

Land of Mine: An Ethical Example of Wisdom and Empathic Rationality

By Patrizia Piredda

The *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, like every Greek tragic trilogy, represents a series of catastrophes and grieves provoked by the violent feeling of revenge that prevents reason from evaluating the best actions to take. Orestes is hunted and tormented by the Erinyes because he killed his mother, who assassinated her husband, who originally sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia, Orestes' sister.

In the last tragedy of the trilogy, however, a fundamental event happens: Athena, goddess of reason and justice, enters the scene as the judge of a regular process, during which a jury composed by twelve Athenians and the goddess herself has to judge whether to condemn or to absolve Orestes and therefore whether to stop the Erinyes hunting him. Orestes is eventually absolved and the long chain of sufferings and grieves is broken: the Erinyes are transmuted into Eumenides and Orestes, the last descendant of Agamemnon's dynasty, finds peace.

The importance of this myth lies on the fact that it represents the passage from the habit of perpetuating the state of conflict throughout the violent reaction of revenge, which derives from the incapacity to limit the feeling of hatred, to the habit of mitigating the natural emotional reactions of hatred, violence, and resentment throughout rational thinking.

The myth of Orestes brings us to reflect on a number of fundamental aspects of the human character and on the building of our social habits, based on the capacity of feeling emotions and empathy in a balanced way, always in combination with the critical thinking of reason.

What can one do in the case of suffering from violence, or of having witnessed or perpetrated violent actions? In the ancient Greek society, violence (*bia*) was known as the mother of tyranny and defeat, while on the opposite end there was democracy, viz. a society based on free discussion and exchange of opinions. However, the statement according to which *violence brings violence* is only partially true. Any violent act begets revenge when the agent believes that only by means of punishment grounded on the principle of *an eye for an eye* it is possible to act by justice and to restore peace. These ethical reflections on the Greek myth are once more expressed in *Land of Mine*, a

historical movie from 2015, directed by Martin Zandvliet and nominated for the *Best Foreign Language Film* at the *Academy Awards* in 2017.

After the surrender of Nazi Germany, the disposal of over two million anti-personnel mines all along the Danish beaches immediately started. German POWs were used for this dangerous work, many of whom were just boys, the same ones that the Nazi regime had sent to war after the Wehrmacht's decimation.

At the beginning of the movie, Sergeant Rasmussen savagely beats up one German prisoner who is strongly holding the Danish flag, probably stolen and kept as an ironic trophy. In order to understand this emotional reaction, it is necessary to take into account the fact that at the end of every war, the most common feelings toward the enemy army, guilty of horrible crimes and atrocities, are hatred, resentment and the desire of revenge. These feelings prevent empathy, compassions and sympathy for prisoners to raise and consequently hinder the possibility to attribute some value to their lives. At the beginning of the story, Sergeant Rasmussen, appointed to lead a team of prisoners for clearing an area of Danish beaches, is entirely dominated by these feelings as well as Lieutenant Ebbe, who manifests a strong rancour and a firm will to take revenge. However, being in daily contact with young prisoners, Rasmussen notices that his team is formed by boys who call their own mother when they feel pain and fear. Slowly, as Rasmussen grows aware of the situation, his feelings change and his hatred, under the control of critical reflection, turns into compassion. This allows him to act wisely and prevents him from committing injustices in turn. Rasmussen, insofar as Lieutenant Ebbe told him, promises his boys that once the clearing is finished they will go home. Without asking for authorisation, because his prisoners had not been eating for days, he personally brings them some food taken from the military depot and decides to relieve them from work on a Sunday so they can enjoy a football game. The peak of this empathic feeling is reached when Rasmussen provides moral support to one of his boys, who has just lost his twin because of an explosion. It is undeniable that many Nazi soldiers that many Nazi soldiers never had similar behaviours and that they almost never developed a thought based on mercy and empathy, which permits us to see ourselves mirrored in the others. The irrational and uncritical acceptance of the false beliefs promulgated by Nazi propaganda (like every uncritical acceptance of populist discourses) originated from the fear that impels to look for strong certainties that might protect the individual (or at least give an illusion of protection) as a part of a group, even if this happens to the detriment of freedom of thought and agency.

The characters of the movie, moreover, are very young boys educated under Nazism. Forged according to the principles of hatred, anti-Semitism, violence and the crazy myths of the purity and supremacy of the Arian race, the generations of the 1920s and 1930s developed their own image of the world founded on the emotion of fear and on the feeling of hatred against diversity: a concept of identity, in other words, which contemplates alterity as something potentially dangerous, since the other, being a stranger, is considered as a potential threat.

