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“Warfare is a specialised variety of hunting”¹

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Abstract. The Ukrainian war pervades – as a token for deciphering the ruins of our present – the lines of this interview. That deciphering implies both refusing to be subjected to the devastation of the cities as an inevitable fate and trying to unfold the possibilities of rediscovering a «poetry of the city» (Fabrizio Desideri). We risk falling into incontrollable mistakes and mystifications if we hide from ourselves life's violence. Philosophically speaking, the most beautiful victory is the one in which we defeat ourselves (Plato). But the role of art, the only human activity able to tear off the masque to violence (Giorgio Colli) is irreplaceable: from Greek tragedy to contemporary cinema.

Keywords: *polemos*, art: painting, poetry, cinema, *Spielraum*, devastation of the cities <-> poetics of the city.

Interview At 72, the philosopher Maria Filomena Molder speaks for the first time about international politics: about the war in Ukraine, which has been going on for more than a year. A conversation about pain, courage, «ruins, dust, historicism and abstraction».

Text by Bárbara Reis

She doesn't have a mobile phone or television, her doctorate came from an investigation into the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, she has written and spoken a lot about aesthetics, language, art and artists. Never about international politics, much less about a war. Now, when speaking about the war in Ukraine, which began more than a year ago, Maria Filomena Molder, philosopher, at 72, is breaking with tradition, or at least with one habit.

Professor of Aesthetics at the New University of Lisbon, she stopped teaching in 2013, was an invited professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, in Paris, and for several years was a member of the scientific council of the Collège International de Philosophie. She is a member of the Institute of the Philosophy

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of Language (Ifilnova) and of the Groupe International de Recherches sur Nietzsche (GIRN). She has published 12 books in Portugal (the last of which was about drawing) and three in Brazil.

Challenged to speak publicly about the war, Molder hesitated and, in the initial exchange of emails, suggested that she was not «the right person». But having read «just enough about the horrors», she accepted. «A challenge is always irresistible to me». In addition, she likes to take on “tasks”. This is a “conversation” done in writing, in an exchange of questions and answers, back and forth. Molder speaks of war; of how pain befalls everyone, winners and losers; of art, «the only activity that presents human life»; of the price of «avoiding surprise» and «endless fear»; of courage and the lack thereof. «Our present life is a mixture of ruins, dust, historicism and abstraction», says the philosopher. Molder speaks with density and with lightness, gives us clear and enigmatic images, gives us a raw and cold take on things, but with surgical sensitivity. She is a scholar who uses Plato to understand the world, but also James Bond and the Big Bad Wolf.

Bárbara Reis: If you were commissioned to write an essay on the war in Ukraine, where would you begin your reflections?

Maria Filomena Molder: With Polemos, «the father of all things», as Heraclitus said; with *The Peloponnesian War*, by Thucydides, and with military strategies in relation to everything that has to do with survival: water, weapons, energy sources; with the growing weakening of the sense of survival in our very anaesthetised lives (technologies, drugs, and associated things); with the images of war that covid-19 evoked (and that many found inadequate); with the idea of losing the war with oneself, that Plato thought was the most painful form of defeat; with what J. L. Godard says about war, and with *Shame*, by Ingmar Bergman.

BR: War has always been a theme of philosophy. How have you been following the war in Ukraine?

MFM: War began as a poetic motif with Homer’s *Iliad*, «the poem of force» as Simone Weil called it.

In tragedy, we immediately have the extraordinary case of *The Persians* by Aeschylus. And in several tragedies by Sophocles and Euripides the motif reappears. But Aeschylus’s play remains unique, as in it a foreign people, and at the same time, a vanquished empire, become poetic and meditative content to the point of generating a vision of a human community originating from the awareness that pain befalls everyone, Greeks and Persians, winners and losers.

I have not followed, nor do I want to follow, the war, beyond the minimum possible. As I don’t have a television, I rarely see images, but it has happened, not just live images, but also documentaries with a thesis made when the dead are yet to be buried (every day there are dead to be buried, right?).

BR: What do you see in the images of this war?

MFM: The images we see of Ukraine are once again those of the devastation of cities, those of the intimacy of lives broken into unrecognizable pieces, those of insatiable cruelty – so much in ruins, so much pain, so much cold.

