

Buenos Aires 5th International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 2

Films on the Middle East, texture in cinema and certain elusive figures

By David Walsh
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As a source of knowledge current feature filmmaking leaves a great deal to be desired. If one wants to learn something important about the world, unhappily, this is not the first place to turn. Genuine knowledge (including knowledge of subjective processes), that is, and not simply the contents of numerous essentially empty, self-important and often celebrated heads. This goes for so-called “art” and “independent” cinema too. In fact, empty-headedness and self-importance find some of their most perfected expressions in this realm.

One has to search: through films from areas of the world where a serious attitude to life in cinema is still to be found, through older films, through documentaries. This is not the same thing, however, as merely searching for the eccentric and grotesque. The excavation and presentation of such material is one of the means by which the current impasse in filmmaking is evaded. The goal is always: to find material with that “definite and important feeling for the world” of which Trotsky speaks.

Despite the efforts of the pro-Israeli lobby, which dominates the American media and entertainment industry, the horrors being inflicted on the Palestinian people by the Zionist regime are provoking widespread outrage and disgust. Numerous documentaries have appeared detailing the crimes of the Sharon regime.

After Jenin (Jenny Morgan, Britain) is one. It reviews briefly the history of the Palestinian tragedy and focuses on the Israeli army’s assault and occupation of the refugee camp in Jenin on the West Bank in April 2002. The filmmakers interview residents who recount the events. In one neighborhood 25 missiles landed in a half-hour. Women are interviewed in the rubble of their homes. The Israelis cut off the water and food supply. Families remained trapped for days. A mass burial takes place in a hospital parking lot.

Both Palestinians and anti-Sharon Israelis interviewed agree: the desire of the Zionists is to “create an exclusively Jewish state,” to drive the Palestinians out. The sinister expansion of the settlements and the de facto annexation of Palestinian land are discussed. The film notes that 42 percent of the West Bank is under control of the settlements. An “apartheid system” has come into existence, through a network of army checkpoints, roads and security zones. An Israeli journalist describes the regime’s policy as “policing the Palestinian colony.” A “refusenik” (one of the Israeli soldiers refusing to serve in the West Bank) calls the situation a “brutal occupation.”

The film takes note of the wanton destruction carried out by the Israelis in Jenin and the other targets in 2002: not simply the bulldozing of houses, but the destruction of factories, shops, equipment, computers. Once again showing the way for the US military, Israeli forces did

everything in their power to destroy the culture and history of the Palestinians during their brutal incursion, to annihilate any sense of community or history. The politics of *After Jenin* are not particularly advanced, but the material is devastating.

Rana’s Wedding [*Another Day in Jerusalem*], directed by Hany Abu-Assad, is an appealing film. One morning a young woman in east Jerusalem faces a choice: to leave with her father for Egypt that afternoon or get married to her fiancée, a theater director in Ramallah. Rana decides on the latter course of action, but faces a considerable number of obstacles, including getting to Ramallah (across an Israeli check-point) and back. Finding the registrar and bringing him to the supposed location of the wedding forms part of the ordeal.

The drama is not earth-shattering, but one sees certain things: mostly blockades, bulldozers, a desolate landscape. Seeing a neighbor’s house knocked down, the young woman says, “They’re tearing down a house on the very day I want to build mine.” In the end, the couple is married at the check-point. Clara Khoury is fine as Rana and the film has a generally healthy attitude toward life and its problems.

Elia Suleiman is a talented filmmaker. His most recent work, *Divine Intervention*, is currently making the rounds in North America. *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) uses a similar technique of brief sequences to shed light on some of the painful ironies of the situation in the Middle East and his own dilemma as a Palestinian filmmaker returning to the region after an absence of 12 years.

There are various goings-on: Suleiman and a friend, unmoving and nearly unspeaking, sit outside the latter’s “Holyland souvenir” shop. A group of Japanese tourists stop to photograph them. Later a book inexplicably falls out of the sky—“It’s raining culture,” one of the pair says. Subsequently we see the shop-owner filling bottles labeled “holy water” from his tap.

