General

Serge Daney

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Serge Daney, *Volharden*, Solange de Boer (editor), *Een ruimte om in te bewegen. Serge Daney tussen cinema en beeldcultuur*, ISBN 9789490334017, 160 pages ,ISBN 9789490334048, 192 pages, 'Text & Context' series, Amsterdam, Octavo Publications, set: ISBN 9789490334062

Two related books by and about the French film critic Serge Daney have been published for the first time in the Dutch language, as part of the series 'Text & Context'. The establishment of the consensus society, the development of the attention economy, the bankruptcy of cultural criticism: even for those who do not belong to Daney's generation, which is marked by the trauma of the Second World War, tried and tested by the spirit of May 1968, it is clear that over the past decades a gap has arisen in critical thinking on images and the world, a gap between the world of images and our image of the world. It is as if everything has been engulfed by an overwhelming wave of indifference and banality, in which there is no longer any room for dissensus.

During the last years of his life, Daney's greatest concern became the vanishing of his ultimate object of affection, cinema, into the vortex of the cult of television and information. The problem, according to Daney, is not that there are too many images, but too many images that we have seen over and over again; images that can be easily deciphered but no longer communicate anything at all. 'The shortage of images begins when the two related actions, seeing and showing, lose their self-evident quality and become deeds of protest, as it were,' he wrote in 1991 in 'Montage verplicht. De oorlog, de Golf en het kleine scherm' (Montage Required. The War, the Gulf and the Small Screen), included in the book *Een ruimte om in te bewegen* (A Space in Which to Move: Serge Daney between Cinema and Visual Culture). This was an answer to the reportage at the time on the Gulf War, a conflict that was not only decided on the battlefield but also on television.

For Daney, a self-declared *ciné-fils*, the world expressed in films could not be seen separately from the world surrounding them. Following time-honoured French cinephile tradition, he considered every film an expression of a standpoint, a vision of the world that simultaneously legitimizes and organizes a work. 'Film is an art of showing, presenting. And showing is a gesture, a gesture that forces one to see, to look. Without that gesture you only have pictures. But when something is presented, someone also has to sign for its receipt,' declared Daney in *Volharden*, the second part of this double publication. Criticism was a way of throwing back the ball for Daney; not as just any pass, but a cross pass, as a safeguard to new horizons.

Daney himself traces the arousing of his attitude to his reading of 'Over het abjecte' (On the Abject), an article by Jacques Rivette also included in the essay collection *Een ruimte om in te bewegen*. In this piece on the Holocaust drama *Kapo,* only a single scene is described: 'Look at the shot where Riva kills herself by throwing herself on an electric barbed-wire fence; the man who decides, at that moment, to have a dolly in to tilt up at the body, while taking care to precisely note the hand raised in the angle of its final framing: this man deserves nothing but the most profound contempt.' This condemnation – the

ultimate focusing of Jean-Luc Godard's famous dictum, 'tracking shots are a question of morality' – determined the axioms of Daney's thinking and writing. In this article of Rivette's – about a film he never saw – Daney found everything that would continue to nourish his cinephile attitude: the discourse of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* family, which would also become his own; an aversion to filmic airs and graces; an emphasis on aesthetical and ethical justness; and above all, an awareness of the intimate relationship between cinema and history – his cinema, his history.

Volharden (Persevere) is the title of the second book in the 'Text & Context' series. This is Daney's posthumously published 'cine-biography', which besides 'De rijder uit Kapo' (The Tracking Shot in Kapo) originally written for the magazine *Trafic*, also contains a poignant interview with his crony Serge Toubiana. This book presents the scenario of his life: a history of cinema from 1944, the year of *Roma, città aperta* and the discovery of the concentration camps, to 1992, when the contours of a world 'without cinema' became visible; 'that is to say, without the feeling of being part of a people from a special country called cinema'. *Een ruimte om in te bewegen* is a thoughtfully compiled anthology of the pieces Daney wrote for *Cahiers du Cinéma* from 1960 to 1970 and for the daily paper *Libération* from the 1980s onward. The book also contains articles by his forebears (Rivette), his heirs (Olivier Assayas) and his comrades-in-arms (Godard). The last of these immortalized him in the pantheon of the greatest: 'To me Daney was also the end of criticism, as I had known it, which I think started with Diderot: from D to D, Diderot to Daney, only the French make real critics.'

'The question that arises in these loutish times,' wrote Daney in one of his last diary entries, 'is, "What can offer resistance? What can resist the market, the media, fear, cynicism, backwardness, unworthiness?"' (from 'Journal de l'an passé', in: *Trafic*, no. 1, 1991) These are the words of someone who has always reacted against consensus thinking: against the commercial spectacle of formula movies, the programme fillers on television, the retrocessive aestheticization of *Kapo*, the self-satisfied prefab of *Le Grand Bleu*, the cynical reasoning of the Benetton campaigns. Of those campaigns he wrote: 'In a period where contradiction is no longer the motor of anything, the compromise formation that Freudians know so well risks becoming the major trope of social communication.' (See: 'Kind zoekt badwater' [Baby Seeking Bathwater], 1991.) By the beginning of the 1990s, the idea of counterforce, so essential for Daney's generation, seemed to have evaporated, as it were, dispelled by a way of living that that had completely broken with 'those "thirty glorious years" after the war, when there was such a strong hunkering for emancipation and all sorts of "liberation".' (See: 'Montage verplicht' [Montage Required]) His thinking is rooted in a period of thirty years, from Rossellini to the death of Pasolini, which also formed the heart of modern cinema; the cinema of cruelty and compassion that taught him to continuously seek the 'other'. For Daney, cinema was a communal space for dissensus; for sharing and dividing, dreaming and awakening: an echo from another time, an impossible object of desire, an untenable promise of confidence.

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Tags

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