We see the images as many times as we want or the TV channel decides and then everyone gets on with their lives. The war can be viewed and reviewed with just one click. All sorts of interests of warlords and everything associated with them, including the media and those who control it. This war is going on at a distance of 4.000 km from Portugal. Tourists think that it is a good distance and so do we.

BR: And have you been paying attention to the “words of war” of Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky?

MFM: Both Putin’s and Zelensky’s words are those of two well-rehearsed actors, although only one has studied in the field. Both are rhetoricians who use words like weapons or as gestures of seduction. Both want to convince.

Putin has more elaborate schooling, as he was trained in the KGB. Compared to him, Zelensky looks like an amateur, a beginner. Putin has the traits of a sick spirit, a psychopath, as they say in

the jargon of our time, a man devoid of feelings of sympathy and the faculty of communicating in an intimate and universal way, which Kant called humanity.

Instead, he is prepared for final destruction, as long as not one of his hairs is affected (despite the fact that he only has a few). Did you see the series of interviews that Oliver Stone did? They are worth seeing.

There is one thing that Putin lacks and that you can observe in Zelensky, and that is courage. Putin is not a courageous man, he is too calculating to be able to exercise that disposition. He surrounds himself with a thousand protections. Do you remember how and where he was protected during the most critical periods of the pandemic? That says it all about his solidarity with the Russian people. I also find it very difficult to imagine him at a meeting of talks to put an end to this war or any other undertaking in which he is involved.

On the other hand, I don't see clearly who is interested in and who has a precise idea of how to bring this war to an end. Empires tend to remain empires until they are torn apart by external forces and/or eroded by internal forces. The American empire would want to annihilate what is left of the Russian-Soviet empire.

What will happen, I don't know. I often think that our life has a double structure, which reproduces the duality of the most banal metaphysics, as in the James Bond films. One of the structures, the one that derives from society and its activities, is manifest and irrelevant. The other, secret and sovereign, manipulates the strings of the manifest structure. Like in the story of the donkey and the carrot or the story of the mechanical chess player that [Walter] Benjamin talks about. In this case, a relationship between history (the manifest structure) and theology (the hidden structure).

A society that wants to avoid chance and surprise at all costs, committed to taming the unknown and hiding, disguising it, the violence of life, is at the mercy of endless fear. With rare exceptions, the media contribute to this. Heraclitus thought that, for human beings, the best thing

is not for everything they want to happen: will we ever be prepared to understand this?

BR: What does «avoiding surprise» and «being at the mercy of fear» mean? It is a mysterious phrase. Turning it around: are we brave if we accept surprise?

MFM: Not always trying to control the unexpected, the surprise, is not exactly an act of courage, but the acceptance of chance. I am not thinking so much about the war as about our day-to-day lives. From this point you can also address war.

BR: We look to philosophy for keys to understanding the world. Is this a realistic expectation?

MFM: There are already stories for children in which the Big Bad Wolf becomes the Good Wolf and gives up eating sheep or goes to play with Little Red Riding Hood.

The dream of making the bad guys, the carnivorous animals, disappear from children's stories continues to produce its effects. And yet the most fearsome of all animals is the omnivore, the inventor of the war of all against all.

It seems to me that this can be placed in a wider context, which has to do with the desire to hide the violence of life through various finalistic systems, all of them proceeding from the symbolism created from survival and the struggle for survival. These are ideological systems, whether they are religious, political or scientific. This concealment, this disguise, leaves, as it were, violence loose and ready to squirt out without warning.

According to [Giorgio] Colli, art is the only human activity capable of tearing off the mask of violence, letting finalistic systems fall.

War also seems to remove the mask of violence, but no, in war that mask is shown in all its splendour, as the finalistic systems really intensify their deceptive game, in this case: weapons production, distribution/sale of weapons, espionage and counter-espionage, strategies of attack and defence, systematic torture, detention camps. And also compensatory systems, geostrategic theories, since World War II, international tribunals

for war crimes, films, documentaries about war, in our time in real time or almost, battalions of opinion articles and debates in concert with live images of the war, positions taken by institutions programmed for this purpose, the UN, NATO, NGOs, this interview and the like. These will not be antidotes.

