East European Film Bulletin

ESSAY

The Consequence of Movement

Brigitte Stærmose's *Afterwar* (2024)

VOL. 147 (SEPTEMBER 2024) BY TAJANA KOSOR

In *Afterwar* (2024), Brigitte Stærmose brings the casualties of a war-ridden area in the Balkans to the frontlines of Berlinale's Panorama – Documentary section. The film opens with archival footage of migratory motion from 1999: explosions, fire, horses, the dead, and those who go on living. We watch as people move like streams through the mountains, carrying their lives on donkeys or on foot. We needn't be told about the events that must have preceded the migration. For a moment, this reality is distilled, but immediately afterwards a few staged scenes seem to announce the film's own role in the shape up of this truth. A succession of pedestrians moving down a solitary mountain in a wide shot is followed by an abrupt closeup – this scene would have sufficed for the viewer to understand what lies ahead. The bleakness which surrounds all movement quickly dissolves into the landscape mist. As the film opens, an element of structural poetry is immediately introduced through a subdued whisper of the young protagonists recounting their stories. Several shots go by before we are presented with an intertitle.

"Past"

Before they had grown up, these men were children. It's in this irreproachable momentum of their naivety that the camera begins to follow them. Right at the start, we are faced with one of the film's most deafening formal traits, and singlehandedly its setback: a broken fourth wall. Stærmose seems intent on crafting a narrative that frames the protagonists in a specific light, thereby erasing all objectivity and formal logic of a "classical" documentary. Low voices and whispers directed towards the camera lens create a performative manipulation that transforms genuine testimonies into a stunt display. We can't help but feel that this chaste deposition has been at least somewhat meddled with, appropriated for the eye of the camera. One of the easiest traps for a (participatory) documentary to fall into is emphasizing misery. And whilst not participatory in the usual sense (the questions are edited out), and whilst

attempting to be observational, the film cannot but always display its subjective upper hand. It's not just the low whisper in which what is said is being delivered; it's the crafted nature of the dialogs – "I give all the money to my mother so she can buy food for my brothers and sisters." Already we lack the authentic aspect that belongs to childhood inherently, weightlessly – the guilt-free selfishness which characterizes the fragile period of preadolescence. Does the kid keep any of the money earned for himself? Does he hide one cigarette? These implausible dialogs seem to be present in unfailing abundance: "My mother cleans houses for rich people."

Hereafter, script in mind, the question of genre arises organically: how involved can the film be in its own making? A skeletal problem of scripted speech exists throughout the entire film; everything is told as a fable would be. While the protagonists' stories originate from their own lived experiences, their discourse is rewritten by the director, then fed back to them. This ultimately means the narrative becomes hers as much as it is theirs. One could argue that this is always true of those who make films – with all works of art really. The danger, however, lies in the fact that once returned to the rightful owners, the speech of those who are filmed can never be their own, never reclaimed in the same way again. Stories grow and mature through language, but in the process of creative appropriation by a director, it's the language that possesses the subjects of a film, not the other way around. The language never belongs to them. The layer of artificiality can no longer be removed, even if the world the characters inhabit and speak of is intrinsically theirs. Rooted within the beauty of linguistic misrepresentation, the prophecy delivered is its single-handed curse. Gradually it becomes evident that the film grapples with the delicate balance between authentic storytelling and the potential distortion of lived experiences. This manipulation of voice raises significant ethical questions about the filmmaker's role in the representation of trauma, compelling us to consider whether the constructed narratives reflect the true nature of the subjects' experiences or serve merely as a curated spectacle for the audience – in Susan Sontag's terms, we touch upon the ethics of representation.

There are, however, instances of language that still retain a truthful sound. The post-war gaze is child-like, and almost pastoral: "The grass had gotten tall, even taller than me. It was like paradise. Or what I think paradise looks like. Nothing but tall grass. Taller than you." We listen to the story of a cow which had saved one boy's life: "A cow had saved my life, and this had made me proud." And how could there be any fabrication in a story like that? Suddenly, we're in a bar. Boys sell cigarettes and peanuts; bartenders stand around, suited up like guardians. The setup leaves a mannered impression yet doubles as a genuine scene – knowing that the scene we are observing is staged contributes to a bi-fold reality, a parallel cosmos capable of existing only within tremors of its own foundations. "That my life had been saved. That had made me proud."

The weather in the film becomes symbolic too, reflective of the morose atmosphere. There is something fresh in the night air, but a shadow covers it like a cloth. The stories being told have a fairy tale quality to them. There is an omnipresence of a juvenile trait of modesty, humility even. Every protagonist is granted an episode, a parable of their own creation. We follow a girl going to work at a bar – her line of work is undefined but hinted at. “I don’t think anyone knows as much about happiness as I do,” she tells the camera. “I’m just this little person that disappears. I know, for example […] I am nothing. You think that I am nothing.” A slow song plays – *Kiss me with your heart – I care and I don’t care*. We listen as the cup of her mundanity pours into us. Inside this closed circuit, pulses of life emerge – the film’s greatest achievement. As the film progresses, the lines between documentary and fiction slowly grow blurrier. One of the protagonists looks into the camera: “There’s only one reason I’m talking to you. […] It’s hunger. I’m so hungry I could eat your money.” The narrative thus transcends fixed categories of documentary and fiction. A dialog is created, it mirrors the complexities of identity formation in a post-war context, where personal and collective histories intertwine, challenging the viewer to consider the boundaries of truth and representation in cinematic storytelling.