Suleiman, as in his more recent film, is particularly sensitive to the anger and seething, often pointless frustration produced by the Palestinian predicament. Outside a café a car stops, two men—the best of friends, we learn—emerge brawling. Bystanders intervene, pack them into the car again, which motors off. Title: “The Following Day.” A car stops outside the same café, two men get out and start brawling. This time, father and son. The same bystanders intervene and stop the fight, the two drive off.

A young Palestinian woman searches for housing in west Jerusalem. She discovers that all the apartments have been snapped up, at least once her ethnicity becomes known. In the film’s most amusing scene, Suleiman is to make a presentation at a press conference. He receives a fulsome introduction: “He has come back from his voluntary exile” to make a new film, he is the great hope of the Palestinian cinema, etc.

Suleiman steps to the microphone and it emits nothing but feedback. He tries to begin again; more crackling. After another attempt, the assembled journalists begin to trickle out or start talking on their cell phones. He never utters a word.

Captive, waiting... is a short but remarkable film about a little-known group of men: prisoners of war still being held in Iran 15 years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Director Mohammad Ahmadi (who has worked on films by Mohsen and Samira Makhmalbaf) includes portions of letters from the prisoners. One writes to the baby he has never seen. His wife was pregnant when he went away to war. He's been a POW for 18 years! "If your mother has [re]married, ask her not to come see me."

The prisoners hear that 400 of their number are to be released. When the busloads of men get to the Iraqi border, there are no Iranian prisoners with whom to be exchanged. After three days they are returned to the camp. One man weeps. The narrator enters his 19th year of captivity in a war whose causes and aims he has long ago forgotten.

A Canterbury Tale is an odd and vaguely unsettling film directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, released in 1944. The film, whose title echoes Chaucer, is an exploration of "Englishness," made under wartime conditions and for patriotic purposes. A young woman, the widow of an RAF airman, a young American flyer and a classically trained organist, now working in a movie theater, find themselves on the road to Canterbury. They encounter a mysterious Mr. Colpeper, a local justice of the peace and perhaps more.

Colpeper is obsessed with instructing all who will listen on the history of the area and its quasi-mystical significance, as the following passage indicates: "There is more than one way of getting close to your ancestors. Follow the Old Road and as you do, think of them; they climbed Chillingbourne Hill just as you did. They sweated and paused for breath just as you did today. And when you see the bluebells in the spring and the wild thyme, and the broom and the heather, you're seeing what their eyes saw. You ford the same rivers, the same birds singing. And when you lie flat on your back and rest, and watch the clouds sailing as I often do, you're so close to those other people, that you can hear the thrumming of the hoofs of their horses, and the sound of the wheels on the road, and their laughter, and talk, and the music of the instruments they carried. And they turned the bend in the road, where they too saw the towers of Canterbury. I feel I have only to turn my head to see them on the road behind me."

The film ends in an ecstatic celebration of everything "English" in the Canterbury cathedral (the seat of the Church of England) to the tune of "Onward, Christian Soldiers"!

Despite *A Canterbury Tale's* national-patriotic aims and its fantasy of a peaceful, rustic English countryside peopled by plain-spoken but astute farmers and craftsmen, the work retains a considerable impact.

Is it simply the blandness of so much of what we see today, or even a misplaced nostalgia, that convinces the spectator that such a work has greater depth and *texture* than current studio products?

Both factors may come into play, but there is a relatively objective manner of determining the question: by looking briefly at the background and experience of those involved in creating the look and sound of *A Canterbury Tale*. How many of the extraordinary American and British films of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s owe much of their strength to the talents of men and women trained in the central European art, theater and film worlds (which generally implied a degree of political sophistication as well)?

The co-director of *A Canterbury Tale*, Emeric Pressburger, was born Imre József Pressburger in 1902 in Miskolc, Hungary (then Austria-Hungary). According to a biographer, "Educated at the Universities of Prague and Stuttgart, he worked as a journalist in Hungary and Germany and an author and scriptwriter in Berlin and Paris. He was a Hungarian Jew, chased around Europe (he worked on films for UFA in

Berlin and in Paris) before World War II, who finally found sanctuary in London."

