

Interview with the Peter Forgács, director of 'El Perro Negro'
Vienna, 25th March 2005

"An anarchist wrote to me, seeing this film: this is more a story of a crime, than a fight for a better future of the poor people. I think he was right. I wanted to tell a story of a crime, because we see so many things around us, and if you look back in history we really don't know what has happened. These family stories, these personal stories tell something off the unknown, the undiscovered, the private history of Spain. I think this was intriguing for me and a great challenge, still. After three years working on this film, I really don't know what has happened, I am trying. Come with me on this journey, Spanish civil war. El Perro Negro. I think it is worth it.

Well, history is just a present narrative that I can provide. Historians are also writing legends and giving their interpretation of certain events which have happened in the past. This is a little bit simplifying the problem but it is connected to memory, remembering and forgetting.

I am not a historian, so it's just an attempt to put into the right place what I am doing. History is the past we are talking about. It is the matrix of millions and millions of events which can be divided into important events, where one country occupies another, or there is a collapse of economy, or there is a revolution between there is nothing happening, you don't feel history and my commitment with history is coming more from the found footage problem and not as an historian attempt. I am collecting home movies since 22 years, running a little foundation called "Private Photo and Film Archive" in Budapest and I am collecting it together with a small team, home movies, amateur films, focusing more or less on the mid-war period and the post-war period. These big transitions of countries because of the war, because of the Soviet occupation, briefly, Europe was poisoned by the Nazis and Soviets for 50 years, somehow created these old amateur films of strings of history that disappeared. And forgetting things what happened with my family, or with my neighbourhood or with my country, or with my tribe is the worst thing that one can do.

But my country, Hungary, had four revolutions, four counter revolutions, two big wars, and that means constantly identity crisis for the population. Everybody had to forget what he was to be something new. And this is the script of dictatorships or semi-dictatorships. So private life in home movies, amateur films give a very specific private history. And these quotidian, everyday nonchalance, these little things like having coffee, and drinking the coffee and how will I pick up this cup, whether it is proper have the spoon in or not, these are all recorded and kept and with these amateur footage there are stories, family myths and show the invisible side of live. So I would say my connection to history is connection to the past live. And my major attempt is to work with private history, which is a kind of alternative history towards public history, let's put it that way.

My feminine side, the sensitive part, is juxtaposed with my masculine brain, the rational and the irrational. I am father of three sons and I brought up my first son alone and I know what it is to be a caretaker. But private life means something else. Private live in front of a camera is something like a print of the little tribe- the family. Most of these home movies makers are not lonely wolves, but part of their community, but off course there are some extremely interesting woman filmmakers. I did also one film based on a home-movie called "Notebook of a lady" which was a film diary of a baroness in Hungary. But private life means something else. It is not only the privacy, but everything that is not in the official history line. But off course there are meeting lines. When we go to school we are in public place, when we are filming in the streets as Adolf Hitler coming into Vienna in 1938 in the Anschluss, we are in part of the history from a private point of view. And off course today it is hard to imagine that there were only 5000 film cameras out there. It was very expensive to buy a film, and develop it and edit it. In today's times digital photography and digital video cameras give an immense quantity of home movies and that is a different time. So let's focus, middle class people, the lower bourgeoisie, were capable to afford camera and film. That doesn't mean that there print of live is negative or not considerable to the contrary. The citizen, a Citoyen, is more capable to see things in a more objective way, than propaganda - or a documentary - an official documentary filmmaker, a newsreel maker, because film was always under censorship in these eastern European countries, except for the golden ages, the golden years.

