EVEN THE RAIN: WHAT KIND OF LEFTIST DO WE WANT TO BE?

The film También la Lluvia (Even the Rain, 2010), by Icíar Bollaín, invites us to question our complaisance in thinking of ourselves as reasonable “leftists.” The film’s plot introduces Sebastian, a film director visiting a pre-Morales Bolivia (2000), in order to shoot a movie illustrating the horror of the Spanish colonialism after Christopher Columbus arrived in the ‘new world’ in the late 15th century. The beginning of the film (Bollaín’s) shows Sebastian’s generosity and passion to (re)write history through a strong anti-colonialist verve. Soon enough however, the Cochachamba water conflict occurs and crowds oppose the governmental privatization of water distribution. For many reasons developed at length in the movie, Sebastian is confronted to a series of choices between his film and his ethics. The latter would suggest that he stop his project and join the protesters in one way or another. Each time, nevertheless, he favors his film more than anything else and without actively helping the violent suppression, he makes compromises betraying the spirit in which he was making his film in the first place.

Sebastian is a film director but the problem is the exact same for an architect. Designing shelters for precarious populations of the world in Western architecture schools is good and certainly stems from honorable feelings, but doesn’t it satisfy us too quickly without contributing to a
practical, long-term plan to help the people our efforts are addressed to in the first place? Moreover, before even initiating such projects, don’t we have everything to learn from the people our projects claim to be serving? Aren’t we patronizing them when we pretend to know the solutions to their problems, without a deeper series of interactions? The very use of pronouns like “we” and “them,” as I employ here, is also problematic vis-à-vis the essential differences these pronouns seem to be stressing. Architects tend to think of their designs as ends in themselves, often ignoring the means and compromises that these designs necessitate to serve their primary goals. Admittedly, nothing happens without compromises but to whom and to what are these compromises possibly detrimental?

Who are the ‘we’ in this movie? The stubborn director who values ‘history’ more than what is happening in front of him in the present? The venal producer who is finally the most eager to dialogue with the local population while remaining slightly paternalist? The actor playing Christopher Columbus to whom the difficulty of this problem appears very clearly, but who prefers to escape from it by drinking rather than acting? The other actors who value their 15th-century ethical characters but act like cowards when the riots begin? Or can we possibly be somebody else?

This question cannot be answered theoretically; it can only be responded to in actions. Many are the occasions to make the choice that is the most conform to our ethics, as difficult it might be. We all occupy a position of power to a certain degree, depending on our citizenship status, if we are white, male, healthy, heterosexual, rich, living in the city, citizen of a former or current colonial empire, etc. Embodying at least one of these characteristics forces us to question our attitude vis-à-vis our position in society. On the other hand, the
norm is never fully incarnated by a specific body as we also share a few or many “minor” characteristics inviting us to be part of what Deleuze calls “revolutionary becoming.” Which one of these two antagonist characteristics we want to embrace and, therefore, which position towards the relationships of power we want to occupy is up to us and us only.

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