

Mbappé's laughter and Urszula's belly laugh

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Last August, I was in Lodz, in Poland. It's the third city in the country, with almost 700,000 inhabitants. It's a useless place. It's a non-city, a non-place.

A few weeks ago, when at a press conference held by Paris Saint-Germain, they suggested to Kylian Mbappé that the team should travel from Paris to Nantes on the TGV (a two-and-a-half-hour train journey) instead of taking a private jet, he literally fell about laughing. Rogério Casanova hit the nail on the head in his opinion piece on the subject for the Portuguese national daily *Público*. But he did leave one avenue unexplored: the possibility that Mbappé's laugh was the nervous titter of someone who sees a catastrophe looming, and, feeling impotent to avoid it, falls into uncontrollable laughter which is essentially a defence mechanism. When I laugh, I am telling myself and other people that the problem isn't all that serious.

From the 19th century, Lodz was a kind of continental Manchester, one of the great sites of the European textile industry. Once the calamities of World War II had passed, it took up its old role within the communist bloc. In the museum of the city's biggest industrial complex, nowadays converted into a gigantic shopping centre named Manufaktura, with entertainment centre and offices, I saw a short film by Krystyna Gryczelowska, *Our friends from Lodz*, a documentary made in 1971. We accompany the everyday life of three female textile workers from the Poltex factory: Urszula, a young woman in her early twenties, still unmarried, with no children; Helena, thirty-something, with small children, and Genowefa, in her fifties, with

daughters on the cusp of adulthood. Three women in growing stages of disillusionment.

In relation to climate change, we are living precisely the Mbappé moment: the symptoms and signs are visible to us all, but we can still laugh, pretending that nothing is happening. Water still flows from the taps, in the Summer temperatures are more or less tolerable (although they are rapidly approaching the threshold of the intolerable), there remains a simulacrum of yearly seasons that still allows us to use the terminology of days gone by (Spring, Autumn, and so forth), the supermarket shelves remain full of products. Deep down, however, we all understand that it is just a matter of time. But, because the enormity of the changes needed strikes us as insurmountable, we laugh nervously, like Mbappé.

Urszula would like to carry on studying, but it isn't easy. The foreman refuses to give her days off. He tells her that, since she chose to register for night classes, she will have to sort herself out as best she can. The factory work is extremely hard. We see the women pushing brutal weights, we hear the deafening noise, we sense the danger posed by the mechanical looms. The workers live in tiny rundown apartments that are freezing cold in Winter. Helena's children are cold. Genowefa dreams of giving her daughters a better life, but her body is paying for the years of working in the factory, the interminable domestic chores. Her husband drinks and doesn't help her. The daughters describe their father as a complete waste of space.

João Reis recently published a post-apocalyptic novel entitled *Cadernos da Água* ("The Water Notebooks"). It's a story in which the Iberian Peninsula, blighted by a brutal drought resulting from climate change, has become uninhabitable. The Portuguese State has collapsed. There is no longer a legal or administrative entity called Portugal. Many Portuguese are living in refugee camps in Northern European countries, where there is water. João Reis depicts what will come after Mbappé's laughter.

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, some people travelled "over there", and then told the rest of us what it was like. I heard innumerable iterations of the phrases: "I'm not obsessed with consumer goods, but I was shocked by the drab supermarket shelves, the white packaging, all identical. And so

few things on sale...” No one called themselves consumerist, because by then the word already verged on an insult, but everyone, paradoxically, was uncomfortable with the idea that there could be limits to consumption. More concretely, everyone was uncomfortable with the idea that there could be other limits to consumption, besides the money we have (or don't have) in our wallet. In other words, we have allowed two very different things to become conflated, freedom of consumption and freedom *tout court*. Mbappé also laughs for this reason: because the obligation (even if it is formulated on the merely moral plane) to exchange the private jet for the TGV, when you can afford the private jet, strikes him as an unacceptable attack on his personal freedom. An imposition of the realm of the absurd, the laughable. And, in this respect, he thinks just like any one of us.

In 1989, two alternatives were available to triumphant capitalism: to opt for the recovery of industrial centres like Lodz, modernising them and making them environmentally friendly and friendly to the people who worked there, or to reproduce, on the Asian continent, the same nineteenth- and twentieth-century model of production. That is, highly polluting factories, working conditions close to slavery, bad for the physical and mental health of the workers, unbridled production and consumption. The fact that the first of the alternatives I have just described sounds hopelessly lyrical and almost ridiculous is a true measure of our tragedy. In just a few years, in the 1990s, all the textile factories in Lodz shut down. All of them. From almost one day to the next, Lodz became the Polish city with the highest rate of unemployment. With the highest suicide rate. A city that had stopped being useful. “For thirty years”, said a friend of mine in Lodz, “we've been trying to understand what we want to be. I don't think we've found out yet”. In the Manufaktura shopping centre there are countless shops with branded clothing, the same ones we find all over the world: Zara, Mango, Levi's, Benetton, and so on. Clothing at laughable prices, with overwhelming environmental costs. A significant percentage of the items of clothing on display will never be worn by anyone and will go straight into the dustbin. In 1989, Urszula was around forty years old. Certainly, she was still a worker,

certainly she felt the end of her world in her bones. I suspect that for her, there was no happy-ever-after.

Ultimately, Mbappé's laugh is also the embarrassed and involuntary laugh that overtakes us when faced with the absurdity of the world we have let them create in our name. Confusing freedom of consumption with freedom *tout court*, we have created the perfect storm. Sooner than we think, we shall have to abdicate a part of our freedom. It just remains to be seen how big that part is. The environmental refugees, the ex-Portuguese of João Reis' dystopian *Cadernos da Água*, are not free. Mbappé's laugh is, basically, the bitter laugh of someone about to lose their freedom.

My text, however, cannot end here. We need to keep on living. Like Genowefa, I too have daughters. One of these days I'll be a grandfather. A couple of very good friends of mine are about to have a son, their first child, who'll be called Lucas. Against Mbappé's laughter, we must set another laugh, a redemptive one. In 1971, Urszula was taking dance lessons in her spare time. We see her in a class, in the open air, barefoot, very focused. She has a plump face. At the beginning of the documentary, she said that if she could, she would change her nose, because she would rather have a small, thin one. Following the teacher's instructions, she carries out a dance movement along with her classmates. But then she loses balance, slips, looks at the camera and bursts out laughing.