Regarding the instruments of death, the weapons, to you remember studying the Ages of Metals at school: the Ages of Copper, Bronze, and Iron? Those who used Iron weapons defeated those who still used bronze ones. In fact, the inventiveness of the warrior is enormous, not only in terms of techniques but also strategies.

BR: You have already written about Apollo, the arrow and death at a distance. Do we remain estranged from distant death, despite the fact that wars are broadcast live and in real time?

MFM: Our present life is a mixture of ruins, dust, historicism and growing abstraction. One of the fields of abstraction that is the most vast, productive and frightening has to do with the concatenation of killing from a distance and watching from a distance. How can we internalise such a bond?

Yes, killing from a distance is a prerogative of Apollo, who introduced the bow among the Greeks. As for watching from a distance, the matrix comes from the invented assemblies of gods, for example, in Sumeria and Greece. In Rome, a profitable system of watching death live was created, a spectacle presided over by the emperor. It took place in the Coliseum.

Now the radical novelty is that human beings watch death live from a distance of thousands of kilometres, through technical reproduction devices, sitting at home, sheltered from the bad weather. We are in the realm of electronic images that can be recorded, replayed, to be played back later, after dinner. What counts is that we have the possibility of invention, to use an image originating from the war, spaces in which to manoeuvre (*Spielräume*, is the concept used, amongst others, by Nietzsche and Benjamin, that have converted it into an instrument of argumentative liberation and of invention of openings and thresholds).

What could those be? Here I turn to the thought of an admirable contemporary philosopher, Fabrizio Desideri (University of Florence) who speaks in his paper «Cities of Memory and Ruins of the Present: Reflections in Wartime»² of the destruction of the unmistakable profile that inhabiting a city draws, as in some Ukrainian cities.

And to this observation he adds the mission of deciphering these ruins, not only so as not to forget that the wars chose the city as a «space of conflict and object of destruction», but also to remember that it is necessary to resist the slogan of razing everything to the ground, in order to oppose the warlike representation of history as «a drama without a fixed term», the decision not to surrender to the strategic justifications of its violence. To carry out this decision, Fabrizio Desideri leans on Walter Benjamin, in particular, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and «On the Concept of History». And it is in this way that he proposes to us the boldness of rethinking what a city is, «the poetics of the city», which does not leave out the complexity of tensions that are at its origin, in the expectation that no fury of war can destroy it definitively.

BR: Why do you speak of the «images of war» of Covid-19 and of that period in which we lived under the illusion that there would be no war, despite knowing that the previous 70 years of peace were an exception in history?

MFM: War images are good, they were good for talking about covid. I never quite understand the criticism levelled at them. If we ask ourselves where the images we use come from, there is little doubt that hunting will be the first matrix, in the sense of being the first scene, the first drama, to which the other dramas attach themselves: hunger,

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the effort to kill hunger and associated gestures, including instruments (appropriate technique), strategies, group work, forms of cohesion, hierarchy. War is a specialised variety of hunting.

As for the 70 years of peace in Europe, it is important not to forget the bloody war in the former Yugoslavia and its horrors that cannot be absorbed «by the experience of the soul», as the poet Jorge de Sena said. Not everything can be absorbed by our affective mechanisms: sometimes, a scream is enough, sometimes we faint, but there are cases in which the violence of what hits us exceeds the mechanisms of absorption, there is no more screaming or fainting, there is a kind of anesthesia or else we succumb completely and the heart stops. Here, art, painting, cinema, photography, and poetry enter: the horror is deposited in the technique used and in the associated inventive resources, so to speak, it contaminates them and is transmitted in a deferred absorption. I remember that in 1991 I was in Heidelberg [Germany] with a DAAD grant [Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst] and I saw on the television the transports full of women and children who had just said goodbye to the men and boys who remained in Belgrade at the mercy of what they foresaw and feared. It lasted about ten years. So many dead people, so many wrongdoings to investigate, so many interests to clarify.

Who won that war and who profited from that war? Who lost that war? We are aware of the forced emigration, as Serbs, Croats, and Montenegrins came to Portugal. In this current war there is an invading country and a country that has been invaded. This is absolutely clear.

