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**Vamik Volkan: a psychoanalyst without frontiers: Reflections on Molly Castelloe's documentary film *Vamik's Room***
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*Introduction*

Can a psychoanalyst leave the analytic room, attend and experience the most bitter conflicts of the contemporary world and participate as a living *player* in them, without losing his identity as an analyst, and still being keen to interpret what he sees with his analytical lens? The extraordinary human and professional journey of Vamik Volkan seem to respond with a "yes": it is *really* possible to be what Green (1994) called "a psychanalyste engagé", a committed psychoanalyst, and to practice psychoanalysis "sans divan", without a couch (Recamier, 1993), remaining faithful to the theory while 'getting your hands dirty' in the mire of human suffering.

This invaluable documentary film, *Vamik's Room* (2020), written, directed and produced by Molly Castelloe, took seven years to complete, with the aim to present to a general, and not only a specialist, audience, the life, work and commitment of Vamik Volkan, a psychoanalyst from Cyprus who has been settled in the United States for many years. Five times a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian and professional contributions regarding terrible episodes of war, genocide and torture in the late 20st century, of which he was not only an observer but also a direct protagonist, with letters of acknowledgment from more than 28 countries.

The director, an American artist and writer, Molly Casteloe has shown great commitment to this project, her first documentary and one that she has been intimately involved in; in her words, it was to give hope to her two children and to future generations that she decided to let the world know about Volkan. His words and ideas struck a chord and fascinated her since their first meeting, when Dr Volkan was director of *the Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction (CSMHI)* at the School of Medicine of Virginia University (1987-2002). Molly Castelloe had a chance to listen to the story of Volkan and his colleagues' work in the most traumatized areas of the world. She decided that all this deserved to be made more widely known through the powerful language of cinema.

*Vamik's Room* has been awarded the *Gradiva Award* by *the National Association for the Advancement in Psychoanalysis* and the *Sidney Halpern Award* by the *Psychohistory Forum* for pursuing the somewhat esoteric discipline of Psychohistory. Dr. Volkan, who authored more than eighty publications on individual and group psychoanalysis, has received several honors and awards, throughout his long career. The CSMHI was a multidisciplinary body that dealt with US-USSR relations, conflicts in the Baltic States, and many other war-torn regions. During Jimmy Carter's presidency Dr Volkan was a member of *International Negotiation Work* within the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA). In the 1980s he was a member of the *APA Committee for Foreign Affairs,* whilst today he is President Emeritus of *IDI, International Dialogue Initiative.* We will see that "negotiation" and

"dialogue" are key words in Volkan's lexicon and intentions. *But* who is *Vamik Volkan* and why the title *Vamik's Room?*

**The film and key concepts**

The one-hour documentary film traces Volkan's long journey, which is ongoing, from his birth in Cyprus in 1932 to today. The often moving interview with Dr Volkan is interspersed with the director's voice-over, with comments from his psychoanalyst colleague and incumbent Director of the International Dialogue Initiative Jerry Fromm, and with a succession of images with strong visual impact: now a map, then the objects abandoned in a concentration camp, then the roaring of Trump and Milosevic to the crowd. Images of yesterday and today demonstrate the *invariability* of human war conflicts, the deep human characteristics that recur even centuries later and their substantial primitivity.

The film opens and closes with Volkan's memories of his beloved and tormented homeland, Cyprus. "History affects us whether we know it or not," it is the opening of the film. History *happens* to humans; *it falls on us*, it is not always something we build. This is Volkan's message, but it is also something we suffer as was the case for him and his people; as he was a Turkish Cypriot child and medical student in Ankara during the attack on Cyprus in 1974: this event will have such an impact on him as to determine his future commitment and interest in ethnic conflicts and, in particular, large group identity and mourning. The film shows us in an early scene how one day, when he was living in the USA and a Professor at the University of Virginia, he saw his fearful mother and sister on television running from gun shots in the images of the conflict between Cypriot Turks and Greeks. The vision shook him, and aroused a sense of guilt (I live here in safety and they run terrorized from enemy gunfire). We know survivors' guilt; initially he thinks it is a hallucination and only when his wife confirms it is actually so is he convinced the images are real. Here begins a living and painful story, intimate and at the same time universal, which delves into the history of this man and his people but which, metaphorically, concerns each and every human being.

