

Joan of Arc’s tears

When did you realise that your parents were movie stars?

«As a child, I didn’t have the fame dimension of my parents. So, when I was in primary school, I wanted my friends to be the thermometer of their success. I used to ask them: “Is my father known more or less than Fellini? Is my mum like Greta Garbo?”»

What about the first time you saw a film starring your mother?

«I actually do remember my first time, it happened with Victor Fleming’s Joan of Arc (1948, ed), that experience scared the life out of me. She was the main character, she was shot with an arrow and then burnt... When we saw the burning scene, we children burst into tears. They took us away from the cinema. Mum, who was not with us, had to run home and show us that she was alive. I still remember the terror I felt in that theatre.

Isabella Rossellini

Giant, luminous, mesmerising letters: JEANNE D’ARC. They are shot from below to give them even more weight, they appear on the screen diagonally, as if they were projected elsewhere. In the background, another vertical lighted sign specifies where we are: CINE. It is an invitation to enter the dark room. In the foreground the suffering face of Joan of Arc/Renée Falconetti appears immediately. The film shown is Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). But now it is inside another film. We are following another poignant, fragile, beautiful girl inside that cinema hall: Godard’s Nanà/Anna Karina (*Vivre sa vie*, 1962). Someone (Antonin Artaud) is telling Joan of Arc that she will soon be burnt at the stake. The girl starts crying. The camera frames Nanà, who is getting uptight. We see everything through her eyes. Joan of Arc is weeping but she also thinks that death will finally set her free. Sitting in her place, Nanà is weeping as well.

A common destiny emerges between the two characters. Godard also attempts to draw an existential parallel between a girl accused of being (also) a prostitute and a prostitute who has all the purity of a girl. However, compared to Dreyer’s film, and perhaps compared to the myth of Joan of Arc itself, Godard’s

operation takes on a broader, almost vertiginous significance for us: the fragility, the impotence – the *pathos* of Joan of Arc – embodied in her tears, find their apparently paradoxical strength, in their capacity to be shared with others. In their transmission of this feeling, they also reveal a formidable destituent political charge.

Dreyer's film ends with the images of a riot. The tears of the girl as she is carried to the stake speak for themselves: they are addressed to those who are watching her, who, thanks to that weeping, step out of their role as spectators in celebration and take part in her pain, they make it their own. The notary Boisguillaume writes: "Almost everyone who was there, was crying". Is it Nana's *sym-pathy*, is it the *sym-pathy* of those women who see that girl conducted at the stake that make a politics of tears possible?

Georges Didi-Huberman has dedicated important pages (*Peuples en larmes, peuples en armes*, 2016), starting with *Battleship Potemkin* and other images, to the way in which a woman's cry, by revealing and unveiling a crisis of the times, manages to take on a curious, unpredictable, disruptive political resonance.

How is it possible for a manifestation of powerlessness to become political? It is mainly women who weep when historical crises materialise. Joan of Arc cries in the face of the injustice of her judges; Antigone cries in the face of Creon; Haidi Giuliani cries; the mothers of Plaza de Mayo cry, and so on. These women do not have power, but, above all, they do not want to have it. Their tears are, in this respect, a sign of their weariness and exclusion, but it is thanks to their powerlessness and otherness (a political, social and symbolic one) that the women who cry can question power. Sometimes they can go as far as destituting it. The Russian Revolution began with women's tears (for mourning in the war, for the hunger and cold at home) which slowly became indignation, riots, and emancipation.

