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Daniel Bensaïd

We Are Alive: A film about the thought, activism and legacy of Daniel Bensaïd

- Features -

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Carmen Castillo was born in Chile, and worked for the Allende government before entering the clandestine resistance together with her partner Miguel Enriquez after the Pinochet coup of 11 September 1973. Arrested and then expelled from her homeland (after an international campaign for her release), she recounted her tragic history in two books and then her 2007 film *Calle Santa Fe*.

The director continues to be haunted by a number of questions. How can we pass on the memory of the defeated without suffocating it with nostalgia or bitterness? What can we do today to keep loyal to the ideas of friends, loved ones and comrades who are no longer of this world - a world that they were so passionate about changing? How can we hope, now that we know that nothing is written in advance (as some of us used to believe)?

Castillo's next film, *We Are Alive*, comes to French cinemas on 29 April. Making use of the thought of philosopher Daniel Bensaïd, Castillo portrays the daily struggles of all those across two continents who throw themselves into the 'joyous passion' of struggle - despite everything, and however ignored they are by the big media cartels.

What first made you think of making this film?

I have always been preoccupied with the question of political engagement. In *Calle Santa Fe* I touched on the mystery of the activist lives of the 1960s and '70s, and I tried to deal with one particular question: was the resistance worth it? Yes... Of course it was. That was my generation. We young people were convinced that we would live to see the Revolution. Our political engagement was clear, vibrant, we knew where we were going. It was full of life: for that generation, across the world, it carried forth a desire for freedom, justice and autonomy. But what came next? After our religion of History and our certainties collapsed, after what Daniel [Bensaïd] called the disappearance of the radiant future: then what? Should we do what everyone else does? Give up, pack it all in, and fall back in line? Believe in triumphant liberalism and the mirages of a joyous globalisation?

For me these questions crystallised with Daniel's death in 2010. We paid tribute to him, a great homage to his life, at the Mutualité [a large meeting hall in Paris]. I was there, I felt very inhibited as I spoke; I was representing Latin America, a continent Daniel devoted a lot of himself to through the Fourth International sections there (he spent a long time in Argentina, Brazil and Chile). I felt something weighing on me after losing his friendship: but it was the opposite of a burden. Rather, I felt I now had to bear Daniel's message. This was not just made of his actions, but also the scars he picked up across his life - and his laughter.

Many of us had always relied on Daniel to look out for our interests. When he died I felt the need, the desire to go and find out on what basis, based on what kind of thought, we could get together and begin to reflect. How to be in movement - active, an actor. Daniel wrote a lot about that. There were a number of occasions when I fell into melancholy periods, and he shook me out of it. He was funny, understated and full of humour. He had this way of helping you pick your head up again, just by using a couple of words.

Did you first meet him through your activism?

Yes. He was in the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and had got involved in supporting the Chilean

resistance, in opposition to the Pinochet regime. That was how I first met him. He was one of the people who took me in. I had to abandon the cult of death and nostalgia, to kill it off; I had to accept that I was a woman who had suffered wounds, but first of all a militant. The pain of our defeat and the death of Miguel [Enriquez] and my friends did not make any dent in my belief that we could continue fighting and that we could defeat the dictatorship. Our discussions were always very sincere; they were to the point, with no time for dogmas.

Did you have a lot of disagreements?

At that time we disagreed on the question of continuing with the armed struggle. He was against but he also knew that in Latin America this was a question of life and death - militants' lives were at stake. He addressed the issue without the least hint of arrogance. He posed questions and warned of the dangers. He was most directly involved in Argentina, with the PRT (the MIR wasn't part of the Fourth International). This was political engagement for the sake of life itself - as the Zapatistas put it, better than anyone - even when we were handling weapons and setting up armies. You had to live for the struggle. Daniel already understood that, even back then. When he found out that he had AIDS he didn't stop his activism; far from it, he devoted himself to an ever-greater amount of writing. These were hugely important works. Here I'm thinking of his *An Impatient Life*, his *Walter Benjamin*, his *Pari mélancolique*... this always makes me think of Victor Serge's decision when he was in hospital after surviving a bowel obstruction: to write, write, and write again, whatever the circumstances... I never talked about that with Daniel, but it seems like he too redoubled his efforts.

It's also striking how attached he was to literature and poetry: he wasn't only a scholar or an academic.

Exactly! Daniel was very literary. He was keenly aware that we have to use everything we can - including our emotions - to understand the world (he was talking about the merits of indignation long before Stéphane Hessel did). And also he was a teacher: he trained people up, or as Olivier Besancenot put it very nicely, he 'smuggled across' his knowledge. He passed it on. And always did so in the understanding that we would need this to move forward, at the same time as we acted on the present. He evoked the memory of the defeated in order to build active revolutionary subjects, but without ever saying that things had been better back then: there had to be an opening, a breach in the present. We need to understand that we do have the power, that it is possible, and that the future will be something different from now. Our vision of History is finished, that's a fact - but even so... etc. That was Daniel's strength, and indeed the strength of other people who thought along similar lines, for instance Michael Löwy. So that was where I got this idea of a film allowing us to see what concretely is happening in today's struggles.

