

## **Refugees've got talent**

Mladen Dolar

On 20 June 2011, such is the diegetic framework of the video, there was the celebration of the World Refugee Day, the date established in 2000 by the UN to remind us of millions of refugees and asylum seekers, uncountable masses dispersed over all quarters of the world, literally uncountable since no one can establish their number and they are always more than can possibly be counted. In order to officially honor this occasion a Slovene celebration was duly organized in the asylum center, as the appropriate mark and display of our conscience and readiness, our participation in the international concern. The camera at a celebration is called for as the witness for history, for the gaze of the Other, and the place of this witness was on this occasion courageously assumed by Katarina Zdjelar. Bearing witness about what and for whom, for whose gaze?

The first peculiarity of the video is the fact that Katarina Zdjelar never accords us a single general frame, she never allows us to have the view of the whole. There are no orientational shots so that one could get an overview of the setting, to place its parts and locate the protagonists. One is constantly frustrated by not having at least one panorama shot to get our bearings as if the camera would deliberately disregard the basic rules of the reportage and the documentary. One could say that the take of the whole, from an elevated perspective, from an ideal viewpoint, is the proper frame that all celebrations call for, this is the proper perspective for which they are staged. Participants can observe only from their partial and limited viewpoints, but the celebration has been made in view of a perspective that practically no one can inhabit, except for the eye of the camera. A celebration is always a staging for an ideal gaze, but this is here completely lacking. The ideal gaze of the other is the viewpoint from which history is looking at us, the frame in which we want to be placed and from where we want to be seen. With the absence of this ideal gaze we are stuck with a disjointed series of partial views that cannot be quite pieced together and totalized. We are condemned to a multiplicity of partial aspects which are always focused on a detail, a gesture, an object, one partial view next to the other. The view is partial first in the sense of being just a part, a partition, an extract, parceling, then partial in the sense of being one-sided, biased, hence non-objective, too particular and limited. What we thus get is a series of side-views without the main view that would provide a center for all the pieces, thus the very opposite of what the accounts of celebrations usually provide – and after all celebrations are staged to be

filmed and recorded, to be photogenic, and to testify with an image in which we appear as likeable. Here the view is broken and dispersed, all objects appear to be too close, without a general plan, without orientation, as parts without a whole.

What we see through this biased and partial view of the camera are always partial objects. A tie, tied so many times over, but never properly, the placement of the microphone into the tie, just as with the professional TV presenters, but here it never quite works, the microphone resists, the tie resists. Hands holding mobile phones and taking pictures, Slovene hands and then refugee hands. Hands nervously holding the paper and crumpling it. A pencil being nervously turned around between fingers. Cigarettes hidden behind the back. Feet moving in synchronized rhythm of dance steps, but there is no music, feet dance by themselves to an unknown beat, uncertain and not quite holding the beat, the rhythm eludes them. Feet in high heels nervously pacing back and forth, the lady is obviously in charge, responsible for the smooth unrolling of the plan and for everything to form a whole. Feet in high heels demonstrate the organizational resoluteness and determination, the concern for a flawless execution; they show who is here the conductor, conducting with dance steps up and down the podium, the choreography of dance steps which is at all times of the verge between the decisive control and the uncontrolled neurosis.

The next trait is the lack of synchronization. The soundtrack as if cannot catch up with the image, we are all the time irritated by not seeing the source of the voices, we don't see where the music is coming from, although we see some separate shots of very bored Slovene musicians, we don't hear the music to regulate the dance. There are too many background sounds for the picture to absorb, pieces of dialogue are like intruders, so are the calls of the organizers, the screams of the kids, chunks of official speeches, the buzz, the amplification that doesn't quite work. Just as on the level of frames and cuts the pieces don't add up to the whole, so on the level of shots the image and the sound never quite manage to add up. They don't blend so as to create a diegetic reality in which we could recognize ourselves and feel at home. The key feature of the whole: there is no match, there is no complementing relationship, no fusing into a whole, no glossy montage to create the illusion of a consistent reality, no smoothly running reconstruction of an event that deserves to be marked and remembered.

The point where the image and the sound nevertheless meet, at least provisionally, is the central event of the celebration, namely the staging of the TV show, with the Afghani presenter in broken down Slovene presiding over the distribution of prizes for the best song,

