Small antidotes to existential angst

Wasn’t it Alki Zei, the novelist, who’d said “The best parties in Athens took place during the Occupation”? That was definitely not the selfish reaction of an unreflective individual, who turned in on herself while all around her fell apart; only the vital urge of a young woman in love (she had just met Giorgos Sevastikoglou, her lifetime companion), who drew strength from the certainty that she did the right thing (she had already joined the Resistance), and resolved to live every day to the full, knowing it could be her last.

That phrase came to mind as I read of the parties thrown in Kyiv and Lviv. With power from makeshift generators, and no heating, dancing with determination, waiting for the next bomb. Knowing that free men and women around the world admire them, cheer their military successes, and pin their hopes on their perseverance, until the end of the nightmare. It’s the human condition: we lick our wounds, count our losses, and push on. What else can one do?

Is it morally suspect of us western Europeans to watch a terrible war unfold as if it were a spectacle, from our warm home, with our beloved ones nearby and safe? It can be – unless we too are prepared to do the right thing: keep our calm about the rising cost of energy, treat compassionately Ukrainian (and other) refugees, send our governments the signal that we too will persevere, until the end of the nightmare.

Meanwhile, the spectacle *par excellence* for me and many other people around the world had already been stained by reports of thousands of migrant workers losing their lives to build Qatar’s stadiums before the bribing scandal at the European Parliament, involving MEPs from my adopted as well my actual country, from a political family close to mine (how many more trials will this life reserve for me?)

And yet, amidst the gloom, how many of us failed to feel, against their better judgement, gradually engrossed in the childish excitement of a tense, closely contested football match? For 90 or 120 minutes (plus injury time) we forget the war, climate change, the vulgarity of much of public life, the mediocrity of most of its protagonists, ready to applaud a spectacular goal, or to regret a lost penalty, of a random millionaire from a faraway country.

Or to share the joy of those who cheer the victories of their own country, like the Moroccans who celebrated in the streets of Milan, children sitting on their shoulders, holding hands with their women, the latter wearing headscarf or lipstick and light makeup (or all of these at once), for a night of pure bliss, and then another, on top of the world.

Or to laugh with the incomplete feat of Ghana’s forward, by the name of Inaki Williams, who in the tenth minute of injury time, lurking behind the post with deadly intent, as Portugal goalkeeper Diogo Costa, oblivious to his presence, dropped the ball in front of him, darted forward, stole the ball, only to slip as he turned to score an easy goal, missing the chance to become a national hero, but not before giving a few million people around the world a few seconds of authentic joy, taking them back to the time when sweaty and bruised, carefree and unsuspecting, chased a ball on a dusty field for hours on end.

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