

Death of the Swedish "Farbror"

As the grand plan of socialism was taking shape in Scandinavia between the 1960s and 1980s, prior the irruption and corruption of neo-liberal and europifying politics, a certain nostalgia came in to vogue for the idyllic Sweden, the arcadic Sweden that started to be no more. During that period was in fact the grand Million Programme to edify cement like bee hives, great complexes in the outskirts of the capital to bring folk from the country to the city. In a way, the many TV series and films that came out of that era, the leaving of the land in search for opportunity and work in the city, the leaving of large spaces to confine family in the most functional and minimum living unit (in the long run rather diminishing and inhuman), these TV series can be seen in the first place as addressing this public, a generation who has in some way betrayed that landscape but might still have some relation to it, as some kind of Russian to his dacha, visiting their natural roots in the beautiful Swedish summer.

Equally, very popular TV series like "Emil" or films like "My Life As a Dog" which became a big hit world wide, may also signify the death of such a natural living in a society now fully shifting from a rural to a more civilized and service oriented paradigm. In the later movie in particular we see this clear transition, with workers still blowing glass in a small factory being most happy with their lives, in comparison with the sickening depression of the protagonist's mother who has already being sucked in the new paradigm of socialism and wealth fare. What it is most striking in these kind of cinematic representation is thus not only an element of nostalgia, a going back to a world that is no more, what is striking, particularly from the point of view of a foreign viewer, is the definition of characters as represented in one and the other paradigm. While in the countryside setting all characters seem well defined and charismatic, in the socialism hit city setting, the characters are characterless, they have no pathos, no defined persona.

Among the first setting, possibly, the character who emerges the most is that of the "farbror", this also in more artistically elevated movies like Bergman's "Fanny and Alexander". Even in the latter movie the "farbror", literally the uncle does not fail to emerge, particularly through his interaction with the young generation of kids. The "farbror" is the one building them a little house, teaching them how to fart (as seen in Bergman's "Fanny and Alexander"), he is the "luffare" the vagabond coming by the farmstead with many fascinating stories, the joy of the children undergoing the sometime too severe educations of the other more grumpy adults. The "farbror" is then the one character, the deus ex machina, agitating the youngsters as some sort of small revolutionaries against the conformism which tends to prevail among the other adults.

While on one side then we see kids playing voluntary ("Pippi Long Stocking") or involuntary ("Skrollan") bad tricks to the grownups, spectators might also side with these more solitary figures of open-minded, and still kid-like adult, the "farbror".

One may argue now, that as in the socialist paradigm, "farbror" could still somewhat survive, in the neo-liberal politics which Sweden has fully and unconditionally embraced, the figure of the "farbror" has been completely extinguished. It is not like in the case of Tarkovski's "Andrei Rublev", in which the buffoon entertaining a farm household in the beginning of the movie, is being taken away by force from the gendarmes seeking to establish a new conformism. Neo-liberalism and in particular in Scandinavian countries where socialism has worked as a safe-guard to the nation resources, which are now so drastically being plundered by these later politics as some sort of new inherited forest where exploitation is no longer regulated but allotted (politicians in these ways washing their hands like Pilatuses), neo-liberalism politics, if this is really the evil one ought to address, have now cemented the conformism which socialism had shaped among the people.

Playfulness, and particularly that brought by a figure of a "farbror" who is unconventional and non-conformist, is out of the picture. The unconventional seems in fact, from these very conformist societies, being brought out of the picture and emancipated, the "farbror", who, to some degree, could correspond to the Foucauldian notion of the Swedish mad-man, is excluded and could possibly be found together with other "farbror" now in a "krog" a pub of a remote suburb drinking himself off or off to Thailand. The "farbror" here seems to be replaced by another figure who instead will survive within the social schemes, that of the priest, such as again depicted by Ingmar Bergman, the ugly conformist, not necessarily an actual priest, but anyone dictating for puritanism, rising constant indignancy and affect on society wishing for the society of blond Swedes to rinse up and become pure once more, yet pure of what? It seems in fact that the only potential, if a farbror will ever come back to the Scandinavian land it should come informally as a poet from another land, as a dark head storyteller coming to play his songs and compose his poetry from afar.... and as the story goes, falling in love with a blond local, to then be kicked out by her relatives, as in ancient dramas and as somewhat invertly depicted by Lars Von Trier in "Dogville".