Cinematographer Erwin Hillier, born in 1911 to a German-English family, studied art in Berlin in the late 1920s. The famous director F. W. Murnau was so impressed by Hillier's paintings that he asked him to work on *Tabu*. Instead Hillier ended up working for Fritz Lang on *M*.

Born in 1886 in Germany, production designer Alfred Junge began working in silent films in 1923. By the time of *A Canterbury Tale* he had worked with Alexander Korda, Marcel Pagnol, King Vidor, Carol Reed and Alfred Hitchcock as production and art designer.

The composer of the film's score, Allan Gray, was born Josef Zmigrod in Tarnów, Poland (then Austria-Hungary) in 1902. He studied under the pioneering modernist Arnold Schönberg. A biographer notes, "To pay for his tuition he composed popular, jazz-influenced tunes for cabaret acts in Berlin. Josef took his pseudonym from Oscar Wilde's narcissistic hero, Dorian Gray."

The individual in charge of visual effects, W. Percy Day, had worked on Abel Gance's celebrated *Napoleon* (1927).

Is it any wonder that today's films often appear pale and weak by comparison?

Human curiosity, for good or ill, is boundless, particularly when it comes to anything out of the ordinary. As boys in Manhattan, for a prank, a few of us would stand outside tall buildings and stare intently upward. Inevitably, although there was nothing to look at, a crowd would gather.

This curiosity about the unknown is an enormously positive force under the best conditions. What would become of science, art or any other field of human endeavor without the impetus it provides?

This elementary collective fascination with the unusual is manipulated within the present society and often directed toward morbid and anti-social ends. In particularly stagnant times an unhealthy interest in "celebrities," in the secret life of the rich and famous, absorbs a considerable portion of this popular energy.

There are other figures whose lives, the details of which are hidden or only partially known, captivate us: eccentrics, artists, the recluses. Of particular interest apparently is the individual who achieves fame or notoriety and then chooses to leave the limelight, or remains out of it as much as possible. People wonder: what did they experience there that made them retreat as though they had been scalded?

Martha Argerich, conversation nocturne, directed by Georges Gachot, is a study of the remarkable Argentine-born pianist, known for her reluctance to grant interviews. Gachot told a journalist half-jokingly, "I have been working for 20 years to get a 'yes.'" This is Argerich's first time appearing before a camera; she began her career in 1957.

The film has its shortcomings. Its essential material is taken from a three-hour long conversation held two years ago. Around segments of that discussion the director has organized footage taken from the pianist's career, including concerts and rehearsals.

Committed to a format dominated by this one off-the-cuff conversation, the film is short on biographical or historical information. It never bothers to search for the source of Argerich's musical genius or probes the conflicts and contradictions in her life (including a breakdown at the age of 21, which drove her to stop performing for two years, and a decision in the 1980s to strictly limit the number of her solo appearances); it is largely a tribute. As such, it is intelligently and concisely done.

Argerich (born in 1941) comes across as an appealing and charismatic personality. In one rehearsal she respectfully but forcefully imposes her vision of a piece on a conductor. Speaking with Gachot, she discusses the great influence on her life and career of the Austrian pianist and nonconformist Friedrich Gulda. She quotes him, "I have to do it right or I die." Argerich is on intimate terms with the composers whose work she performs. "It's easy," she says of a Prokofiev concerto, "He's very fond of me." She speaks of a special relationship with Schumann, with whom

she has “a thing.” The pianist advocates a kind of improvisational approach to performing, “You don’t know what will happen.”

Gachot’s film is worthwhile for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the opportunity to hear passages from Ravel, Prokofiev, Bach and Schumann.

An Argentine performer of another type is the subject of *Yo no sé qué me han hecho tus ojos* (“I don’t know what your eyes have done to me”—also the title of a famous tango waltz), co-directed by Lorena Muñoz and Sergio Wolf, as much a piece of detective work as anything else. The film chronicles the life, career and “disappearance” of tango singer Ada Falcon.