Volkan's first great merit, which the director acknowledges, is that he has created a new lexicon for diplomatic relations. The normal exchange, the '*do ut des'* of diplomacy, works in ordinary life, but not in the phases of conflict where diplomacy - Volkan insists at various points in the film – should do more. The message is that nothing will change, until diplomacy understands it is dealing with the profound and irrational psychology of human beings. Every effort will be in vain if foreign relations, which in the film come across as so inflexible, do not understand both the deep-seated need for security and for homeostasis in the human being – what Freud (1920) identified as a death drive – and the equally profound need to belong.

This brings us to the first point, which also acts as the first chapter, of the conceptual elements that make Volkan's psychoanalytical thinking original, whose roots are found in the school of object relations and in Erikson's thought (1956) on identity. It is always in relation to others ("objects") that an individual develops an identity, an inner solidity and sustained feeling of oneself through time. I return to this concept "identity" below. The film develops by outlining a series of conceptual principles, of which it illustrates the theoretical basis and the practical result: large-group identity, linking objects, shared mourning, chosen trauma, time collapse, hot spots, the tree model. In my opinion, these are Volkan's most original contributions to the psychoanalytic theorization of the collective human

unconscious response to severe trauma. These traumas are associated with the fundamental "transgenerational" concept. already discovered, as we know, in second generation Holocaust survivors in Germany and by several Argentinean studies (Kaes et al, 1993). These seven concepts, we might say, constitute the basic framework, the conceptual apparatus and the mosaic that provides answers and an understanding of unconscious human reactions in response to the collective trauma of large social groups. Although each one is original in itself, for example the concept of 'chosen trauma' (which is perhaps the most original), it is only by seeing them as a whole, each one a consequence of the other, that we have a complete view of Volkan's discourse. What are the concepts? Let's have a look at them one by one.

The film begins with a sequence on *large group identity.* With this term Volkan defines tens, hundreds, thousands, millions of individuals – most of whom will never meet during their lives – who share a deep sense of belonging to each other from childhood on (Volkan, 1997). The large group shares feelings, culture, food, traditions, on both an unconscious and a conscious level. In addition to the school of object relations, Volkan is indebted to Erikson's studies (1956) on the concept of identity, a concept not systematically dealt with by Freud. Identity is universally conceptualized as the sense of self, of one's own continuity and boundaries. It should not be forgotten that Volkan, known all over the world for his work presented in this film, is also an "on the couch" psychoanalyst of the object relations school, who has worked in his clinical practice and published prolifically from the 'classical' and individual psychoanalytical perspective. We could say that it is his profound knowledge of the individual, as can only be drawn from a long psychoanalytic practice, which allows the study of *many* individuals. The main characteristic of the large group is *to maintain itself*, its borders, its integrity and identity; it is like *a large tent,* says Volkan, which protects both the individual and the group, both the leader (who functions as the pole of the tent) and the followers. The main need of the large group is to survive, at any cost, against external threats. The concept of 'large-group identity' expresses to the maximum the deeply self-conservative nature of psychic life, already identified by Freud (1895) at the beginning of his thought as the 'principle of constancy', which will later merge into the more extensive concept of the death drive, nirvanic thrust, homeostasis of the organism. Psychic life does not want to change and, similarly, the large group only wants to preserve itself.

