

*Les tourmentes* by Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd.

Heathen ritual and modern exorcism.

There certainly exists, among the shepherds of Mount Lozère in the wilds of the Cévennes in southern France, an ancient ritual which has been passed down by word-of-mouth, a bit like a secret, mysterious and powerful. A ritual which takes place there where the elements are unleashed, there where the tempest blows and which is concerned with the people and animals who are lost and have disappeared from the memory of the living.

For those who remain, for the shepherds travelling in desert-like solitude, there is perhaps nothing more important than exorcising the feeling of forgetting which has precipitated the strays into this crepuscular exile where the light appears as the pale winter sun and seems to ignore the eventuality of a spring. It is to counter this amnesia, this fatal distraction of oneself and others, that the ritual is perpetuated. Between ceremony and invocation, it is practised in the winter, the time of strong winds and extreme weather, when all that lives seems to die. And it describes the stages of a difficult progression which links the sites of disappearances with the agony, attempting to rekindle the fire, the necessary presence, of those who were lost in the storms and never returned.

*Les tourmentes*, Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd's latest film, depicts in its first movement the different moments of this ritual and follows the advance of a shepherd and his flock in the middle of winter towards the summit of Mount Lozère. Step by step the film accompanies this slow progression, marking the shepherd's stops like the stations of an improbable roadside cross, yet tinged with paganism. Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd films the sheep, the footpaths and the rocks, the shepherd, the cairns and standing stones like so many elements of a magical act which interweaves the visible with the invisible, the profane with the sacred. His camera follows the flock at the boundary between two worlds, that of a present contained in effort and grace, the wind of ascension and that of a buried past, hidden, in which the lost will be dormant voices, waking up the bells and the bleats of the flock. The image here is rocky, brutal, earthbound, made of granite and thick clouds, contrasting black and white, occasionally slashed with the sparkling blue of frozen skies. The sound is unrestrained, irrational, haunting, the gusts hypnotic in their repetition. All of this combined leads us to confusion and disorientation towards the final noise and which precedes the instant where the resolution of the ritual takes place.

During this voyage that is like an initiation, a female voice accompanies and guides us in the Occitan language, revealing to us the mysteries that preside over the ritual and allowing us to enter progressively into this incantation to the lost, up to the summit, until the sacrifice is offered, the ritual offering of a life to summon those who are lost.

The film could stop here, at this recitation and the scene of an ancestral rite which the cinema, by its formal invention, gives us as a sort of poetic truth. Nevertheless, Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd's point is not to celebrate a heathen tradition. That which interests and touches him, is a meditation on the tempest and its different ways of losing the living. It doesn't just blow on desolate mountains, but sweeps the icy world which is ours, jostles us and takes some people far away, sometimes too far away for them to be able to return. Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd appropriates, in a surprising cinematographic gesture, the hidden evidence of the shepherd's ritual, and as a film maker, gives us a form of it that is more actual and exemplary.

In the north of the Lozère, there is a particular place where the storms reign. The psychiatric hospital at Saint Alban has received alienated patients for many decades. Within the dry-stone walls that delimit the asylum, there is a cemetery, Madman's Pen, a communal grave where more than three thousand anonymous bodies rest, put there by a society that has no other location for their disorder and unreason than a hole in the memory of places. Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd films actual patients at Saint Alban and he films them head on in their enclosure, looks at them like immemorial rocks, sees a mineral life running through them, elementary and prodigious because it's so other, so different, so elsewhere. He films their faces, their bodies, their hands as he filmed the flock and the shepherd during their ascent, with the same desire to conjure up a disappearance that hasn't been realised yet. Going back to the medical diagnoses which signpost the story of Saint Alban and which an impersonal voice reveals to us in a glacial commentary, Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd makes a census of those whose bodies feed the earth of the cemetery. And so doing, he draws up a list of all those who disappeared. Then, only keeping their first names, he asks the patients at the hospital to name them, unreeling this litany of names as a long appeal over the hieratic images of those who were ravaged by madness. And in this movement where he mixes the voices of today with the names of yesterday and inscribes them in this ancestral practice of a ritual, something sees the light of day. We are involved in a sacred act. In the looks of those filmed by Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd, even as they name the first names of the absentees, there is the presence of those who return among us but there is also the presence of those who we are facing and who are at that moment there, terribly there. Then there is the presence of Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd who, because he is filming makes all of that happen and finally there is our presence as spectators who can only respond to this appeal and travel along with it. And what is truly touching isn't an act of memory carried by each and everyone but this magic operation which sees the lost in the call of others in a reality which, if it always escapes us, is already becoming closer and more sensitive to ours.

If Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd constructs his film between the crazy grass of the madman's pen and the refusal to forget which animates the shepherd's ritual, it is to better pass from one to the other and, jostling the frontiers of these two narratives, to appropriate the primordial force of an exorcism to better allow us to share it. And it is with subtle and sometimes disconcerting editing, almost confusing the two stories, that they can both advance as a pair, to mutually complete and illuminate each other, playing the shadowy zones of the past to better take us into the field of the present, there where our relationship with the other, with others, with all the others is so important today.

*Les tourmentes*, beneath its crepuscular style, is a luminous film, shot through with a drive for life which borrows rarely frequented paths. A film maker of links and the invisible, Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd proves with this film a rare talent, which is to put us in touch with a secret that is unnamed but which the cinema may sometimes let us experience, that of our belonging to and dependency on beings, on places and on the things which constitute us.