BEING TRUE, EYE TO EYE

Pedro Rosa Mendes

1.

It rained forever the whole night. There was no other sound other than a woman weeping or praying or begging,

„I did not, I did not, I did not"

in the house next to our miserable hotel, the Dokone, formerly the Florida before the war ravaged the old quarters of Mamba Point in Monrovia.

From one of my notebooks :
"12 November 2003. There is no light. Wolf lyes flat in bed, on hisboxers. He meditates. The woman stopped crying after I shouted

Stop it!

to the darkness and the rain. I shouted to the man beating the woman with a belt, or with a whip. Eventually, Wolf rises and sits. He starts recalling:
'There was an offensive from the Northern Alliance against an area under Taliban control but which was not affiliated with their regime. There was a bizarre military alliance between enemies back then. General Dostum's forces stormed the region, including the village from where my interpreter came from. Everything was brought down. When we reached the village, my interpreter looked for his house. Dostum's men had killed is entire family. My interpreter had six children. From newborns to grown-ups, like a staircase. It was still possible when we arrived to the village to see where Dostum's had crushed the children's skulls. A stain... It looked like the victims had been grabbed by their ankles, or so I guessed, because one could still see purpled marks of hands printed on the babies' legs. The heads... Just like that. Young skulls are soft. I entered one of the houses and there was the body of a girl. I couldn't exactly understand what happened with her since her dress was folded back, covering her head. I mean, the place of her head. My interpreter cried out, desperate. He cried and cried and cried. I walked outside and raised my hands high:

how? How?...

It was winter. It was Winter 2001. Everything was frozen. I tried to dig a grave for my interpreter's children. I didn't succeed. Everything was frozen. I remained with him for three days".

2.

On 23 July, 1939, Gandhi wrote a short letter to "the one person in the world who can prevent a war which may reduce humanity to the savage state" – that person being Herr Hitler.

"Will you listen to the appeal of one who has deliberately shunned the method of war not without considerable success?"

Whatever response, if any, to Gandhi's letter, History provides an extensive illustration to what became a cause of distress and almost mental disruption to Gandhi: the realization of his own impotence in the face of mass slaughter. (He wrote a second letter to Hitler a few months later.) Rabindranath Tagore, for whom Gandhi nurtured a mutual deep admiration and affection, identified on his nonviolent resistance "the fierce joy of annihilation". Gandhi didn't fear death and kept that moral contempt alight until his very last moments, when a fateful, violent end to his life became more and more plausible in the weeks proceeding his assassination by an Hindu extremist in 30 January 1948.

The outbreak of religious and communal violence in the context of India's independence and Partition heightened a sense of melancholy to Gandhi's last months. The Great Soul would walk by the communities of Bengal and then Bihar, his bleeding feet walking on narrow paths tainted with the blood of Hindus and Muslims, his nonviolent stand met with growing hostility. One time, a Muslim spat on his face; Gandhi kept walking. He would kept walking every morning, from village to village, often singing Tagore's creepy song:

Walk alone.
If they answer not thy call, walk alone;
If they are afraid and cower mutely facing the wall,
O thou of evil luck,
Open thy mind and speak out alone.

3.

Most of the time that me and Wolf spent together on assignment, documenting the suffering caused by Charles Taylor in West Africa, we were wearing the skin of journalists. I still entertained back then, as I did for many years, that objectivity, neutrality and personal detachment would honor human suffering in terms that could render it morally tangible to strangers. I think Wolf knew best all along about the limits of objectivity and how radical a commitment you have to take to honor your intentions – to be morally loyal to your program of work in a way that makes it coherent and one whole with your program of life. I thought of Wolf, and his work, when reading a passage of Pankaj Mishra (on his An End to Suffering) about how Nietzsche and Buddha attempted similarly to reaffirm the natural dignity of human beings without recourse to metaphysics, theology, reason or political idealism. As acknowledged by Nietzsche on Buddha, in Anti-Christ:

"The spiritual weariness he discovered and which itself as an excessive 'objectivity' (that is to say weakening of individual interest, loss of centre of gravity, of 'egoism'), he combated by directing even the spiritual
interests back to the individual person. In the teaching of the Buddha, egoism becomes a duty: the one thing 'needful', the 'how can you get rid of suffering' regulates and circunscribes the entire spiritual diet".

I strongly believe – having never discussed this much with him – that Wolf's uniqueness derives from his photojournalism being a radical form of self-overcoming. He's saved from nihilism albeit living a lifetime in close encounters with different forms of human bestiality. There is thus a quality of the superman who built "a power over oneself and over fate", which has "penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct" (On the Genealogy of Morals).

4.

T.E. Lawrence, whom we are both very fond of, sensed madness near, even if in the form of wisdom and alterity, as "it would be near to the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two cultures, two environments" (Seven Pillars of Wisdom).

Borderlines of all kinds, from mental to political to cultural, are central to Wolf's account of the human
nature we all inhabit and share. It is that inherent madness that he crudely displays, with layers of historical, political, emotional and linguistic complexity.
Throughout Wolf's extensive body of work, human reality emerges as revelation, vary rarely as exposure, whereby each photographic moment captures the accumulation of references that define a sense of individual, collective and social identity – identity being that ultimate sovereign form of madness over one's self.

