Traces of Violence
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The work of Austrian documentarian Fritz Ofner traces the causes of structural violence. His approaches to this subject are always shaped by the specific locality in which he works.

It is rare for an Austrian filmmaker to grapple with a subject so persistently—or at least circle around it with such tenacity—as documentary filmmaker Fritz Ofner. His works have always been guided by a fundamental question: the search for the causes of social, or more precisely, structural violence. This drive has taken the ethnology graduate across the world—to Guatemala, Libya, Colombia, Lebanon, and the United States. Fortunately, what emerges is not ethnographic film in the vein of Jean Rouch, but rather something closer to a distanced sociological ethnography. Ofner understands his subject—violence, and likely also the subjects subjected to it—within a broadly universalist framework. Cultural paradigms are largely absent, which is particularly noticeable in Libya Hurra (2012)—a journey to the rebels fighting Gaddafi—where Islam would have offered itself as an attractive explanatory backdrop for a discourse-oriented zeitgeist. The filmmaker traveled to Libya spontaneously, seeking a look behind media representations but also, as he says, to capture a historical moment.

Ofner's interest in Guatemala, a former civil war country where he made Evolution of Violence (2011), arose somewhat differently. Living in the country for some time, he was struck by the everydayness of violence and the way it was perceived socially. "There, people talk about violence the way we talk about the weather," he says. A bus robbery, murder, a rape—these are understood as normal. Yet hardly anyone would identify the civil war as a cause. As in Libya Hurra, it is the outsider's perspective that attempts to bring order to an otherwise opaque situation. But the "cadastre of violence" is designed very differently in the two films. Evolution is structured vertically, moving in a formally rigorous manner from the present social condition back through the 36-year civil war into the depths of the colonial period. It is, in a sense, also a journey into the depths of consciousness—or the collective unconscious. The film is underpinned by a strong epistemological interest: the search for the underlying reasons for killing. The end of the narrative marks the starting point of the film's assumed causal evolution: the post-/colonial interventionism of the United States at economic and military levels.

The film is conceived as a causal chain, which becomes evident through the types of images used. It opens with sites of killing, though Ofner does not aim for bodily immediacy. He shows dead bodies as indexical signs, as "traces" of a lethal order—briefly, in wide shots, or on the screens of reporters 'cameras who, in affective images, appear as grinning profiteers of a morally bankrupt state, moving from one crime scene to the next. The past appears through testimony: Indigenous people recount experiences of brutality; a war criminal reenacts a crime, revealing the ambivalences of Guatemala's violent legacy. Perpetrator and victim status cannot always be separated—such as in the case of a man forcibly conscripted by the military. Colonialism, too, speaks for itself: through historical propaganda films cleverly integrated into the narrative. Nixon and Reagan authenticate themselves as villains, while the notorious United Fruit Company (Chiquita) legitimizes its economic operations through a cynically constructed antagonism between the supposedly advanced U.S. civilization and Guatemalan backwardness. Cynical, because the UFC appears not as a force of development but as an extension of the military-industrial complex. When the film asserts that the region's "primitive" economic practices are passed from father to son, the statement echoes the film's central thesis: that the violence learned during the civil war has been transmitted across generations and persists today. This exposes the insidiousness of the colonial system, which aims to freeze social status in place in order to perpetuate its own power. One of the film's few symbolic images appears here: severed bananas hanging upside-down like corpses from hooks, eerily pulled through the plantation on a conveyor line.

Ofner generally strives for distance in his imagery, as well as for equidistance on ideological and thematic questions. An adherence to the past is also evident on the opposite side—in a gathering where Che's image adorns a red flag beneath which children chant "El pueblo unido…". A priest who fought alongside the rebels for decades appears as part of a revolutionary folklore whose commemorative rituals and pathos become an almost quiet climax of Evolution of Violence. Not because victims and champions of justice are gathered here, but because this priest, convinced he did the right thing, seems wholly at peace with himself. No foreign strategic or capital-driven interests hover in the room as he walks past a gallery of fallen

comrades. Death appears, for the first time in the film, as something imbued with meaning, conferring integrity rather than taking something away.