The most important thing in the home movies is the connection to the past – their past, and to the memory and what kind of memory we have towards the past. Is it a common past, is it my private past? Why do I forget things? Why human forget things? And what is suppressed? We suppress a lot of things that have been photographed. And documented. And these secrets are on these films. Because inevitable the connection between the written diary and the film diary is that if I write down what happened with me today I have a few words if I am not a genius writer – and I am not. But if I would film this morning, what had happened to me lot of things unintentionally would be grabbed,

recorded and kept in that film camera or video camera. Like what kind of coffee cup I am drinking, what is the coffee machine, what is my environment? How do I communicate with my family? These are all unintentionally - kept in the camera. When I look at it 20 years later I would discover so many things which I could not have written down in my diary. So I think memory and forgetting and the secrets and the unintentional diary that is intriguing for me. And put it together to the narratives gives a certain collage of the past which I would never call as the real thing how it happened. Just one narrative, just one reading of the past. And I did normal documentary films and video installations and because I am not coming from a filming background, but from music and fine arts. I don't have any convention to follow. What I do follow is really practically is how the whole thing started. I started to make performances with old amateur films on stage with music and just six years later I discovered, somebody offered a stipend to make a film. But at that time, with my composer friend, we had enough experience how slow motion or scratchy home movie works with minimal music. Off course I wanted to understand what is on the background. So history was in the beginning secondary, because I wanted to tell stories from certain amateur film collections which had a certain secret.

I think I am storyteller. Political filmmaker is not interesting for me at all. More and more TV stations, and more and more primitive documentary slots are appearing, less and less I am interested, because I think the secret of live is not in the political events, what is the meaning of my live. Where do I go? What is the reason that I am here or there. So it is more the storytelling certainly there is some – I did some 30 films based on found footage until now, and 15 of these are private Hungary series. But each film gives a different challenge, a different approach. If I make a film about a couple who have a dog or a couple who is sent to Auschwitz, the story is very different. One is Catholic family, one is a Jewish family. They live in the same city but their story is very different. To understand the differences and the similarities and the secrets of the human life, we are always surprised. My favourite philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, said, wrote somewhere, I think it was in *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, "when I went home I was expecting surprises. And as there was no surprise for me, I was surprised." And I think this is how I approach my films. Off course not forgetting that it is the work of months and months and all the details come together like a patchwork and the background research and the extremely complex knowledge is needed, when you just write down one word, behind that there must be a lot of volume of books and films that you have to know, because this is more a sensitive relations with the viewers minds. So if I am telling a story with all this found footage, with home movies, its more to work, somehow collaborate with the viewer, because the viewer also had a mother or even a son and they have their own private stories. So it is more kind of imaginal live where these free associations of a home movie context is calling their own stories definitively.

As I started the whole private Hungary and found footage on stage it became much more musical using multiple channels like the soundtrack and in the soundtrack we have the music and in the soundtrack we have effects and the narration. But you're right, there is not a direct synchrony between the image and the narrative, because then it would be just a normal film as we see thousands and thousands and millions of hours that they want to tell me: what is the cup? And they tell me: Now you see the cup, and we drink from it. The majority of the documentary films are tautological. It talks about what we see. But where is the secret? Where is the feel what I don't know? How will I understand what is indescribable? How we'll understand the more important things of life if I don't try to drive it myself, together with the viewer to the unknown field, which can be an emotion or just an event in the past. Maybe it is a little bit simplifying in this framework, but it is like a performance, like a concert, like an opera, were you have to deal with the subject which is going inside and in the depth of the film behind the screen. Like peeling an onion, you have several leaves of an onion, before you understand: what is the onion. So these layers are provided the viewer in a hidden way. So the soundtrack and the narration and the voice over, the text captions, the tinting of the film are all emotional and irrational communications to the viewer, not didactic, not entertaining, not educative, not advertisement, nothing. Contemplation, like reading a book. If I don't understand something, I have to go back. Like a concert, where you hear a motive of the prelude also in the end, or it is a rondo, where you have the motive where you go in and out. So I would say it is more a connection, a deep connection - and this is what I try in the film – a deep connection with the viewer's imagination. And I am not pretending that this is the one and only true reading of my subject. I am saying: Look, what I found – here it is. And this is how I think it could have had happened - it could have had happened. And not: this is what was. Definitely leaving a space and time for the others to say: "Well yes, maybe. Or "Oh, yes". Or: "I don't believe it." Otherwise it would be just journalism. So most of the time I am not considered as a documentary filmmaker, I am on a boundary. But I would not call it fiction. So therefore it's a little bit of a conflict sometimes, let's say in my country, when the documentary film fund doesn't give me a penny since seven years, because they think I am too experimental. And the experimental think I am too documentarian. So it is very funny. This is just the cast. There is also the convention of festival and television. So this is a kind of very narrow path how to deal with the past.