the winner of an alleged song contest. This could appropriately bear the title “Refugees’ve got talent”, this is like the miniature and caricature version of shows such as ‘Pop stars’ or ‘X-Factor’. The message of this event is clear: refugees are people like you and me. First of all, they learn Slovene and are making praiseworthy efforts to be integrated into our culture. And second, the best proof that they are indeed human and that they can be assimilated into our western framework is the fact that they already participate on the core of our culture, on its constitutive authentic element, which is none other than television, show, the winning songs, Eurovision, talent hunting. The proof of their humanity is their media humanization, their capacity to appear in a show, their ability to display their supposed otherness as yet another media attraction. We can stage our sympathy for the refugees only by staging their inclusion in our show, their universal capacity to appear on TV. Television makes the man, this is the distinctive human universal. They are just like us insofar their secret desire is just like ours, namely to appear on TV – what else would a refugee want? The celebration is the show of our humanity, and the core of this show is the TV show in which refugees enact their humanity for us. The TV show is the allegory of this celebration, the show within the show, its diminished model, its *mise-en-abyme*, the classical device where one part reflects the whole. – But although they have good intentions, namely to be just like us by their capacity for the show, the good intentions nevertheless get thwarted, the Cameroon winner doesn’t quite know how to behave like a winner, the presenter is awkward and misses his cues, the winning song doesn’t quite work, although ‘we’ try to make the impression of being entertained, we clap our hands to the beat, we try to help them along. But the thing doesn’t work as it should, so they nevertheless prove that they are not quite like us, however much they try. They lack practice, otherwise they are ok, but we shouldn’t expect too much, for after all they are refugees and they may eventually learn.

If in this piece refugees stage what they are not but what they should be according to our assumption, namely secretly coveting the TV show, then in *Act 2* we have an immigrant, earning his living as an extra, who equally stages himself for the other, but now staging what he should be according to his true habitus as excluded from our community. He is forced to stage the supposed Eastern European criminal, drug dealer, arms dealer, a Mafioso, a drunkard, a fistfighter. If he wants to earn some modest fee, then he is paid as an actor to play himself, the image of him that the show expects of him. If refugees supposedly only wish to appear on TV, then his true wish is supposedly to rob, drink and murder. The more he impersonates the image of the other in the eyes of the western other, the more he will be

praised. But he can't expect to be paid much, for it is clear that it doesn't require high acting skills to just act oneself, so this can't count as serious work, and nobody can quite imagine that in his habitus he might be something else. As a marginal he will remain marginal, a picturesque background for some more glamorous action, or as an optional addendum, a minute digression cut out from five hours of shooting. Once a marginal, always a marginal, paid for the role of a marginal. East Europeans are born to be extras and we pay them to stage their own exclusion.

For which gaze is the celebration staged? It is clear that 'they' stage themselves for 'us', for the Slovene public, for our community. But the eye of the camera mercilessly catches their gazes, it is obvious that they look aside, they don't know where to look and where to put themselves. They always look away, their gazes don't meet ours, they don't recognize themselves in ours, they cannot return the gaze that we are directing at them. They are put in the position of enacting what 'we' would want to see, but it is clear at all moments that this role is not written on their non-white skin. But also the Slovene participants don't know where to look, they are obviously bored and stare sideways, waiting for this thing to be over. On the other hand the Slovene public is staging this occasion for another gaze, for the international public, for the gaze of the Other, for the gaze in front of which we are trying to present our inclusion into the world-wide endeavors, our human vigilance and concern, in the hope that the Other will see us and return an appraising gaze, tap us on the back for our effort.

The public for which all this is put up is nowhere to be seen. It is composed on the one hand of the organizers, the officials, the social workers, the caretakers, all of them dressed up for the occasion (while 'they' are in their training suits, corresponding in advance to the Slovene cliché of the 'other'), and on the other hand of children who have been brought there from schools, happy to miss their classes, just as in the times of socialism the school used to bring us in well organized ways to wave to some prominent politicians. Different times, now one waves to the refugees. The children are not there just as the audience which has to be somehow flocked together in absence of any interest of the general public, but also as the participants who are to present a program rehearsed for the occasion, to stage 'us' for 'them'. Children are the best enactment of our community. The message of their performance couldn't have been clearer, the text of their song goes something like this: "I am the true beauty, look at me you all, ... admire me you all." In the staging of 'us' for 'them' everything is laid out: we are the bearers of beauty, and it belongs to you to admire it. Beauty proclaims itself beautiful and presents itself to the admiring gaze.

The form of this work *is* its content. Cuts, partial views, isolated details, partial objects, lack of synchronization, discrepancy between sound and image, gazes that look away, missed encounters, impossible whole, mismatch, empty slogans, screeching noise: this form very precisely refracts multiculturalism and the care for the refugees, it is the form of their content. We are looking at a multiple disposition of staging, where ‘they’ stage themselves for ‘us’ presenting the image in which we want to see them, and ‘we’ stage ourselves for ‘them’ under the image in which we want to be seen, and all together is staged for the gaze of the Other, in the hope that we will appear likeable and that this is the way that the Other wants to see us. Only Katarina Zdjelar has spoiled the game: she staged this staging itself, its contrived nature, its split, its crevices, its behind-the-scene. Katarina Zdjelar thereby convincingly continues her engaged search, subtly displayed by all her work: the missed encounter of cultures, hidden presuppositions of staging, the disposition of gazes, invisible tentacles of domination, vacuous proclamations, dismantling of ideologies that are self-evidently offered and imposed by images, mechanisms of inclusion coinciding with mechanisms of exclusion, uncovering the obvious which is naturally overlooked in its very obviousness. If the motto of the celebration was that everyone should do at least one good deed for the refugees and the excluded, then she made one that nobody expected nor wanted.