Falcon, born in Buenos Aires in 1905, was singing from an early age. At 19 she had already sung with a band, at 20 she was performing concerts in theaters. Francisco Canaro, the band leader and composer, became her lover. More or less at the height of her career in 1942 (oddly enough, the same year Greta Garbo made her last film before disappearing from public view), Falcon abandoned tango and singing, and dedicated her life to the Virgin Mary. She entered a convent in a provincial town and never performed again. No one really knows why.

The filmmakers, astonishingly, found Falcon alive (she has subsequently died). Decades in the nunnery have not been good to the former diva. “I was so pretty,” she comments, watching herself on film. The questions are not so interesting. “Who was your greatest love?” she’s asked. “My greatest love was ... I don’t remember.” The film does not shed terribly much light on Falcon’s life-altering decision and manages to be a bit self-conscious, but its subject matter and imagery hold one’s interest.

Cravan vs. Cravan (directed by Isaki Lacuesta) takes a look at the life and disappearance, permanently in this case, of “Arthur Cravan” (1887-1918?), nephew of Oscar Wilde, self-styled poet-boxer, critic-provocateur, anarchist, claimed later by the surrealists as a precursor. Born Fabian Lloyd (the son of Wilde’s brother-in-law) in Lausanne, Switzerland, the future Cravan grew up in a family that desired nothing more than to live down Wilde’s “disgrace” (the writer had died poverty-stricken in Paris in 1900). His discovery of Wilde’s writings and fate transformed his life and propelled him into a career of aggressive confrontation with the cultural establishment.

Cravan’s activity, in fact, seems to bear within it the seeds of a number of movements, including the Dadaists, Futurists and Vorticists. He dressed in outlandish waistcoats, half green-half red, praised the machine and violently denounced all the leading cultural figures of the time. His attack on André Gide was particularly memorable. In Paris he edited a magazine, *Maintenant* (two of whose numbers are available on-line, in French: <http://sdrclib.uiowa.edu/dada/Maintenant/index.htm>), and wrote all the articles himself, under a variety of pseudonyms. “Oscar Wilde is living!” was one piece, in which he describes an imaginary encounter with his uncle and sums up “All of literature” as “ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta.”

Cravan verbally assaulted everybody, the avant-garde too. The poet Apollinaire once challenged him to a duel. Typically, his attack on the painter Robert Delaunay begins, “Once more I must admit that I have not seen his paintings.” Cravan wrote in his magazine, “If I write it is to infuriate my colleagues, to make people talk about me and to try making a name for myself. With a name, you succeed with women and in business.” He also wrote: “I refuse to be civilized.”

Cravan, a large, powerful man, really did become a boxer, in fact, a European champion. In 1916, in front of 30,000 people in Barcelona, he fought heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, who knocked him out in the sixth round. “The day of the revolution, Johnson will be king,” Cravan remarked, according to the film. The poet-boxer was in Spain because of his hostility to the war. He sailed for New York City on December 25, 1916 ... aboard the same ship as Leon Trotsky (this is not mentioned in the film).

Trotsky wrote in *My Life*: “The population of the steamer is multicolored, and not very attractive in its variety. There are quite a few deserters from different countries, for the most part men of fairly high standing. ... A boxer, who is also a novelist and a cousin of Oscar Wilde, confesses openly that he prefers crashing Yankee jaws in a noble sport to letting some German stab him in the midriff.”

For his part Cravan later wrote of Trotsky with a combination of respect and irony. “The poor fool!” he observed, “He sincerely loves humanity. He sincerely desires to make other people happy. And he truly thinks that one day there will be no more war.”

In New York Cravan continued his effort at scandalizing society. Invited by Marcel Duhamel to deliver a lecture, Cravan reportedly began his talk by swearing and disrobing, whereupon he was arrested. Moving on to Mexico, Cravan apparently attempted to set up a boxing academy. In the fall of 1918 he sent his pregnant wife on to Buenos Aires, intending to follow her by boat. He never arrived and is presumed to have drowned. Legends grew that he was seen years later.

Frank Nicotra, a present-day boxer, acts as guide through Lacuesta’s film. He is described as a poet too, but we never hear or see any evidence of his writing. So the reason for his presence is unclear. In any event, Cravan’s life is interesting enough without gimmicks. [<http://www.excentriques.com/cravan/index.html> (in French)]

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