To show private Spain. Private Spain means: private history of Spain. As I did by Greece and Holland also. This was an interesting – a more than interesting travel, because first I found in 93-94 the Noriega films. And from the Noriega footage I thought that there are a lot of beautiful expressionist and avant-gardist Spanish films. But I didn't know the real nature of that civil war, which halted this kind of amateur filmmaking, because this kind of amateur film cameras were in the hands of the middle classes, and they were in the republican side in danger, so they stopped filming. The dimension of this national schism, this Spanish schism, the Spanish crazy schizophrenia of history, when brother kills brother. This is outrageous. And one cannot understand it. As we still don't understand how it could have happened in former Yugoslavia that in the same village Serbians killed Muslims, just because they were Muslims, while for 40, 50 and 60 and 70 years they were living in peace as neighbours. Maybe with hate, but we don't understand... or it is hard to understand how this irrational blood thirsty attitude becomes a nationwide feature. Suddenly when I was looking for nice amateur films which show in depth from the private historical point of view: what is Spain and you understand what is Spain is still a big problem. We know that today's Spain is divided still: Aznar or the socialist. But this is not that simple. This is the division. Exactly the division that was before, just now there are no weapons and idiotic generals and crazy anarchists. So for me it was a wonderful and extremely rich journey into Spanish past, coming from a country which is also extremely divided. And it was divided for decades and decades. I understood something that here is an extremely intransigent (?) and intense material or collection of legends or human faiths or drama and tragedy, blood and peace at the same time. Having a nice coffee and the next day you are executed. It is completely beyond imagination and rational understanding. And off course having this handicap of not knowing well Spanish, it was even more, whether I can do something that was different from the previous readings. And off course nobody did films from home movies in Spain before. Most of the time filmmakers tend to use film archive materials as illustration for an interview type of film: so you have one shot of the portrait, one good quotation from an historian and then an illustration from what was there, how it happened. ABC. ABC is the abc of BBC. You do this and the narrative and everybody is explaining everything. For my case it was kind of fantastic journey for family collection, all kind of footage of German, French, British, American news reels, documentaries, communist propaganda films, anarchist propaganda films, fascist

propaganda films, feature films. Even this bloody handed Franco made a film after the civil war, Raca, the race. Film was something extremely intense. Just imagine, there were more cinemas in the 1930s in Spain than in France. There were more cameras out there. Which means that there is something very specific in Spain, which was emerging country from extreme poverty, an extreme exploitation like medieval, feudal exploitation in the south, in Andalusia, or it's the new capitalism of the north like the Basques and the Catalans were always more developed like the rest of the country. Catalonia looked like Manchester in Karl Marx time. So the capitalist handled the proletarians like animals and exploited them for their bones, the blood suckers. And off course with the Spanish temperament, there were more anarchists in Spain as there were in the rest of the world. Anarchism in the south was like a religion, replacing Christianity, Catholicism, which was the religion of the rich. An extremely divided country. It is hard to understand today or to rely to each other and to ourselves if we forget what kind of poverty like in Africa. People lived in caves. And some brave filmmakers, like Bunuel, did a wonderful film for example about this poverty.

Going back to the filmmakers, what was my motivation, it was the film source material, the family legends, the footage, the brilliant and intense films, and the habits and off course each film I made, helped me to learn a culture, learn a lot of things to put together this almost unexplainable coloured, dimensions of private public history. So when for example in Catalonia, it was always important if they were in a proud and rich region of Spain, to have their own president. And suddenly in some amateur film, Marcia comes up as the independent president. But there is an amateur film where we see Marcia in southern France in exile. There were no video cameras and news companies running after the exile president, who we've seen millions of footage of exiled presidents on the other side of a certain border. But at that time it was a lucky moment when a filmmaker who was a friend of a friend of Marcia, went to southern France and met them and then you feel the shivering on your back and ... oh my God, this is a lucky moment. And that was the motivation to put together. But when I started the film I didn't know that I was at the beginning of a mission impossible. So it took year or more, and we would be bankrupted with the production company. Definitely, because if you are working a year more in a documentary film you more bankrupted as with a fiction film, because you don't have loose ends and it's hard to move around. It was full of problems and conflicts. But off course, when we were doing it, we couldn't stop. But off course there were lucky moments and sad moments. But the real thing is, to find the families, make the interview, listen to their tales, their stories, their description of events, which have certain secrets and vague and black points and unknown, because you never know what happened 70 years ago. And then suddenly one member of the family, Idela, who is 93, still can talk and he still can identify persons on the film and then you feel you still are on the right track. Because