So you never thought of making a biopic?

No, I didn't want to recount his life. Impossible. This isn't a film about him, but a film that starts out from our friendship, his thinking, and all the attributes I mentioned before. As well as the question: what's going on today? And how could Daniel help me understand it? I didn't want to go to the places that are currently in vogue: I was looking for post-1990 struggles, but ones that have already been going on for some time, fighting and creating, both at the same time. I'm currently reading Kristin Ross's book *Communal Luxury: the Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*: which isn't the umpteenth narrative history of the Commune, but rather a work that delves into what still remains of its imaginary, the surviving militant energy that we can still find here and there, for instance at Occupy Wall Street or among the indignados. That's a bit like what I'm trying to do as well. I also immediately decided against using 'experts'; I stuck to looking at the anonymous. Daniel taught me - he put it a lot better than me - that these anonymous people in struggle represent all that is great about politics. I wanted to stay true to that. More than anything, these people are active. They develop their thinking, even if they haven't pulled it all together yet, and still isn't ready for analysis. I wanted to give life to them, to show them in their beauty. To show that these fine people are also a beacon - that they are what engagement means! This is so much better than sitting in front of the TV or sinking into drugs or nihilism. They live better, it's as simple as that. It's a fuller life, it's even more... fun! For my generation,

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activism meant sacrificing a lot of things, never going outside of the collective (which was everything). Being revolutionary also means laughter, love, dancing, children, 'normal' things; but if you followed the ideology too closely, it meant sacrificing all that. Today such a division is senseless.

That's what Bensaïd was referring to when he wrote that activism is 'the opposite of a sad passion'.

Absolutely. Anyone involved knows that, feels that. You go from powerlessness and submission to action, to creating something. The problem is that today media and consumerism do everything possible to stop there being connections, encounters, affection, thinking. All those who are associated with collective action feel a sort of joyous melancholy. I've often seen that. Rarely does our joy in victory last long, and the road still to be travelled is always a long one. So bitterness can take over. But those who we meet on this road, those who share in our commitment, those who we go through such wonderful experiences with - it's them who make this engagement a joyous passion.

So I want to hand over the mic to these anonymous fighters, so we can see what kind of people they are. Not movements or abstractions. But subjects who are also part of a collective: the landless peasants in Brazil, the Indian resistance, the right-to-housing movement in France, trade unions... I had thought about including Chile, but there weren't the same kind of long-term movements. And I wasn't just cataloguing whatever struggles are out there... I had to make some choices. I could of course have looked at some things happening in Spain or in Greece. But film is money, and I made this one with a lot of activist energy and not a lot of funding. Every day I thanked the technicians, the collectives, the producers and filmmakers immersed in day-to-day action. Without them there'd have been no film. Not one like this, anyway.

Your film has a real aesthetic quality, in its composition as well as how it's shot. Sometimes we tend to think an activist film has to be rough at the edges, or even ugly, in order to seem convincing [laughter]. How did you address the question of form?

This is essential. A film is always a form. When I talked about honing in on the beauty of political engagement, I meant this, too. Even if we didn't have much time, our work on the images was vital. It certainly wasn't OK for it to look ugly. There is already violence and even death in it... the image itself had to look as good as possible, as far as a documentary allows. And my photo editor Ned Burgess was right there, contributing his kindness as well as his talent.

There are a lot of words, throughout the film. Some of Daniel's writing appears in it, a sort of red thread running through my narrative; I needed a wider backdrop to bring them to life.

How long did it take you to produce the film?

From the time when I first wanted to do it, through the writing process, the search for funding, shooting (a few days shooting, but scattered over a long period), months of production, and now preparing its release... a total of five years!

So you set off on this journey with Bensaïd's writings... how did you decide where you were headed?

The world is vast and I wanted to show something of its extent. For example, in terms of Latin American struggles I'd already met Subcomandante Marcos in Mexico, but here I wanted to share the experiences of the Brazilian landless peasants, who've waged a thirty-year battle that has been necessary for many of their survival. In Bolivia the election

of Evo Morales, after a series of often-violent struggles, allowed me to show a fight that resulted in victory. In France I had already met with the right-to-housing movement as early as 1996, impressed by the obstinacy of the homeless in refusing to accept injustice, as well as militants' creativity in promoting dignity in the face of poverty and other people's contempt.

But you'd never been to Brazil before, which is quite a surprise...

Brazil was very important for Daniel: he went there a number of times, and took part in the formation of the Workers' Party (PT). It was following his activity there that I found out about the landless peasants' movement. This was something very tangible: a highly organised political force that defends its autonomy as well as being in dialogue with the PT. It embodies a series of attempts at self-management, popular control and participatory democracy. With its travelling schools - the teachers who head out into the areas where they've taken over land - this movement has managed to train two generations of young people who have successfully resisted the trap of voluntary servitude. They call their perspective 'Eurosocialism' - a new word, but a resonant one, and an urgently important task for our time.

