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Lucciole malgrado tutto

a cura di Monica Centanni, Daniele Pisani, Bepi Cengiarotti

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07	Editoriale Monica Centanni, Daniele Pisani, Bepi Cengiarotti
09	Immagini come lucciole, secondo Georges Didi-Huberman Marianna Gelussi
18	Luce rara. Una lettura politica di <i>Come le lucciole</i> di Georges Didi-Hubermann Monica Centanni
33	Per una apocalissi dialettica Daniele Pisani
47	Parole malgrado tutto Anna Banfi
53	Nutrirsi di luce. Note per un dinamismo della visione orientata Maria Bergamo
67	Bagliori di innocenza e scintille di resistenza Guglielmo Bilancioni
71	Lucciole (possibili) per lanterne (ideologiche) Alessandro Dal Lago
76	Memoria corporale Claudio Franzoni
83	‘Was aber schön ist, selig scheint es in ihm selbst’ Intermittenza delle immagini e <i>Unverletzlichkeit</i> Barnaba Maj

- 94 | 'In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni': intermittenze di un
palindromo
Stefano Bartezzaghi
- 98 | Lucciole, ovvero l'età dell'ombra
Paola di Bello
- 101 | Frammenti di cinema resistente
Stefania Rimini
- 113 | Abdullah and the Fireflies: On reading *Survivance des Luccioles*
Laura Waddington

Abdullah and the Fireflies: On reading *Survivance des Lucioles*

Laura Waddington

I read *Survivance des Lucioles* in Jordan, where I was living, from beginning to end, on a computer screen in a smoky Internet café. Georges Didi-Huberman had sent me his completed draft by email. And the book was a kind of shock.

The book focuses on many writers and thinkers whose work I love (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben), written in a way that made me understand them as if for the first time and created new connections. Most of all, there is Pasolini's 1975 text about the disappearance of the fireflies, a phenomenon he believed coincided with the destruction of culture. Pasolini, who foresaw all that has now occurred and warned of a "true fascism" that would seep into our souls, our words and gestures.

A few days later, when I went into a café in Amman to ask where I could find a copy shop to print out some extracts of the book and the owner insisted on printing out the whole of *Survivance des Lucioles* on his small home printer and offered it to me as a gift, I remember thinking, as I had many times, that one could still find something there, in the Arab world - a human contact - and that Pasolini's prediction had not spread everywhere: "I ask simply that you look around you and become aware of the tragedy [...] ... the tragedy that there are no longer human beings".

Survivance des Lucioles is a diagonal light in the dark; full of the fireflies, the often clandestine attempts to chronicle inner states, even in the darkest times, when no one appeared to hear. There are, throughout, gleams of the will to bear witness and provide counter information: Viktor Klemperer's daily chronicling of the perversion of language under the Third Reich, an act he described as an "SOS" sent to himself. And, Charlotte Beradt's recording of peoples' dreams in Nazi Berlin in order to leave for the future an intimate "seismograph" of political history, a document of political terror "haunting deep into the soul" ... all those scraps of testimony which exist and resist and are there if we only choose to see them. Georges Didi-Hu-

berman wrote: "The most 'obscure' *inner experience* can appear as a *glimmer to others* from the moment it finds its just form of construction, narration, transmission".

I was extremely touched that this beautiful book should include a description of *Border*, the video that I shot in the fields around Sangatte Red Cross Camp. Throughout *Survivance des Lucioles* Georges Didi-Huberman explores the war between different registers of light: the invading light and ferocious projectors of the society of control versus the glimmers of Pasolini's disappearing fireflies. The book ends with the violent glare of the police torches and helicopter beams sweeping through the fields of Sangatte, and unseen by them, a Kurdish boy dancing in the wind, "his blanket his only drapery: like an ornament of his dignity and somehow his [...] joy despite everything". This battle of light was always present to me in Sangatte. For the torch light that the police shone on the refugees in the fields was so harsh that when the police shone it at me to try to stop me filming, it burnt pixels in my camera. One by one, my small cameras were partially destroyed; the images, covered with the tiny flickering white lights of dead pixels. In *Border* you cannot see this. I passed the edited footage through a computer and replaced each dead pixel with its neighbour. But when I saw the photo *Fireflies* by Renata Siqueira Bueno that George Didi-Huberman has included in his book I was amazed, the fireflies photographed at night look the same as the flickering burnt pixels.

In his pages about my video, Georges Didi-Huberman mentions the Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad's film about a leper colony *The House is Black*. When I was filming in Sangatte, I had not yet had the chance to see her astonishing film. Like many works mentioned in *Survivance des Lucioles* it was buried for a time, then reappeared. But, during the months I was going back and forth to Sangatte, I always had with me, written on a scrap of paper, a poem by Forough Farrokhzad, that and a letter written by Zoroaster. One night, near the Channel Tunnel, where Afghan and Iraq refugees were trying desperately to jump on the trains headed to England, I met an Afghan man. He was cold, underdressed and very depressed. He was a housepainter, born in the Panchir Valley. He told me that one morning he had left his house and when he came back there was no house, his whole family had been killed in an American bombing. As we walked in the dark he explained that although he was a housepainter what he really loved was poetry. When I mentioned that I loved the poems of Forough Farrokhzad, his face lit up and he nearly started to cry. He abandoned his attempt to get to England, sat down on the wet ground and for hours he talked cross-leg-

ged in the pouring rain. He spoke of Forough, her life, her poems, the car crash in which she had died too young. For a few hours, there was no police, no Sangatte, only the poems of this woman that he had carried in his memory, when everything else was gone. Then the rain became a storm, the reality of Sangatte and the violence of the police returned, his face clouded over - a look of such incredible sadness and exhaustion. He was soaked to the skin. He had to go on. I lost Abdullah somewhere.

When I read *Survivance des Lucioles* in the Internet café in Jordan, I wished I could find Abdullah. I wished I could offer this book with its mention of Forough Farrokhzad and its belief in the silent threads of transmission and of chance, almost invisible but not quite, to him.

Georges Didi-Huberman asks: "Have the fireflies disappeared?" and replies: "Of course not. Some of them are near us. They brush past us in the dark; others have passed over the horizon, trying to reform elsewhere their community, their minority, their shared desire".

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