the film itself is just a document. It is not telling those juicy, nice parts, who killed who, who married who, who loved who, who hated who. Who cooked the best. These are the most important things.

It is also very special, because after the First World War and after the Russian revolution, Europe was first in a big post war economy boom, but off course because the godfather of Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm, was out, and also the Austrian Kaiser was out. It was fatherless society. The authority was missing. The drive was missing. And off course there were a lot of revolutionary working unions, and like in Austria, the Schutzbund and the left, was prepared for revolution. But something which was very important and typically good about Austria, that they gave up, because they didn't want a civil war. Because somehow the social culture of Austria is different than the Spanish one. If the Spanish workers had have, would have had that much armours in 1926 the war would have started in 1926. Because the Schutzbund was full of weapons, they had great armours, etc. Its very importance difference, but it is also part of history that so many leftist, because of Hitler and the fail of the Schutzbund when it was crushed in '34, so many leftist went to fight against fascism. And the other reason which was very important, political motivation, that nobody knew the real nature of Soviet Communism. So the leftist good-willing people had a tremendous illusion about the good and the bad, which is Adolf Hitler and the capitalist world.

And this was the tragic schizophrenia of the whole European liberal and leftist part. Because they thought that the big solution for all capitalist problems is the Soviet type of society or it there was this nationalistic fascist type that was different, like in Italy and Germany and Spain. And everybody thought that this was a black and white world. Either red or brown, or in Spain it was red and black or bleu, which was the colour of Franco. So people and families were divided completely. So the Spanish civil war off course specific, cause 40000-50000 warriors came to fight to Spain for the good, but they did not know what they were doing. I don't want to go into detail too much, but it is a very, very important year, '36, it is the same year when the civil war started, it was the same year when Josef Stalin started his trials against the old bolsheviks. The Nazi regimes brutality was obvious, but nobody knew what is really happening in Soviet Russia, which was exactly the same fascistic country as Nazi Germany. So I lost all my illusions by going in deep to this quagmire of the Spanish past. All my little illusions what I had, because I was not under informed about Soviet Russian, being Hungarian, not to say more about that. My historical disposition is anti-soviet, definitively, but I had illusions about the Spanish war, because how good guys were there like Mallraux or Saint Exupery or Orwell. But suddenly with Orwell, George Orwell and Arthur Köstler a new light came into the picture that somebody can be a leftist, an anti-francoist and anti-fascist without being soviet. Without being communist. And that is the smallest and narrowest path. That is the political side of it and that made it very, very difficult. Because my film is not about justice. Not about giving clues about what happened in the Spanish civil war, but my film is on the narrow path: what happened with certain people, with happened with certain families. What happened with this and that filmmaker, why are we learning now something about micro-history, personal narrative. Because it is more important than propaganda films or didactic descriptions of human events. It is intriguing what makes it a little bit more historical *El Perro Negro*, *the black Dog*, considering my previous films, that with the previous found footage based films of mine the historical background was more simple, more understandable, the context was clear. The Spanish history is so confusing, so many powers, so.... Because I didn't want to go into this fascist or communists cliché, I wanted to drop it completely, but then I had to discover that so extremely many parties and motivations that is impossible to put the story into one single frame, so I had to keep this multiparty, multilingual viewpoint projects always sensitive and not giving one simplifying road to ... but therefore I had to integrate more historical viewpoints of facts and is always a keen and problematic balance whether it was too much or not enough. If I just speak about the family, is it enough to know why he was killed or why he was first arrested and then an anarchist and then a falangist. How it is that certain people are moving from one side to the other. So for me, to avoid and neglect historical and political stereotypes and clichés, my basic aim was to understand what happens with the individual. And not to judge, but have the good questions and keep the material enough musical and sensitive to involve the viewer, to involve the viewer and I can invite the viewer and say: look what kind of treasures I find, they dancing and living, they like live, they like to eat, they are suffering, they are exploited. So it's a panorama, a journey from our 21 century point of view, with the warning, it can happen if we are not aware of like it happened in the last decade in Yugoslavia. And Yugoslavia is important for us, because it teaches a lesson, that we didn't win, we meaning humanist, or with the democratic feeling how life in a country and culture should run to the benefit of the citizens. Because this demon that we identified with Adolf Hitler or Josef Stalin, is there and there are many dictators and they want to kill us, because they don't like us because we are not their faithful followers. I am not talking about, because this would lead us too far, what about this Islamic re-revolution, but let's keep us focusing on this European brutality which we have in our backyard.

