

Beyond reportage: The Music of Images

...There are two symptomatic indications that make us understand Ripa's practice: the fact that he often returns to the same countries and his preference for black and white photos. The first case serves to explain how important overlapping visions and sensations are, as if they were layers that solidify because only this way can we deeply understand a country without stopping at our initial emotions. Emotions that, in any event, shouldn't be erased, but instead enhanced. This leads us to the second fundamental element in the poetics of Giuseppe Ripa, who prefers the ability to interpret, the dreamy vision, and the emotion connected to the use of black and white rather than the somewhat brazen showiness of color.

If in other cases, as with the Cambodian archeological sites or countries in the Mediterranean, in Rajasthan or in Venice, he allowed the value and beauty of the photos to prevail, even to the point of turning them into symbols or displays of technical virtuosity, here for once reality boldly takes main stage. The search of a powerful though refined image comes after the need to narrate, typical of the story-like structure of reportage. But distinctions need to be made here as well. Ripa does not keep the fast-paced rhythm of classic reportage, but instead opts for a pensive tone and in-depth investigation that lingers upon details and atmospheres. It's as if the photographer lets himself be involved by the setting to such a degree that he is emotionally subject to its influence.

The only possible path to take for those who observe these images is therefore to let oneself go, to be slowly accompanied by a flow of sensations, though keeping in mind that we may come across symbols that are difficult to decipher, mysterious rituals, allusions we know that we can never fully grasp. But this doesn't matter because everything, in the end, will be comprehensible to the wise man who knows how much true understanding consists of looking beyond appearances, because the intimate nature of things like to hide itself, according to Heraclitus, an ancient Greek philosopher (5th century BC) who was defined by his contemporaries as "obscure".

We can already understand from the first image that one of the keys to better understand this reportage is sound. We normally do not find ourselves faced with this element. But when we clearly recognize it, as in this case, we realize that we cannot but follow it. Everything seems to open up like a raised curtain; but what seem to be simple sheets are actually the "prayers" hung on wires that become tangled from the blowing wind. It is a subdued beginning, but we can already perceive a music that remains in the background to underline the grandiose composition of a scene that would seem to concentrate our attention on the two figures moving in the back, but in reality arouses our curiosity about the writings on the right that allude to the purity of the lotus flower that is metaphorically born from mud. Our vision then broadens to include men moving from one tall building to the next, made of the same materials as the mountains that loom all around. These men venture down long paths that lead to the temple, carrying sacred objects (the prayer scroll and the rosary) down paths that rise then descend, but in the end trace a circular motion, called kora, that is forever repeated. In the background once again we hear, though louder this time, the whisper of the wind that makes its way among the prayers, almost wanting to drag away the words written upon the banners and to transform them into sharp and mysterious notes that sound like the screeching of birds in the distance. Now the images bring us inside the temple and here scents prevail-lamps that burn butter, spreading in the air a sweet-sour odor. Or the scent that seems to come from a penumbra out of which, as soon as our eyes have adjusted to the dark, figures of worshippers emerge with their faces lit up from below with small lamps. At the same time we perceive, painted on a wall, the startled faces of ancient demons that have become guardians of the faith, and, especially, the enigmatic smile of Buddha who, as if wanting to remind us that he is the illuminated one, seems to emerge from out of nothing. Inside the temple and nearby, movements are slow and precise. The benevolent looks of the Gelupkas, monks from the Order of the Virtuous, blend together with the frightened but immobile faces of the terrifying divinities. Then we return out into the light, and the limpid mountain air carries a distant jingle that act as a backdrop to a monument teeming with symbols: the Dharma Wheel that represents the doctrine and the two crouching fallow deer that seem to be kneeling, alluding to the first disciples. Further below, there are actual disciples, young novitiates interrogating one another and pointing their index fingers at each other in a ritual that includes questions and answers to test memory and

understanding. We hear feeble laughter that breaks the silence, than all becomes peaceful again and we can even hear, we look from the balustrade, the faint blowing of the wind when it decides to cross the flexible branches of a large pine tree that climbs up to the heavens.

Jingling and rhythmic, the sound of the cymbals emerges above the gloomy noise of the drums. Now there is a sense of waiting in the air, and in the eyes of the children huddled in the tribune under the umbrellas used to shield them from the sun, there is the curiosity of those who let themselves be fascinated by something new. The religious dances suddenly begin, the bodies move in the center of the field, demonstrating their ability and showing the strangely refined beauty of their garments, headdresses, embroidered belts.