BR: In citing Plato and the idea of the «most painful defeat», are you thinking of Putin?

MFM: Not in any way. It is rather the distinction that Plato makes in the *Laws* between war between cities and war with ourselves (that is also presented by Fabrizio Desideri). In this dialogue, Clinias, the Cretan, recalls that war puts an end to the very constitution of the city for a reason connected with human nature itself, since «what most men call “peace” is really only a fiction, and that in cold fact

all states are by nature fighting an undeclared war against every other state» (*Laws* 626a).

BR: Is what you said about Polemos being «the father of all things» useful in telling us something about war or the inexorability of war?

MFM: Useful, I don’t know. But, to focus on a way of thinking that could not be more alien to us is worth it. In Heraclitus, Polemos is the father of all things and the king of all things. On the one hand, he is responsible for the rift between gods and men; on the other hand, he is responsible for the division of human beings into slaves and the free: «Polemos is the father of all things, therefore, of everything; he renders some gods, others men; he makes some slaves, others free» (DK 22 B 53).

War is a cosmic force that generates fractures and divisions on which our lives are based in all their aspects.

Returning to Plato’s *Laws*, we find that Polemos is already inscribed in the intimate constitution of every human being. Hence the urgency of protecting the laws of the city, of finding ways to defer and replace direct and deadly aggression, for example, through sports competitions and other means. And it is in this context that Plato supremely values the victory that each person can obtain over themselves, transforming the power of Polemos into an instrument of self-knowledge, which contributes to the strengthening of the city.

BR: What about Godard and Bergman?

MFM: Art is the only human activity that presents human life. The theatre, cinema, and associated forms are the most powerful artistic forms for making life an observable object, providing self-knowledge. But also painting and sculpture and photography. In painting, the most famous and, at the same time, the most impressive example is Picasso’s *Guernica*. On this canvas he blew the burning wind of war with its terrible train of calamities. The poems of Carlos de Oliveira on the subject — *Descrição da Guerra em Guernica* [Description of the War in Guernica]— are sublime.

I quote *Poema IX*: «Houses dehydrating/ in the blast furnace; and gazing at them, / an instant

before collapse,/ the desolate angel/ thinks: amid the detritus/ with neither pith nor water,/ how can I announce/ once more the miracle of rooms;/ of bedrooms; growing scrap/ by scrap, son by son?/ those strange machines,/ those thirsty engines, didn't even/ sip the spirit of my houses;/ they simply vaporized it all»³.

Now the cinema. First, *Les Carabiniers* [*The Carabineers*], by Godard (1963). This film, a grotesque comedy with a corrosive critical content, offers us a very lucid vision of the radical subversion that war introduces into sentimental gestures and dispositions, which are embodied in values, without which no human community is possible.

Examples of dialogues and handwritten sentences: «— And can we massacre innocent people? / — Yes. / — And steal without being arrested? / — Yes». And also: «There is no victory, only flags and fields of the dead».

In this context I also remembered *Shame*, by Ingmar Bergman (1968), where the state of war presents itself as enabling the discovery of what each one is, of the abyss of each one, surprising ourselves with the abjections we are capable of.

And also *Paisà* [*Paisan*], by Rossellini (1946), where solidarity takes the lead, giving everything for everything, of the *partigiani*, the pain and suffering, the losses, the ruins, the hunger, the fear, the terror, the end of the world.

On the one hand, being doomed without any rescue, as is the case with a group of British allied prisoners who know they are all going to be killed by German soldiers.

And, on the other hand, feeling, without being about to perceive it, that one has been abandoned by everyone – this is how we glimpse the very small child, two or three years old, crying in the blackness of the night, blackness that also comes from the burning of the flames that devastated the house of the farm and all his relatives, a child that no one will come to save.

There are many good war films (a collection of them was shown at the Portuguese Cinematheque recently), but I chose these three.

(Translation by Robert Vinten)

³ The English translation of Carlos de Oliveira's poem cited here is from *Guernica and Other Poems* (translated from the Portuguese by Alexis Levitin), Lancaster: Guernica, 2004.