Hatred generates hatred. There are two possible behavioural solutions for Rasmussen: to take revenge on his prisoners for the evil produced by the Nazi ideology that had been feeding them since they were born; or to listen to his own feelings and reason, and to show them a different way of life, built on humanity and wisdom. Rasmussen's wisdom becomes evident during the football game, when his dog gets killed by a missed hidden mine which had remained undisposed. Suffering from the pain for the death of his dog, after his first reaction of fury – the same he felt when he beat up a prisoner at the beginning of the movie – Rasmussen is able to understand that the prisoners had not premeditated to let mines hidden in the sand and that it was just a human mistake. Therefore, he can regain control over his own emotions and eventually bring his duty to completion, viz. he grants the safety of the beach: he decides that the prisoners will check the safety of the ground by walking in a row all over the beach, but he does not take revenge or punish them. He does not allow hatred to take over reason and justice.

Rasmussen chooses, therefore, the second solution and thanks to his empathic and rational behaviour he manages to provide the young prisoners with a new perspective over life because he donates them an example of something they have not yet experienced: the feeling of justice that paves the way to democracy. In fact, as opposed to the violence of dictatorship, democracy expects the existence of disputes, insofar as without diversity there would never be changes or evolution. Democracy does not mean simply putting the city government in the hands of the population: this is, indeed, extremely problematic because the judgment of the individual - who is part of a group - is influenced by rhetoric. The propagandistic use of rhetoric is aimed at enhancing the passions in the audience as to convey the general opinion toward a precise direction; it is also aimed at diminishing the presence of a rational reflection through which it is possible to see the errors of argumentation and to eradicate prejudices, false beliefs and erroneous opinions. That who does not develop such critical capacity risks having his/her emotions manipulated and, therefore, emitting erroneous judgments. When one is not aware of the importance and dangerousness of passions, it is possible that one

easily listens to and accepts the absurd argumentations of propaganda, by approving and backing dictatorship and consequently by renouncing freedom. By thinking on the power of propaganda, Jaspers writes that the conflict of information, the prohibition of free public discussion and finally the repetition of falsehood might turn a community into an unresponsive dull mass (Karl Jaspers, *Vernunft und Widervernunft in unserer Zeit*, München, Piper, 1950). When the human being does not act like a thinking individual, he falls in the trap of sophists whom Jaspers calls the *sorcerers*, the *enchanters* that create illusion by promising knowledge and by claiming to act for the good of the others (Jaspers).

Such “sorcerers” fight reason with the weapon of “anti-reason”, which requires the enchanter’s and the enchanted audience’s cooperation: the mediocre and undecided people who legitimate anti-reason by believing in its absurdity and by adopting the rhetoric of scientific objectivity (Jaspers).

Democracy, then, means that everyone should develop critical capacity to have a balanced interaction with their emotions, which are necessary for judgment, without letting them prevail over reason. In this way, it is possible within a group to compare different opinions based on knowledge and on rational and critical evaluation, which time after time permits to make decisions for the sake of social equilibrium.

This is what Rasmussen does. Even if he is blinded by hatred and pain, he is able to find an emotional balance between the feeling of grudge against the prisoners and that of compassion towards the young men. Eventually, reason prevails: it is right to punish those who are guilty of the evil they have perpetrated, but that it would be wrong to take revenge: this rational behaviour permits to break the same closed circle that reproduces the violence in the *Oresteia*.

Against the will of Lieutenant Ebbe, who instead of sending the young prisoners home, after the clearing is finished, assigns them to clear another beach, a much more dangerous one, therefore condemning them to death. Rasmussen decides to keep to his promise; he goes and picks them up with a truck and drives them a few metres away from the border with Germany, where he sets them free. By doing so, he prevents the perpetuation of the chain of hatred, which characterises Orestes’s myth according to which the victims sooner or later become oppressors, and prevents his own feeling of hatred from causing him to act unfairly.

The movie shows that the ethical sentiment depends on the individual and does not concern complying with laws and rules; these are fundamental for organising societies but, being made by human beings, can be unjust or wrong. Therefore, one must develop

critical thought, which enables to judge and act well. The only possibility for the young prisoners to develop this feeling, in order to be rescued from an unjust system, is to develop the maturity to understand that they were educated to hate and to obey blindly. In other words, only by letting them modify and improve the consciousness of themselves and others, to develop a better conception of life through the experience of diversity and, above all, of justice, the young prisoners have a possibility to direct their lives toward wisdom.