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## **R.G. Gallego. Blanc sur Noir. Arles : Actes Sud, Paris, 2003.**

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## **R.G. Gallego. Blanc sur Noir. Arles : Actes Sud, Paris, 2003.**

- 1 Gallego's book, which was first published in Moscow in 2002, was immediately translated into many European languages. The speed of implementing foreign language versions shows the importance of this text, a testimony of common life in Soviet orphanages. Gallego was born in Moscow in 1968 from a Spanish mother. Strongly handicapped at his birth, Ruben Gallego was separated from his mother and transferred from orphanages to asylums till 1990. Thanks to the *perestroika* and the opening of Russia, he managed to quit the USSR and to find his mother. He began to write his memories in the 90's.
- 2 His testimony is highly illuminating concerning soviet daily life in closed institutions. His first quality is to show the difficulty, in USSR, to accept differences which in Gallego's case are both ethnic (he is recognised as Spanish) and physical (he is multi-handicapped). The question of alterity is central in this book. Gallego spent his youth in institutions gathering young or old "outsiders" of the Soviet society. He describes relations with the "nianas" (nurses), who represent normal people and often accuse their pensioners of being useless. Because of this incomprehension, young handicapped people in orphanages construct their own social life, with its codes, practices and values. They are used to divert official laws and rules to their own profit. This composition of a "small society" within orphanages allowed the survival of children and explains the sustainability of Gallego's book and its title "White on black": black as the soviet reality of orphanages, white as the solidarity and closed relationship with other handicapped children.
- 3 Gallego describes the importance of solidarity between children in the orphanages. For example, in his chapter "The fight", he shows the common training of children to help one of their friends who have to fight against a valid guy. He also describes friendly and tender relations with one or two professors and nianas. But such solidarity is often broken by deaths and transfers. Such separation was difficult to support for Gallego who evokes his own periods of anorexia and depression. Asylums appear just as destructive to the individual, owing to frequent rupture of social collective links between children. Gallego describes the common points between orphanages, prisons, the Gulag and the army. Concerning prison, he is even envious of the prisoners' destiny. Nianas are presented as authoritarian, venal and insensitive. They are the sergeants or screws of soviet orphanages. As he writes, "Prisoners are lucky. They will serve and will become free. On the contrary, we can't hope for anything. Our establishment is closed".
- 4 As a conclusion, far from sensationalism, this book gives insight into understanding the reality of Soviet closed institutions. From the point of view of daily life, it invites readers to think about informal private solidarities in their interaction with official public rules.

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