“Present”

Twenty years after the war ended, we are back at the same spot. What has changed? “When a war ends, men get quieter.” We’re back in the same field, on the same streets, in the same houses. We walk the very path the protagonists who have seemingly remained immobilized for all these years have followed, unable to move despite having disappeared. Now they are grown-ups, and we witness the same faces fully evolved into people – brimming with desire for recognition. This experience is a deliberate directorial tactic; the film underscores that what it deals with is a *state of exception* by portraying how these lives remain suspended in a perpetual emergency. This notion raises critical questions about the nature of living in a context marked by trauma, suggesting true existence is elusive when one is trapped in a cycle of unresolved grief and loss. The film also uses the gateway of precarious conditions (not fulfilling the promise of the day) to pose the question: when lives led only exist in a permanent *state of emergency*, do people ever get to really live?

The film’s mise-en-scène uses what’s within reach – a partial truth, its shape within a lawless and immoral society, the surrounding landscapes. The scenery in the snow quickly becomes a backdrop for an abandoned country – tall grass, melting snow, cityscapes in twilight. As if the city was designed to be vacant, death creeps in unnoticed. We listen in to a conversation between two friends: “I can’t stop thinking about my own death.” – “I had a dream about my own funeral […].” – “I’m not talking about a dream.” The protagonists speak of

‘other’ people looking away from them (“Still I know what they want before they say it.”) Identities are constructed through a societal gaze, which often overlooks their humanity. Butler’s insights into the dynamics of recognition and representation can be broadly applied here too, in order to further illuminate the struggles of these individuals as they navigate a world that imposes narratives upon them, shaping their identities in ways that may not align with their lived experiences.[1]

Twenty years later, all they have is manual labor, all they can hope for is precarious living – geographically and geopolitically, the film poses yet another question: why is it that in some places time stands still, that things can never change? The continuous cycles of trauma and memory echo the resonance of the past within the present, creating a dialog that shapes identities in a region marked by conflict. The film ultimately compels us to consider the broader implications of these narratives, confront the realities of post-war identity and the enduring impact of history on personal experience. The filmmaker navigates these complexities not merely as an observer, but as a participant in the ongoing discourse on migration, trauma, and identity – writing a plea to the audience to reflect on our own engagement with the transcendence of time and place. In the same vein, the most beautiful sequences in the film occur where narration (the scripted) blends seamlessly with the haphazard (dogs running alongside the car in which the protagonist is rapping).

“Future”

“We fled to Germany.” – “Hamburg, the city, I never got to see.” – “When we were in Germany, the land was all I could dream about.” – “I’d rather eat the soil.”

We witness a wedding scene. Formally, once again we are faced with callow decisions (e.g. slow-motion camera movements). Suspending reality here only takes away from the inkling of the real. A frontal shot of the wife’s face captures her discomfort as she listens to her husband speak about the long-awaited warmth of home and the expected pot of soup on the stove. Her expression transcends the mundane symbolism often associated with such scenes, reflecting a deeper conflict between personal desires and societal expectations. Among many types of repetition present in the film, a recurring one is the comparison of the protagonists to their predecessors. It’s a constant dialog between the past and the present, leaving limited room for nuance or grey areas. Or is it indeed the case that absolutely nothing has changed? Ultimately, the film presents its own version of the *final girl* – and she decides to flee as well. Can one ever truly escape a life of servitude? The notion of ‘fleeing’, of ‘escape’, brings to the forefront the principal issue of privilege – whether it be inherent or inherited. This notion is necessarily tied to the predeterminism of fate: “I’ll go to my grave with this curse. I’ll be left with

nothing. But I'll be able to say that I've seen it all." The film moves towards an understanding of identity that is congenitally tied to a sense of place – grounded in history, yet perpetually in flux. Each character's story embodies a microcosm of larger societal struggles, reflecting the consequences of displacement, trauma, and survival. One could argue that Agamben's theories illuminate the ways in which personal narratives can reflect broader existential crises in post-war societies, as he posits that the state of exception – where norms and laws are suspended – shapes not only public life but also individual identities.[2] In the same light, *Afterwar* invites us to scrutinize the boundaries of personal agency within the larger framework of collective suffering. Through the lens of documentary, the film forces us to reckon with the complexity of representation: how can we capture the essence of lived experience without falling prey to the very narratives that perpetuate marginalization? It becomes an ethical inquiry as much as an artistic one, revealing the delicate balance between representation and authenticity. In the end, *Afterwar* compels us to confront the inescapable reality of our shared humanity, even as it grapples with the fractures left by war, inviting us to question not only the characters' realities but also our own roles in witnessing and representing those stories. Through the lens of fictionalization, the film offers us solutions for collective redemption.

1. She writes that "recognition cannot be unilaterally given" (Butler, Judith (2005). Giving an Account of Oneself. New York: Fordham University Press; 26). ↩
2. See Chapter 1: "The Paradox of Sovereignty"; Chapter 2: "Bare Life"; Chapter 4: "The Homo Sacer and the Problem of Sovereignty"; and Chapter 5: "The State of Exception and the Politics of Life". In: Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford University Press). ↩