimately forcing the losers to take a backseat in the fourth row. It shows a goal-oriented pragmatism and unbridled personal ambition that can at times be unnerving.

They want to win and if possible on their own, certainly never content to merely remain in the background as the personified guilty conscience of the established parties. In this fashion, those who hoped to further align the structure of the party with grassroots democracy have been backed into a corner; the new leftists believe that strong leadership is the better solution. They quote Marx, these overly analytical, extremely well-read, and hyper-articulate young politicians, who believe that they can reach for the stars. In the end, they actually do achieve decent results in the elections of December 2015 (even if not enough for a government majority), it nonetheless sparks new hope for the future.

Hope for the future is something that the residents of Chiatura have not yet given up entirely either, even though the signs of the times are against them. *Mzis qalaqi* (City of the Sun), a film from the Forum section by Rati Oneli that was financed with European and US support, is a portrait of a ghost town. In beautiful, expansive, serene images, carefully framed (and perhaps a little bit staged?), Rati Oneli shows the Georgian mining town surrounded by misty valleys and forests whose manganese mines have been exhausted and whose prefabs are now being torn down. A few miners continue to work here in an increasingly unsafe and rickety mine. A music teacher has stayed on in order to earn money from old metal salvaged from obsolete industrial sites to support his family, who have long since moved to a different location. And two young runners, both under 18, who continue to train regularly although they barely have enough to eat.

The title is a reference to Tommaso Campanella's 'City of the Sun', and it is he who also has the last word in the film – although it is doubtful that Campanella's elegantly formulated passage on poverty that enriches us by saving us from becoming slaves to our circumstances would really find the universal support of the residents of Chiatura. Here and there, people can still be found dancing and drinking in the town but already the ghosts outnumber those that are still alive. They raise a glass to the dead who lost their lives in the mines, and persevere.