And how about Bolivia - you said you wanted the film to include a success story?

What happened in Bolivia in 2005 is a real revolution. I wanted to have a success story, and what happened there was more than I could have hoped for. We ignored institutional politics and the emblematic Evo Morales, and instead went to Cochabamba to seek out the protagonists (most of them illiterate indigenous people) of the Water War, a 2000 struggle that defeated the ultra-neoliberal government and a French multinational. I met with Oscar Olivera, one of the founders of the 'EurosCoordinadora'. This organisation not only brought together a whole people in struggle during the Water War, but also showed the way for those fighting over the country's coca and hydrocarbon resources. Oscar is still active in the social movements: he refuses to accept any kind of governmental post. As soon as I first saw Oscar he seemed somehow familiar. For me there is a community of people in struggle, and they look alike - they are all equally beautiful. Like the women of La Busserine in the northern districts of Marseille!

It was the 2005 banlieue revolt that brought you to the northern districts of Marseille; and yet there weren't any riots there?

Indeed - they had already taken place beforehand. These misunderstood revolts were a political baptism. You can't see the reality of the place if you're distracted by the rag of drugs and Kalashnikovs, as the media and politicians normally present it. Via some activist networks I met Fadela, then I was introduced to Fatima and Karima. Their collective is active in these neighbourhoods stopping the cycle of violence among the youth, as well as denouncing the violence that's being perpetrated against these young people. These women are active in social work and educational associations as well as developing an uncompromising political critique that allows them to propose alternatives. For me, they are the real heroines of our time.

You bring in the voices of the right-to-housing movement, which has succeeded in promoting the requisition of empty private housing. But the film also provides a platform for another cause that is often neglected (or even disliked) in social movements today: trade unions. Why?

I think that the trade union struggle is simply essential. At its best it is the bearer of values that we have sometimes tended to forget: solidarity, sharing... As Daniel put it, it reminds us that the class struggle exists, and it smashes open the false unity of a race, a nation or a religion - because you find that there is always another side within each of these camps. These are words that we really need to listen to, particularly at the present moment.

I first discovered Christophe when I was watching a video online about the pensions strike at the Total oil refinery in Donges. Moved to tears, he said something almost exactly the same as what Daniel once wrote: 'There are defeats that have the taste of a victory'. I was bowled over to see a union leader showing such emotion, and by the fact that he had simultaneously found the words to express such a fundamental political insight. I thought that if I put him at the end of the film, I could show how we can overcome disheartenment and defeat and progress onwards, despite everything.

You have already produced a film on Victor Serge. Do you consider yourself close to Trotskyism?

I've never fully identified with it. I am, let's say, of a Trotskyist education. It's a question we could talk over for ages - I have often been very angry with certain Trotskyist organisations, particularly in Latin America. The most important thing, in my view, is that for Victor Serge, for Daniel, for the MIR and the comrades I've had across my life, is that communism - the communist utopia - is something magnificent, and we must do everything possible to defeat Stalinist communism. The price we have had to pay because of Stalinism and the Communist Parties the world over is an enormous one. It caused very serious damage. We have to save the word 'communism' - the common, sharing. This word has been polluted, contaminated, and stained with blood and authoritarianism. I very much like the idea of libertarian communism, which Michael Löwy has described very well.

Bringing together Marxists and anarchists?

Yes. We can't leave aside the question of organisation, connections and structures. I'm no believer in spontaneism - that kind of anarchism is not my tradition. The movement I most identify with today, out of all those I've encountered is the landless peasants' struggle. This movement has shown an extraordinary kind of political intelligence. It has been going for thirty years, and lays emphasis on education, freedom, resistance and a refusal to submit to authority. It does everything possible to escape the trap of voluntary servitude. We need organisation, but I don't know what form it should take. The Zapatistas are also making an opening, in this sense.

But contrary to what some might think when they read this, your film isn't about a party or any particular political current?

No, not at all! It's not a film on the NPA, though Daniel was of course an intellectual for this party. It's anything but a manifesto. It is political, certainly, but since there is a personal narrative and a storyline it is just a film, not a militant act. It is a film that poses questions, and I don't give the answers: people can discuss them after they've seen it. It is very wide in its scope, spanning both my homelands - Latin America and France. This is the first time that I've shot a film in France, and it changed my way of 'being French' quite a lot. I wanted it to be wide in its scope, as these experiences exist everywhere, and I found some of them here [in France] and others in Latin America.

What thought do you want to leave in your viewers' heads as they head out of the cinema?

I want them to be energised. I want the film to open up a corner of their mind that can be open to ideas and actions. I hope that it can do at least a little something, in these terrible times, to free us from our sense of impotence. I want it to be una canción, a paean to possibility. If it does that, I'll be happy with it.

Translated by David Broder for Versobooks.com.

See the original article on the French site Ballast.