

I WANT TO FEEL: THE EMOTIONALITY THRESHOLD OF POLITICS

‘There is no need to hope or fear, but only to look for new weapons,’ writes philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his essay, ‘Postscripts on Societies of Control’¹. Deleuze then leaves it to the reader to conceive what those new weapons are that have the potential to oppose control societies. Mark Fisher, the cultural theorist, argues that both fear and hope translate today into emotional passivity². While on the one hand lives are shaped by the fictions created by control mechanisms and the ready-packaged by the entertainment industry, on the other the twin emotions of fear and hope that actually sustain us are gradually losing their impact. Could the vital states of emotionality be what we need as our new weapons? When ideologies combine and gain force, they damage potentially proactive subjectivities. We may be keenly aware of this, but are we also aware of our feelings?

Confronting the hard facts of the world again and again, day in day out, is tough on the body’s chemistry. And painkillers are just a temporary solution. But can we trigger different thought processes and solutions by feeling, locating feelings or making the sensory receptors open to effective? It is this very perspective that is espoused by film artist, Didem Pekün, a student of Mark Fisher. And she uses the essayistic documentary image, a form that derives its strength from first-person subjectivity, to produce different states of effective and to create space for them. Shot and edited in Bosnia and Herzegovina, her latest film, *Araf* is the embodiment of her research inasmuch as it deals with the convergence of mythology, history and the present day.

Araf is an essayistic road movie based on the diary of a ghostly character, Nayia, who travels between Srebrenica, Sarajevo and Mostar. Living in exile since the war, Nayia returns to her country for the 22nd commemoration of the Srebrenica massacre. The film is guided by her diary notes which merge with the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. *Araf*, or purgatory, is neither beyond nor behind; it is here. Between heaven and hell. That in-between place where time challenges time. A human figure stands on the Mostar Bridge in the reflected light of the River Neretva and prepares to dive. The slowness of the image expands the moment. Nayia’s story begins at the moment when this male figure glides silently towards the waters of the river.

Born to a family with partial Bosnian heritage, Pekün grew up with the image of the historical bridge, which sits astride the Neretva. With its destruction during the Bosnian War, Mostar became a place that merged her own family history with the political awareness of the generation in which she grew up. But once the bridge was rebuilt, the city’s youngsters resumed their everyday rituals and, specifically, carried on proving themselves with a plunge off the bridge. The best divers were rather meaningfully awarded the title of Icarus. Meanwhile, the world’s history of pain and suffering continued apace with the impact of the social, psychological and emotional violence characteristic of capitalism. While people living there were left to flee to all parts of Europe, people who do not to live there chose to forget altogether this tragic war, which brought them in touch with the violence of the present day. Twenty-two years on, the war remains unresolved at both an individual and a collective level.

So, what is the story behind the arrogance and determination which drove Icarus’s bid to escape to another world - an ambition that ended in a taste of purgatory? Or is it a story of courage and optimism? Whether they live in a direct war zone or not, are people disposed to feel the history

1 Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, Vol. 59. (Winter, 1992), pp. 3-7.

2 Mark Fisher, "Abandon Hope (Summer is Coming)", 11/08/2015. Accessed 11/11/2018 on <https://repeaterbooks.com/1197-2/>.

and fabric of the purgatory that they are now sharing with who were left behind and standing? The images, news stories and articles that feed our news media from Syria and Yemen today, and previously from Afghanistan and Iraq, almost force us to build a hierarchy of suffering. But should we then choose to numb our bodies to the implicit burden, or to share it with our bodies by accepting that we are part of the same fabric of suffering?

Known better for his work on economic theory, Adam Smith wrote a book in 1759, entitled 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments', in which he sets out how individuals acquire the moral mechanisms that inform their feelings towards themselves and other people. At the same time, he writes: "How selfish so ever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner." In so doing, he describes a mood of collective emotionality developed in the upper and middle classes in the face of others' suffering³. It could be argued that this description also underlies the idea of humanitarian aid. During the Bosnian War, Sarajevo waited for the aid that would break the siege as if waiting for Godot. The point where the ethical basis of western liberalism collapsed came dramatically in 1999 when this terminology was used to rationalize the military intervention in Kosovo, while in 1995 same structures favoured disarming thousands and delivering them into the hands of the enemy in the name of helping Bosnia. While this distortion prepared the ground for new wars, the inability to share collective suffering --a state oscillating between apathy and numbness-- has brought empathy to a point of crisis.

In the experimental fiction-documentary film she created in *Araf*, Didem Pekün aspires to transcend this very point of numbness and paralysis. She argues, "Crimes against humanity are crimes perpetrated against every one of us." As the artist sees it, engagement equates to accepting collective responsibility. The screen's potential for gathering audiences time after time and sharing this collective responsibility is epitomized in Pekün's research. While the world is inclined to fast-forward humanitarian crimes and the misery they cause, Pekün's black and white images use time to question time and make us all share the suffering as they shift deliberately between the river, the bridge, the road, the military headquarters, the burial ground and the city. As the graininess of the images intensifies and expands in this process of sharing, every movement of the bodies incorporated in the camera frame evokes a both familiar and new grammar.

If our new weapon is to feel, there is much that art can do and encourage to be done. Two of the most powerful examples of this potential hail from the wartime siege of Sarajevo: they are firstly the theatre groups that continued to perform regardless, and secondly the audiences that packed the auditorium for Susan Sontag's production of *Waiting for Godot*, news of which spread purely by word of mouth. The world is weary of suffering; and yet the future of the world is a permanent state of exile. So long as politics fails to be experienced in terms of effective, the exile of the collective to the majority seems unlikely to end. Emotions and emotional muscles need to be developed beyond the emoticon keyboard. If everyone were to make the time on their own to take a single, honest step towards themselves, this alone would more than suffice to overturn standard practice.

3 Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, translated by Rachel Gomme, Berkeley: University of the California Press, 2012, p. 263