

Flight into Poetry: Sylvain L'Espérance's *Combat au bout de la nuit* (Panorama)

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In his documentary, the Canadian filmmaker **Sylvain L'Espérance** dedicates five whole hours to the crisis in Greece. No European director has ever realized such an ambitious project. One must immediately regret this in several respects. Because this profound crisis has led not only the Greek commonwealth, its economy, its politics, and its society to the precipice of collapse, but also the European Union. It is therefore almost disgraceful that European documentary film has largely been as little interested in Greece as the media, which concerns itself with the country only at the times it is immediately faced with insolvency or when there is no other crisis currently at hand.



At the beginning of his documentary, Sylvain L'Espérance dramatizes the impenetrable **switchboards of politics**, the Parliament in Athens and the European Commission in Brussels. In a polyglot hubbub of voices, economic data, financial decisions, and policy procedures are negotiated. No one can make sense of what these faceless technocrats are negotiating, L'Espérance

tells us, and then cuts to the Greeks on the other hand, who are experiencing the social collapse of their country, suffering, and are trying to find ways to hold it off. He shows us social activists from the Athens district of Exarchia taking care of the homeless, shipyard workers rebelling against the oligarchy of the ship owners and collectively singing old battle songs by Mikis Theodorakis, refugees from West Africa carrying around their entire lives in a plastic bag and selling at the market all that they can fish from Athenians' garbage bins. A young shepherd from Niger who, as a boy, moved with his flock throughout the entire Sahel region says, entirely without bitterness, "life holds many lessons for people."

He recounts with particular tenderness the **struggle of 595 cleaning women** from the Ministry of Finance whose enterprising boss wanted to put them out on the street. For more than half a year, they demonstrated in front of his office every day with a power and a temperament that would be unthinkable in other parts of Europe, and not just north of the Alps. At their best organized demonstrations, they chant "history begins with civil disobedience."

The physicians from a social clinic financed solely by donations are also very interesting. A neurologist reports that in his state hospital, where he is actually employed, there are only ten doctors remaining, and even when there were forty-five of them, they were still understaffed. But they know it is not poverty that is tearing apart the system, but dysfunctionality. The clinics are teeming with patients who are treated with psychotropic drugs at high prices although absolutely nothing is wrong with them. They are just having trouble sleeping.

In his best moments, L'Espérance conveys through his "battle through the night" an actual sense of how existential the plight of people in Greece is and how desperate and hopeless their situation. He allows those who are left out a chance to speak, which is worthy and moving but not always an advantage when one is hoping for deeper insight. Only rarely do we hear from those who, like the doctors at the social clinic, can draw on real or recent experience. At no point do we learn what has changed over the last seven or eight years.

Much remains at the level of rhetoric in the film. There are accusations and laments, romantic images of the workers' struggle, and revolutionary

poetry. L'Espérance makes recourse to the old poets of resistance, **Iakovos Kambanellis** and **Tassos Livaditis**, who still enjoy widespread popularity in Greece. However, the poets, theater directors, and intellectuals of today must also have something to say. After almost ten years of the crisis in Greece, and after Alexis Tsipras' dramatic policy shifts, the refugee crisis, the encroachment of the specters of populism across Europe, and Brexit, L'Espérance flees from this complex situation of conflict into poetry. Europeans should understand the film as an invitation to confront Greek realities.

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