

The Missing Street

There are many street name signs in *Avenida Progreso*: though they are shot from a moving vehicle, it is clear that they don't exactly mark the itinerary followed by the professor to go back from the University to his home in a taxi. Rather they compose the Pantheon of classical culture: Sophocles, Aristotle, Dante, La Fontaine, Schiller, Hegel, Victor Hugo, Michelet: the universe in which belongs the old professor whose chalk wrote a phrase of Balzac on the blackboard in his classroom and who hears Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* on his walkman in the taxi. Nevertheless they are real street names: those names of writers, philosophers, poets or artists which were given to the streets of the new areas at a certain moment in the development of modern capitals to honour universal culture beyond national celebrities. Those names are not only the outdated universe of the old professor. They also compose the landscape of the city – at the least the landscape of a certain age of the modern city: the moment when their own development appeared to coincide with a step forward in the history of human civilization – the moment of Progress. All those names together make the modern city the spatial inscription of a history of Progress. This is why the point is not merely that those are the names of old European authors, far from the reality of contemporary life in Mexico City.

The point is that the streets through which the taxi goes are strangely empty. As if the space marked by the names of Sophocles, Schiller, Dante or Hegel were refuted by another space – a space structured by something that remains invisible, that only exists in the words of the professor asking the driver what the devil this “honeysuckle with no honey and no bees” can be: the edifice of the new culture - the art museum offered to the town by a Mexican billionaire and built in the postmodern fashion according to which a building must resemble a cloud, a boat or a honeysuckle, or anything but a functional building.

Should we understand that this professor of Aesthetics, with his chalk and Balzac, or his tapes and Schönberg, is definitely out of steps with the universe of his students who despise classical culture, have their own car while he must call a taxi and blow onto his face the smoke of their joint? The conclusion would be a bit too hasty. After all the black and white film that the artist himself uses for describing the journey is still older than the walkman and the attaché-case of the professor. It belongs to the time of the “modern” city, the time of the old movie theatres and of the streets celebrating the great thinkers and writers of the past. The contradiction does not simply oppose the poor old professor to the rich young students. It also opposes the town of progress to itself. The invisible Museo Soumaya also marks the end of the promise spread along the wall of the University with the mural mosaic of the communist artist David Siqueiros. The mural celebrated the link between the University and the people with imperious gestures showing the right direction toward the socialist future. We could thus perceive the minimalist story of the journey from the University to Avenida Progreso as another version of the “end of the grand narratives”. As it turns out, the trip becomes strictly allegorical and the way to progress ends up going round in circles when the cab is asked to turn left on Stalin, then left on Trotsky and left again on Karl Marx to reach Avenida Progreso. But Mauricio Guillen does not want to add his contribution to the story of the end of the Marxist narrative. Progress for him is not simply a dream of yesteryear that has vanished in the times of postmodern scepticism. Progress is a certain way of understanding the journey of the human mind toward knowledge and that of human collectives toward equality. And it is this way that must be re-examined.

This new examination is based on the strange lesson that was given, twenty years before the beginning of the Marxist adventure, by another professor of classics - a 19th century professor who has no street in any capital of the civilized world but whose words resonate throughout the film, Joseph Jacotot. Jacotot lived in a time when the learned classes promised that the

instruction of the people would provide a future of equality. He took the exactly opposite stance. He said that the apparatus which promises equality in the future to the young students and to the infant people is destined to reproduce indefinitely the situation of inequality between the professor and the student as well as between the learned classes and the people. Instruction of the people means stultification. And the heart of the process of stultification is the explanation that the master gives to the students to help them “understand”. By so doing the master mainly explains to the students that they cannot make a step forward in the universe of knowledge without the professor’s help. This is what the student in the film “explains” in turn to the teacher: “the more you explain, the less I understand”. But it is not enough to denounce the bias of the master – and of the ruling class - and prove that “equality” is the mask of inequality. The “critical” denunciation of inequality is still part of its logic. What breaks away from it is the affirmation of the equality of intelligence and the effort to enact it, to verify the capacity of learning by oneself which is shared by everybody.

Emancipation then is not simply a question of pedagogical method. It is a new way of thinking about society and of living in it. Emancipation does not simply entail the upsetting of the professor’s or of the ruling class’ power. It requires that the “student” or the “people” themselves change their way of thinking and doing. This is what the student in the film does not do. He is satisfied with denouncing the master and giving him a banknote as an answer to the examination: a way of telling that education, aesthetics and culture, this is all a matter of economic domination. As he does so, the student does not break away from the system. His provocation is part of the logic through which inequality reproduces itself. It stills echo, in his way, the voice that we hear on the radio: the voice of the leader of the teachers’ Union, who stumbles on difficult words like “epidemiological”, yet seems more expert at embezzling the Union’s money. As for the taxi driver, he is not willing to answer the provocation of the professor. He is satisfied with the inferior status of the worker

who has not been at the University, provided that he can denounce in turn the ignorance of the poor old University professor who teaches Philosophy and Aesthetics but does not even know what the driver knows: to-day is “teachers’ day”. Just as the student, the driver remains trapped in the social logic of compensation described by Jacotot, the logic inside which the inferior (student, worker, ignorant, etc) accepts the law of inequality because it always offers opportunities for upsetting the positions and affirming one’s superiority.

Emancipation instead means upsetting the law of Inequality itself. This kind of upsetting usually is less spectacular than the other. No character in the film embodies the power of emancipation. Jacotist statements tend to be cynical in the writing of the student, ironic in the mouth of the taxi driver, disillusioned in that of the teacher. There is no straight way, nor are there “good” characters. Instead there are figures that phrase in different ways the jacotist lessons and use them to question the urban and human landscape within which education and culture work to-day : classrooms and cash dispensers; University exams with Q and A; speeches about Instruction in official ceremonies, urbanism and educative programs of the past, cultural consumption of the present, attitudes of disenchanted teachers and disabused students...No lesson is given to the spectators. It is up to them to hear the fragments of the emancipatory discourse, to link them together and compare them to what they see on the screen - the attitudes of the characters, the images of their situation, the landscape of the city, the sound of the radio...- but also to their own experience, in order to compose their own story and make sense of it. The Avenida Jacotot will ever be missing. Emancipation has no distinct avenue. It must weave its own thread by crossing over the tracks of progress. This is a task for the artists, for the spectators, for anyone.

Jacques Rancière