

The Eye Swims on the Canale Grande

by Eduard Schreiber



At first sight, this is a dump in northern Berlin: a place where you unload household items, state and status symbols, love letters, military uniforms, an accordion. It is fall 1989. A state is about to vanish: the German Democratic Republic. In a hectic spasm, many rid themselves of the supposedly needless items they collected during 40 years of history, to make room for new things. A unique historical event, taking place unbelievably fast. What remains is the image of a ruin that grows and grows.

The orange garbage trucks appear, like ghostly ships on the Canale Grande in Venice, as they float nearer to the strains of a Neapolitan song sung by Enrico Caruso. With this, if not sooner, *Eastern Landscape* leaves the realm of historical reality. The 13-minute film is without words. There is only the wind, the deep rumbling of the trucks . . . and again and again silence, interrupted by music made on instruments found at the dump.

And there are hardly any people. At the beginning, a young garbage collector silently points the way for arriving trucks. Later, an old worker stands before the camera, the remains of an accordion in his hand, and tries to elicit a few notes from the destroyed instrument. Nobody talks, no one is questioned. The closeness to people that characterized many East German documentaries seems here to have metamorphized into mute, speechless distance.

What fascinated me about the scene that I experienced at the dump, day after day, was the inexorability and indifference with which history was proceeding and the challenge it presented me: to capture this process only with my eye, with the eye of the camera.

Up until this moment, my experience had grown from working on films that told life stories, that gave individuals space to reveal and articulate themselves, to show their gestures – even those that were against the dominant, ideologically-determined image structures, or went around them.

My images wanted to bring out a counter-world, a world that did not exist in official statements. My images were tied to the individual, with all the problems that this brings. Of course it involved interpretation – but the individual was never exposed, abused, denounced.

These images gave people space; they were mainly long, steady shots in classic formats, strongly influenced by the gesture of photography. These were often shots with a “resonance” – an experience familiar to every documentary filmmaker, in which the decisive movement, the decisive word, the gesture that pulls everything together flashes the moment the camera stops rolling and often gets to the crux of the speechlessness. Because mostly the people in this society were speechless, which accommodated the film, but did not serve the ideology. Silent gestures have always been suspect for ideology, and were here as well. (This explains why television, for instance, from which the silent gesture is estranged, becomes in every society an instrument of dominance). And because of that a take was often not cut where it seemed to be over.

By means of montage, these “images” were strung together, brought into an order that was again determined by slowness. It was to hold onto something that had slipped out of the field of vision; it requested the viewer to take a close look, to discover something. Perhaps these were illusions, because of course slowness in this society also meant immobility, sedateness and

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boredom. And yet a certain care, precision, honesty is unmistakable. Here, cynicism was unknown in a certain kind of documentary. Mostly the images influenced the montage, so the films progressed in a linear fashion that did not exploit the medium to the fullest.

The scene I observed at the dump took place at different levels. Here, the garbage of a big city was brought – a city that called itself the capital of a country, but was only half a city.

What do people liberate themselves from when, in the midst of an all-encompassing euphoria, the restraints of thoughtfulness and fear itself are lifted? Do they want to dispel all traces of an early betrayal, everything that could denounce them as manifest supporters of the party line in a system that broke down? Do they only want to make room for the new, more colorful and long-desired articles of prosperity of the society that is now upon them? Was it a huge house cleaning, like when a new owner is expected? Or was it simply trash, which always gets dumped here, independent of politics? The leftovers of a civilized society?

I was interested in the layers that now came to light. I was interested in the question of which images I would find and how, from them, a cinematic structure would emerge that described a political and social demise, without superficially connecting these themes. I was interested in the question of how I could sidestep the picturesque milieu represented by the garbage, especially in a social system that had banished such images by decree.

The assembled images describe civilization's trash, reflect an atmosphere of finality, visualize the euphoria of rejection, up to such an extreme sequence as the one in which the love letters of a couple are whirled up by the wind, the tender expressions legible on the pages. What a time — in which you take leave of your most intimate past!

If, as a documentary filmmaker, you engage in observation – you persistently pursue everyday events, keeping your eye ready to discover, among seemingly insignificant moments, the very instant that reveals a way of behaving, a social structure, a human impulse, a social condition – occasionally you come upon images that cannot be replaced by even the most artful montage or “staging.” The instinct of the documentary filmmaker is to trust events. Something will come.

Things don't only get brought to a dump; they also get taken away. There are people who value one or another find, people with a different value system, whether out of poverty, morals or obsession. With persistence came the shot of a Russian soldier, whose army and country were also in the process of dissolution. He finds a suitcase and at first examines it, undecided. Then he picks it up, stalls again, and finally leaves with the suitcase in hand. The camera pursues his movement, his hesitation, his walking, itself surprised at what it sees. The camera doesn't hide, the soldier does not notice it.

It is an invitation to the eye to take a closer look, to recognize the dimensions of the event, the emotions of hope and doubt, happiness and pride; to discover something with your eye that has no space in media that are drowning in a flood of images. In this one shot, the dilemma of that huge country becomes an image.

You look for such images, but nothing in them is staged. In this sense, these images are strictly documentary, and because they are no longer arranged along the lines of a life story, forms, colors and signs count and, in a few spots, can become symbols. This depends on the observer's

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point of view, however, and how closely involved or distant he or she is from the events.

I had to push away everything I had seen and mobilize my self-critical ability, because I too had lived and made films in this country. And I had to appropriate these images once more, in order to find my way to a working film montage. Now I was freed from the course of events that I had observed, freed from the unique finds in the garbage, which had elicited my surprise, confusion, amazement, creativity. Now I could handle time differently, the seasons got mixed up – the brown dust of fall winds with the ice crystals of approaching winter. That is how montage fabricates historic time, the pivotal element in the film.

Of course, I was not completely free from the historic background. This led to staging one scene at the end of the film after all. A young man dumps a suitcase, then his clothes, and disappears naked over the horizon under the ravens circling, cawing, over the dump. At that point in time, in the moment of working, it was an extremely polemical (and provocative) act targeted at the films of the vanished country. It was also a metaphor for an event that had affected East Germans. What fascinated me more was the emotionally strong image, the disappearance of the young man to Caruso's song. The final sequence merely brings the events at the dump to a head, but does not specifically implicate East Germans. It brings people's disposable and destructive mentality to its absurd conclusion.

In a society in which any artistic work that even touched upon a catastrophe was suppressed, it was emotionally important to free oneself from this repression, and catch up with the many colleagues from other countries for whom it was no longer an issue. Today, we see this film with different eyes. Its emotional charge has disappeared. Today, it is more a push from the edge into the center. Images, forms and colors appear, and decay, destruction, disruption – and, all in all, in comparison to huge parts of the world, it is an image of abundance. This film "speaks" about an amoral event and delivers images about why, from the inside out, something was not right with this society. It tells about what happened, but also turns something that did not actually happen – the appearance of the young man – into an event, and thus anticipates the future.

Eduard Schreiber wrote this text in July 1997. It was first published in *The Search for Reality – the art of documentary filmmaking*. Ed. Michael Tobias. Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998.

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