Joan of Arc is a girl from Domrémy. The question of gender proves decisive in addressing our problem of the destituent power, which is precisely that 'Johannesque' gesture of challenging power without wanting to take its place. It is a laying bare of power: this evokes the boldness of Joan of Arc during her trial. She also arrogates to herself the right to evade the court authority, even going so far as to threaten her judges: "Vous dites que vous êtes mon juge, mais prenez garde à ce que vous faites, parce qu'en vérité je suis envoyée par Dieu et vous mettez vous-mêmes en grand danger". It is more than a simple contestation of religious and political power: Joan of Arc just does not recognise it. Joan of Arc wants to have this space occupied by the legitimate king. But, on a closer inspection, the issue at stake is bigger than that: the girl, a poor, marginal girl, also imagines the possibility of leaving empty the space of power. We know that Jeanne la Pucelle's defiance stems from the visions she has. Virgin, warrior, witch, child, whore, saint... different and contradictory are the images that history has left of her, but there is one that runs through them all, and it is also, from a historical point of view, the most certified, because the trial against her will focus on it: Joan of Arc is a seer. She sees angels, saints who incite her to perform, through

‘voices’ that only she understands (what language do they speak? The judges will ask her), military and political actions willed by God.

According to the poet-philosopher Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), Joan of Arc belongs to the tradition of the great biblical prophetesses, such as Judith, Esther, and Deborah. But, as Claude Gauvard shows, the phenomenon of female prophetism is also widespread in the kingdom of France in the historical context of Joan of Arc. Between 1350 and 1450, at least twenty women are known for their gifts of prophecy. In moments of crisis, these women, empowered by a word coming from above, manage to come out of silence, even to impose their voice, to show everyone a way forward - the necessary revolts. Many of them come from the borders of the Kingdom, from its extreme boundaries, and are of modest origin. It is precisely this marginal condition – like that of Joan of Arc, who comes from Lorraine and is said to be a humble shepherdess – that gives their divine word a greater strength.

Prophets and prophetesses complain, they often cry. They are, in the full sense of the word, nobody, they often possess no special social status, they come from afar and from below. Their situation is in itself alienating, but their feeling of bewilderment, if not stunnedness, emerges above all when faced with the immense task assigned to them. Deleuze says that this is the reason why they cry. But their lamentations also reveal a pure joy, typical of all those who, within the world, are caught up in ‘furors’ pushing them towards something higher, within the world, but, still, further away. On the one hand, Joan of Arc’s tears flow in an attempt to hide this joy in facing her thousand tormentors. On the other hand, it is also true that Joan of Arc cries because she is restless, because, in her helplessness, she is realising a great power. And she does so without knowledge, without ‘conscience’ (she is uncultured and wild). The ‘voices’ tell her ‘go... go... go...’ and nothing else. The prophets, in fact, do not see what is happening or even what they do. Their tears, their own endless mission, prevent them from looking at the phenomenon. As a matter of facts, they are often quite blind. But they announce another time within the end of time.

Charles Péguy calls Joan of Arc the “jeune fille espérance”. This representation is an efficient synthesis, and we intend to problematise it in this issue in order to understand how the words and gestures of a girl were able to crystallise the aspirations of an entire people, for a few very long months.

The prophecy of Joan of Arc rips up the monotony and inevitability of the present mainly because it can ignite a spark of hope within. By inserting herself into the historical juncture, starting from the ‘voices’ she hears, Joan of Arc succeeds in bifurcating history. It becomes clear that the war, to which she is called and to which she calls to, represents something higher and deeper than a mere defence of patriotic borders. Were it not so, Joan would remain within the continuity of history. Instead, she attempts to suspend the traditional course of history (prophecy disrupts historical time). Perhaps, as Bensaïd maintains, her war extends to a universal boundary, an immense frontier. An outer boundary which

unjustly separates the world of the rich from that of the poor. Joan of Arc's war is an episode in the endless and interminable 'war of the poor', from Spartacus to Müntzer, all the way down to the resistance of the Mexican peasant women who, after the defeat of their revolution, set up the "St. Joan of Arc Women's Brigades" to continue their struggle.

As argued by Péguy for Joan of Arc, one must "make war", but in order "to kill war".

Joan of Arc's tears dig footprints, furrows, paths. By revealing an underlying fragility, intrinsically solitary, they prove, instead, to be powerfully political, breaking the same homogeneity of history. Eyes clouded by tears glimpse at another horizon of events: within a harsh clash, beyond war.