Giuseppe Ripa lies behind these images as if wanting to step aside and make way for what is going on. It is a gesture of great elegance and respect that photographers are not always capable on. But it is only by cancelling his own presence (or rather making it as discreet as possible) that the delicacy of what is taking place can emerge. Now, however, the photographer takes advantage of the opportunity to intervene with greater determination: he blends in with the followers who, seated, listen in silence to the teaching of a lama. He wanders about the hills where smoke from aromatic herbs, burnt as auspice, rises to the sky. Finally he approaches men and women and photographs them up-close. The pilgrims resting on the ground or against a wall call to mind the portraits that circulated in Europe in the early twentieth century. Back then, photographers were often walking salesman who moved from town to town, carrying on their shoulders all their cumbersome tools. They would set up in a strategic place, in front of a church or in a square frequented by many people, and wait for customers. At times, they would make available well-made garments for customers to wear in a portrait that would probably be the only one in their life and from which their tombstone photo would be taken. Back then the portrayed persons seemed self-conscious, affecting poses. They really didn't know where to place their hands or where to look. If we could compare those images to Ripa's, the result would be an evident analogy.

The sound that had died down has now returned, carried once again by the breeze and making its way among the prayers hanging in the fields around which pilgrims carry out the kora, or in the entrance to a temple where a woman prays with a rosary in her hands. The sounds becomes more rhythmic, as if it wanted to caress the female figures seated out in the open, intent on preparing the clay votive stupas. It then loses its way in a sinuous game with the smoke of aromatic herbs that spirals up to the heavens. The music is always in the background. It's not easy to hear outside, and yet the nomads that pitch their tents on the grasslands-who knows how to establish an almost affectionate symbiosis with their horses-are familiar with these mysterious notes. They know very well that Milarepa-the hermit poet everyone looks to with admiration, brings, according to the tradition, his hand to his ear and distinguish the feeblest of sound, perhaps because they are also the most intense. At times one only needs to sit on the ground in front of the enchanted landscape of the houses carved into the mountainside, cross a ravine using the only path available, or lead animals with a steady hand through fresh-cut grass in order to hear that distant music. No one asks where it comes from, or who is playing.

Equipped with a very sweet nature that allows them to endure the injustices of man in the same way they endure the harshness of nature, the Tibetans have an eternal smile on their faces that at times seems enigmatic, like the one of their Buddha. But more often than not it corresponds to our indication of happiness: for them, the joy of leaving is a sort of weapon to use against the violence that they have often been subjected to throughout their history, most recently by the Chinese and their devastation. This has nothing to do with a manner or attitude, but with a sophisticated way of thinking that channels every aspect of reality into an overall vision that can be summed up in a deeply profound thought. A thought that consider the landscape as an emanation of the sacred and therefore decrees that harmony with nature is an element of fundamental importance for any man who intends to make peace with himself. Even the horse race of the Dartsedo Festival seems to resuscitate the ancestral sense of confrontation, ignoring the sense of competition because, perhaps, there's nothing better than riding lashed by the wind of speed, and maybe it's not so vital to arrive first.

Tibet is no longer a place outside the world. The influence of other societies arrives filtered through age-old wisdom that that transforms and assimilates everything in a sort of cultural syncretism whereby traditions are not affected by contemporaneity. This doesn't even happen when inhabitant of a lovely traditional tent, embellished with embroidery that once again calls to the mind the Dharma Wheel and the kneeling fallow deer, sits on the ground talking into a cell phone and wearing a baseball cap. There are young Tibetans who proudly wear wide-brim hats, or a young woman who shows interest in, from among the garments on a clothes stand, a typically Western outfit. Or a group of boys curiously looking at blankets, the award of a local lottery where even plastic items can be won and which are scattered on a meadow like our flea markets of the past. Now all is ready for the dances, and if it weren't for the presence of the Chinese soldier, sharp-eyed controller of every gesture, it would seem like a great party. Finally the music becomes loud, the sound of the drums alternates with the sharp notes of the wind instruments and the jingling of the cymbals. We no longer ask ourselves where it's coming from. Now we know that it arrives from the depths of each thought of ours, from our ability to relate to life, from our desire to go and search for the intimate nature of things, the one that loves to hide itself.

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