The fundamental question that Volkan poses at this point in the film, a question that has never stopped querying Freud's thought, is: why are humans the only animals, of all species, that kill their fellow humans? An elephant will not kill an elephant, but only another animal considered an enemy of the elephant. A human being, on the other hand, is the only living being who can consider himself, another human being or human group, as an enemy. Humans seem, periodically, *to need* an enemy. Freud found an answer, a very controversial one in the psychoanalytic community, in the existence of the death instinct, an innate destructiveness within humans. Throughout his thought, from the turning point of 1920 to the *Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1938), to the bitter considerations of *Why war* (1932) and *Civilization and its discontents* (1930), it is known that Freud had no illusions about the goodness and altruism of human nature, nor about the mind's free capacity of understanding when placed in certain circumstances, such as those described by Volkan:

> "….How is it these devices succeed so well in rousing men to such wild enthusiasm, even to sacrifice their lives? Only one answer is possible. Because man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction. In normal times this passion exists in a latent state, it emerges only in unusual circumstances; but it is a comparatively easy task to call it into play and raise it to the power of a collective psychosis."
> (Freud, 1932, p. 201)

Although it does not appear expressly in the words of Volkan, today we cannot fail to consider hatred and destructiveness as the result of the defusion of the life and death drives (Green, 2010; Valdrè, 2016), and of the preeminent desire of the individual to safeguard himself with respect to the other. In this *mors tua vita mea*, which no other animal knows, man justifies his jungle.

> The death instinct - Freud writes - turns into the destructive instinct when, with the help of special organs, it is directed outwards, on to objects. The organism preserves its own life, so to say, by destroying an extraneous one.
> (1932, p.211)

Human groups, characterized by even more primitive unconscious behaviors and structures, the "basic assumptions" (Bion, 1948), behave in the same way. Therefore the large group does everything, is willing to do anything, in order to save, to preserve its survival, its identity, which coincides with the identity of all the subjects who form it; if *another* attacks and threatens the large group's feeling of self, that other becomes the enemy. Freud never ceased to recall, always in connection with the death drive, its not necessarily destructive but *homeostatic* aspect; that life is conservative, that the individual does not want change and seeks quiet. This applies to the patient being treated and to the large group. The more the identity of a large group feels traumatized, the more it folds narcissistically on itself (we-ness). Here comes into play the complex concept of *trauma*, a concept on which exists today in psychoanalysis, after the first definitions of Freud of the "contact barrier" (Freud, 1895) and after Ferenczi's subsequent elaboration, an extensive literature that I will not engage here. In Volkan's simple and clear definition, trauma occurs when the normal coping mechanisms with which the individual and group face adversity are eclipsed and proven inadequate. Trauma is *too much: too much* pain, offense, shame, humiliation.

When an individual, or a group, fails to process trauma due to this excess, it does not disappear, but its representation settles, through a precise unconscious chain, onto the next generation. We are at the core of the film, *the transgenerational transmission* of trauma, one of the concepts that I find the most relevant in contemporary psychoanalysis. The exceptional phenomenon of unconscious transgenerationality reminds us of another fundamental requirement of the psyche. Mourning needs to be elaborated, it does not disappear by itself, and collective mourning sometimes requires a complex and painful collective elaboration. It is to avoid, illusively, this pain, that often the individual and the group unconsciously deny and hand down the trauma. They magically treat it as if it never occurred; it literally 'jumps, then, to the next generation. Children pay the price that fathers and mothers have avoided; there is no escape. Psychoanalytic treatment carried out on second generation patients after World War II or after the bloody events in Argentina, has detected these "deposits", images of the representation of the object-trauma deposited in the unconscious of future generations, who from there on will carry them, unknowingly, within themselves. Argentinean

psychoanalyst Bléger (1968) called these "deposits" that silently pass from generation to generation "agglutinated nuclei", to indicate their viscosity and insidiousness: once stuck, agglutinated, they will no longer detach themselves from the more unconscious layers of the mind. However, it is necessary at some point to elaborate the trauma, so as not to destroy the psyches of entire generations.