Ofner picks up this image of hopeful rebellion elsewhere as a temporal echo when he accompanies the insurgents in Libya Hurra, who are still poised before the reshaping of society. As mentioned, this is a very different project—arising spontaneously and perhaps for that reason far more open and sensorial. The cognitive and informational structure that shapes Evolution seems reduced here, while the handheld camera becomes an exploratory presence. It is allowed to shape the visual material itself, even through extended takes. The journey to Libya does not lead to a society in agony, but to one in upheaval. Palace ruins mark a moment suspended between two phases: something was there, nothing new is yet in place. The armed civilians read these ruins as signs of victory, doubling them through their poses before the camera and celebratory gunfire. These modes of interacting with the world may recall many political springs, but in the case of media-isolated Libya, they are nonetheless surprising. Libya Hurra at times resembles an adventure film in epic clothing. Only a slight breath of war hovers over the images of friendly men—wearing Lacoste caps or sandals and Calvin Klein T-shirts—who have temporarily exchanged their jobs for the hunt for Gaddafi. One wonders who wouldn't want to be there, even as a filmmaker.

That Libya is no impoverished Central American country is evident in the self-assured demeanor of men and women—adept at using megaphones, though sparing with their newly won freedom of speech. The journey across Libya unfolds once again in stations. A young man in a hospital recounts the loss of his right foot. Another, whose house was destroyed by government mercenaries, does not lament the regime's lack of democracy or personal freedom, but the loss of his money and car. There is no evidence in these scenes that the uprising was orchestrated by the CIA. Civic engagement seems to fill every pore of the frame. The exploration becomes particularly interesting at the atmospheric level. While combat is largely absent, a sense of brotherhood forms before the camera. The "Allahu akbar," addressed directly to the viewer, rings out as naturally as "Grüß Gott" on an Austrian street. Backwoods extremism feels as distant as Afghanistan.

Libya Hurra is therefore an intriguing, almost hermetic mood piece that differs from other recent documentaries about the Arab Spring. In Stefano Savona's reportage Tahrir (2011), for example, the full spectrum of societal forces and future power dynamics already articulates itself directly amid the revolution in Cairo. Libya Hurra, by contrast, finds no clashing societal factions; the voices in the liberated areas are tuned to collectivity, and even Gaddafi's supporters are once referred to as "our brothers." Ofner does not deny the iconography of victory that confronts him everywhere. On the roof of a possible government building, the camera catches four women whose dresses and headscarves billow in backlight—a quiet image of triumph, of intoxication. Even when graves are dug and a former political prisoner revisits his cell in Tripoli's Abu Salim prison, the film seems to pause time with the people and refuses to acknowledge a before and after. This becomes clear in a scene where two older men recount their first improvised acts of war. When commotion rises offscreen and youths suddenly rush in to snatch one man's rifle, Ofner denies the pan. The narrative remains rooted in the here and now; what concerns youth and the country's future would require another film entirely.

Another short documentary, From Baghdad to Dallas (2010), was made for the 3sat series "Foreign Children," again taking up the motif of violence and its consequences—here through the story of a family fleeing militia-ruled Iraq. Beirut Blend (2012) presents itself as an experiment in narrative form. Jim Jarmusch's Coffee and Cigarettes is the immediately recognizable and ultimately acknowledged inspiration for the strictly black-and-white conversational miniatures set in Lebanon, a former civil war zone. Beirut appears as a collection of sub-milieus whose ritualization produces an ambivalent sense of artificiality and authenticity.

Ofner's only portrait to date, Walking with Cecilia (2007), made with colleague Michaela Krimmer, follows a woman in Colombia who fled her mountain village due to marauding FARC guerrillas and now returns for the first time, accompanied by her mother and the two filmmakers. Cecilia functions as a story between fronts—between Indigenous people and whites, city and countryside, guerrilla forces and state power, man and woman. Issues of gender are addressed on multiple levels. When the group arrives in the Sierra at the house Cecilia abandoned out of fear of the rebels, a sense of tension hangs in the air, as if danger lurks behind the dense vegetation. But once inside, Cecilia does not pick up that thread. Instead, she begins speaking about her separation from her husband and various violations committed by him and the villagers.

In an abrupt thematic shift, the protagonist becomes the focal point as a woman defending her independence and her body. The entanglement of male power—in its various forms as guerrillero, man, husband, or priest—moves to the foreground. Even when Walking with Cecilia eventually returns to a broader political perspective, this momentary focus leaves behind a sense of profound social taboo-breaking—of something one does not speak about.