So my story is more a private story that we are carefully keeping this treasure that is called peace and it is happening in my film in the personal dimension and not in the big political arena. But off course, paradoxically, this guy, this big butcher, Francisco Franco appears in his privacy. I was very keen to choose from his large propagandistic footage collections, only those where he looks like human being. Because we don't understand the bloody dictators if we do not understand that they were humans. Because if we demonize those butchers, we don't understand them.

It would have been good, if we wouldn't have been bankrupted. But that is not ... that is the story, when you go into the woods and you lose the tracks, but you have to go back and one day you will go back to the city. I don't think so. The big problem was: how to keep balance. Not to be over political, but give the minimal information and keep the power of the personal stories and not to be political, historical biased. And this was the most important problem: as a film scripts and lines and the other is how get the best music, how to convince the composer friend Peter Orsescu to do something now, which is more connected to the Spanish attitude and not the minimalistic music that we normally go on with.

Money in this case would be good, because then I could pay easier my bills, but the problem with the film is, what to do when you show bourgeois, a rich family who is killed by an anarchist and not to blame the anarchist for everything and not to blame the capitalist for everything, but to show that the personal responsibility in the personal life and in public life is the most important thing. Meanwhile I have to tell the story and sell it well, so we had more problems of this re-contextualising and balancing and tuning. So I think I edited one year and a half, unfortunately. And it is not without conflict, off course. For example, the anarchist trade union, who owned the rights of the anarchist film crew's films, that was made in 1936, 1937, wanted to kill this film and banned it out of Spain in the first round. So the civil war is still on in Spain, because they wrote to us... suddenly we got a letter, when they saw the final film, that this is not good, that this is not about the poor people's liberation, this is not about the fight against the bourgeoisie and the fascists, but this is a film more about a crime than about a fight for a better world. This was Carlos, who wrote to us. The CNT, the Spanish anarchist trade unions' audiovisual boss. Now you must imagine that they are proletarians, who complain that they could not learn English because they had to work in a factory at daytime. So they couldn't understand the film, what they saw was that somebody is killed in the beginning and the killer is an anarchist, and that means that the whole film is about the bad anarchist. So it meant immediately like a shock for us, because I thought its not about that the anarchist are bad and the bourgeois are good, or the exploiting capitalist are not good and the anarchist are not bad, but this is life, in this story. Which was absolutely shocking and it was a slab on our face. But we understood and funny enough that CinemaNet Europe, by selecting it for screening, this is the place for advertisement, had the opportunity that the Spanish partner called up the anarchist and we have now permission to show it in Spain. But it is forbidden to show it in Spanish television. And until CinemaNet Europe's decision, from October to January, we thought that we can't offer it for the Spanish public. But this is the paradox and this little paradox like in one drop of water we understand the nature of the sea. That, what? The anarchists are censoring? Who are really for the individual, horizontal freedom, the anarchists who represent the freedom, seemingly, or in idle case. I wouldn't say that they are dictators, but I would say they are idiots, at least those who wanted to ban our film, because it didn't fit to their political vision. But I don't think so that any political party would love my film, because I am not making films for political parties. Give a damn not to, because my films are, like we started our discussion, about telling a story. Or here: stories."