Here is what I would call the most original concept of Volkan's: 'chosen trauma', which refers to the shared mental representation of a traumatic historical event that becomes a significant mark for the identity of the large group (Volkan, 2007). However, this state of affairs does not remain silent, inactive. Almost always, a populist, charismatic leader takes over the scene, and *reactivates* the 'chosen trauma' through powerful propaganda and fervent nationalist speeches of hatred, which can inflame a crowd of followers who, they themselves or their ancestors, during the trauma, were wounded, dispersed, humiliated and now search for revenge.

There are two types of leadership, says Volkan: either *reparative* (an example is Martin Luther King) or *destructive:* Hitler, Milosevic (who Volkan focuses on, in particular, as the Serbia-Kosovo conflict is exemplary and he knows it well), up to the image of the American populist Trump. The film shows us how easy it is for people, when lost and looking for a leading figure after major crises such as in 1929, to fall into the arms not of the reparative leader, but of the destructive one. The regressive phenomenon with which groups aggregate around a leading figure who makes himself accessible to the group's projections, was carefully described by Freud in 1921 with *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.* In the group the individual regresses, loses rationality and judgment, and becomes extremely manipulable in the hands of a supposed Father who acts as the ego ideal; subsequent studies by Bion (1948) will elaborate the so-called basic assumptions, that is to say, the types of unconscious dynamics always present in the different types of groups.

What does a group do at this point when it has identified its charismatic leader and must, through him, recover identity and elaborate trauma? Through transgenerational transmission, the group *chooses* its trauma. Mourning that is unelaborated by the previous generation(s) falls onto the successive ones, and the same task descends on their shoulders: the shared mental representation of the predecessors' traumas slowly evolves into a 'chosen trauma' (Volkan, 1991). In this process, which is largely unconscious, historical truth is not particularly important, but what matters is the *sharing* of the 'chosen trauma' that unites every member of the group; men and women, rich and poor will recognize each other, from there on, under this mark.

Central in the film is the description of what Volkan considers an emblematic 'chosen trauma', that of the Serbian people's historical loss of The Battle of Kosovo and the death of their mythic leader Prince Lazar (1389). The dictator, Slobodan Milošević, was able to reactivate the 'chosen trauma' during his famous speech at the Kosovo Field in 1989, which urged the people to regain control of Kosovo, symbolically a very important region after the defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Empire 600 years earlier. The dictator brought back to life the memory of Prince Lazar and, in reactivating that glorious memory, it was as if those 600 years had never passed by (to give evidence of the timeless nature of the unconscious). The Prince was *really* still there among them, they believed, side by side with the people's sense of loss and destruction after the collapse of the USSR. The imago, the icon of Prince Lazar, was used to cement the common sense of victimization, becoming a

symbol of the Serbian desire to take revenge for the humiliations suffered in Kosovo, both in the past and present. Around the monuments and ancient battlefields – hot spots – the memory of the collective trauma is gathered: the latest in recent history, which the film shows us in all its architectural beauty, is the monument in New York City, Ground Zero, in memory of the tragedy of September 11; while the 'linking-object'' is the object, any object or action that binds us to the lost person in an attempt to process mourning, a mourning which, if not healed in the right way, becomes *a perennial mourning,* one that repeatedly returns and is never worked through.

In the reactivation of the trauma, time is undone: it is what Volkan defines, in another important chapter, as *time collapse.* This is when history collides with the present. Yesterday and today, past and present, fantasy and reality are totally confused within these unconscious collective processes: how can we get out of it? All the feelings and emotional reactions reactivated by the 'chosen trauma' represent a formidable block to any process of growth and development, where official diplomacy is often powerless.