Displacement, deportation, exile, exclusion, elimination, derangement and, hélas!, genocide (a distopian form of negative identitarian enterprise) are abundant throughout Wolf's coverage of present and past human tragedies. He himself is not immune to the unpredictable ways on which – as in many stories we pursued together – collective memories can strike the nerve of individual narratives of belonging.

I still vividly remember the moment Wolf and myself made it from Monrovia to Gbarnga, upcountry, in November 2003, when combats still raged across St. Johns River. The United Nations peacekeeping mission controlled only a strech of

50 km out of the capital. Gbarnga, as most of infrastructure in the Eastern and Northern counties, had been raised to the ground during the civil war. When we arrived, people were collecting debris from the ruins and organizing it on small piles of catalogued rubbish: window frames here, reusable bricks there, doors somewhere else, lockers and other metal remains in yet another pile. I sensed something crumbling silently inside Wolf, as buildings implode inside even when the external walls keep standing.

We did this after the war.
In Germany, he meant.

There was a pile for books as well: a copy of an English translation of Dostoievsky's The Idiot survived the bombing of a secondary school.

In Liberia, I mean.
I held on to it, for sanity.

5.

Months before, we followed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from Sierra Leone for the provincial audiences, including to some of the districts
where the RUF hailed and ruled. The plan was to then proceed to Liberia and continue our assignment there. On the eve of our scheduled departure from Sierra Leone, we sat with TRC's president, Bishop Humper, and listened informally to his recollections of the many intense moments among victims and perpetrators.

The cleric told us that he was particulary disturbed by the story of Morie,a boy from the Pujehun district in the remote Southwest of the country. Morie was four or five years old (he was born in 1992 or 1993) when is village, Bendu Malen, was attacked by RUF rebels in retaliation of an earlier attack by a group of Kamajohs, who were part of the Civil Defence Forces. The RUF isolated the village, stormed it and killed everyone (up to 1.200 people according to TRC official estimates) but one person: Morie. He was spared out of pure cruelty: the rebels made him look for and find his father, after which they put the infant on top of his corpse and declared the boy 'Prince of the Dead'.

With much arguing, we decided to drop the flight next day to Monrovia and instead to look for Morie through the contact given by Humper of a priest in a remote mission. A helicopter from the UN mission literally left us in a clearing of the thick Pujehun forest, a couple of days later. We were somewhere down there when we heard the news that the final attack of LURD on Monrovia had started. I was frustrated, Wolf was furious: we had just lost the opportunity to be in the right place at the right time (journalistically speaking).

Or so it seemed.

We eventually found Morie through Father John Garrick, a catholic priest that went through the horrors of the civil war in Pujehun. We visited Bendu Malen and collected more pieces of Morie's story. Morie became central to both Wolf's career in the last fifteen years and a resilient thread cutting across my own work in doumenting violence and my search for the right language to capture it – on others and on myself.

I never saw Morie again. Wolf did, visiting him in Pujehun twice in the years after. That is a feature of him: Wolf documented the upbringing of someone
who grew up with the ultimate wisdom of the absolute erasure of what was the world of a five year old. Or of what we can imagine of it from Morie's own sparse memories. „In the middle of everyone, the chicken, the dogs, the goats – all killed..." Among the Ashokan inscriptions presumably originally from Kandahar (Zor
Shar in Pashto; Shar-i-Kona in Farsi) there is an Edit, a rectangular limestone block, containing 22 lines of an incomplete Greek inscription that starts: "...piety and self-mastery in all the schools of thought; and he who is master of his tongue is most master of himself" (as taken from R.E.M. Wheeler by Louis Dupree for his Afghanistan, from 1973). How many Alexandrias run in the blood of each new massacre down the Durand Line, I ask to myself looking at Wolf's significant Afghan-Pak-Indian portfolio? No digression here, all is continuity seen through Wolf's lens. For instance: thinking of us interviewing Morie, I see Gandhi on one of his silent days, on Mondays, making a silent statement to a crowd of reporters that, at his feet, diligently recored the nonspoken eloquence of nonviolence.

6.

II keep my Taylorland notebooks on a wooden ark, a fine carpentry work from Guinea-Bissau. My father commissioned this ark to a local carpenter in Southern Guinea-Bissau before I was born, in the mid-1960s, a most difficult period when he, as many young men of his generation in Portugal, were assigned to fight for the regime against the freedom fighters of PAIGC.

The ark would be
My coffin or your vessel
as he would explain to me many years after.

From my father, I also first heard about men who, in the same region, cured bad dreams and bad diseases by washing their heads on a solution of sacred words. They would write Coranic verses in wooden plaques, wash the plaques in a bucket until the ink dissolve in the water, and then pass their wet hands in their foreheads.

Wolf manages a similar epiphany but using the inversed chemistry: our nightmares and fears are captured in the lives of others. Then, through revelation – a magic practice which Wolf never gave up -, they are offered to us in the form of supranatural strenght, divine wisdom, and intemporal grace. They flow back from light and onto an emulsion of black and white images – and, in Wolf's most recent work, of lettering and caligraphy. From coffin to vessel, photography being true, eye to eye.