**Does psychoanalysis have a role?**

Psychoanalysis has accustomed us to concepts such as 'therapeutic space', transitional area, sublimation, negative capacity: to be able to wait and tolerate uncertainty and doubt, to renounce immediate drive satisfaction, to find intermediate spaces of creativity and thought, to foster love, redress vs. hatred and destructiveness. We could translate the set of strategies put in place by Volkan with the term with which the film moves to its conclusion: the '*Tree Model*'. This model, which the author has adopted for many years in different countries, can be applied to non-official diplomacy aiming - under the guidance of psychoanalytically oriented facilitators – at negotiating peace within large groups affected by lasting conflicts and by their very high human cost. The aim, specifically psychoanalytic, is *to separate fantasy from reality* and *the past from the present* among large groups in conflict, opening a sort of game, a "therapeutic space." This is a difficult task, which cannot be carried out if the groups in question reject the dimension of the 'game' and do not give up fighting with real weapons. The principle that drives the 'Tree Model' is the principle of reality, we might say. The 'Tree Model' is intended to help the humans find a common language. The first step is to diagnose what is at its roots, to interview, and understand the people (the film gives us the example, at the end, of an excellent experience conducted by Volkan with children from a school in Estonia after the collapse of the USSR and their anxious coexistence in school with Russian children); the second phase is dialogue; the third are the branches of the tree, the creation of interdisciplinary links. The aim is the search for truth. In this sense, we can say that yes, psychoanalysis can certainly have a role, not only necessarily theoretical and speculative, but also 'practical', as the experience of this extraordinary man shows: his courage, his faith in the search for truth, his personal mourning creatively transformed into art and a commitment for peaceful relations.

Finally, the film recounts the experience that gives us the film's title, how Vamik's Room was born. This symbolic place is the fruit of the therapeutic work that Volkan led with the refugees from the Republic of Georgia, and in particular a specific family, expelled from their homes in Abkhazia, after the collapse of the USSR. Volkan helped them regain a sense of community and hope by listening to their past traumas and facilitating a process of adaptive mourning. Years later he returns on a visit to find that from the ruins of the refugee

camp the family had built ‘a room’ for him (but really for themselves, ultimately), a symbolic place of remembrance and contained grief: they called it *Vamik’s Room.* They were devastating years and in order to survive, the grand patriarch of the family who was also a poet developed the ritual habit of writing small poems about the people’s daily life, which the family read in turn, over breakfast.

“Psychoanalysis seems to me today to be one of the rare, if not the only, ally of culture-sublimation”

(Kristeva 2005, p.1665, translated for this article)

I believe that this quotation by Julia Kristeva expresses in a nutshell the whole meaning and message of the film: only through the passage to the symbol, to art (the little poems) and therefore to thought, can the human being have an alternative to *homo homini lupus est* (man is wolf to man) to which, otherwise, he is condemned. The title is emblematic of a symbolic place: thought, memory, or the psychoanalytic space. “Whatever fosters the growth of civilization” – these are the words with which Freud closes his bitter correspondence with Einstein – “works at the same time against war” (1932, p. 204). Only psychoanalysis, even in our contemporary world where it struggles to find its status and credibility, is able to promote this movement, to replace action with thought, negation with memory, immediate satisfaction with sublimation, destruction with repair. *Vamik’s Room,* a symbolic room that the refugees dedicated to Volkan, thus becomes a metaphorical place containing the memory and the essence, representing this reparative process and the strength of its foundation in the family and broader community of displaced persons.

“We are destined to *metaphor”* - writes French psychoanalyst Pontalis – “to psychic work, to dream work, to the work of thought, to the work of writing, that is, ultimately, to a work of mourning. The minimum creation is produced by a mourning” (1988, p.174).

With Cyprus the film began and with the memory of Volkan’s childhood homeland, its trees, its sunny garden, the documentary film closes. This is where he always returns, the director tells us, to the geography that nurtured the heart and the thought of a man who also knew how to go so very far afield in the practical application of psychoanalytic ideas.

Molly Castelloe's voice asks, at the end: *What is our identity today?* Who are we in the globalized world? Do the old nationalisms, the ancient roots still matter in this world with its continuous moments of passage? And, I add, how can we cope with the constant temptation of wars, with the search for an enemy?

“One solution: love” (Kértesz, 2007, p.250).

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