Locarno Film Festival 2003

A report by **Valentina Vitali**

Writing from Locarno last year, I raged against the Festival's new politics of marginalisation, whereby small independent productions and films from countries other than the US and the EU, once at the core of the programme, were now relegated to peripheral venues with third rate projection facilities. The bad news is that nothing has changed: Locarno can now be dubbed the McDonald's of the film world. The good news is that with twice as many films and videos than only a few years back, a clear two-tier system has emerged. Two separate programmers and two juries now select and award (a) the International Film Competition and the screenings in the 9,000 seats Piazza; (b) the Video Competition, the sections 'Filmmakers of the Present', 'In Progress', and the special theme-based retrospective, this year on 'Cinema and Human Rights'.

Little of interest was screened as part of the International Film Competition, with the exception of Masahiro Kobayashi's *Onna Rihatsushi No Koi* (*Amazing Story*, Japan, 2003). But then the 49 year-old Japanese director, with several features to his credit, is relatively well established in the European film festival circuit. A less comfortable presence was the Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, invited especially to participate at the round table that accompanied the programme on Human Rights. Suleiman had this to say to Locarno:

"There is some tension about how to contextualise my presence on this panel. I am not an activist, and I think that in my films, other terms apply than those at work in this panel. [...] To begin with, I don't know how we can position ourselves to judge what is right, and what are the rights, for humans. I absolutely support and will look forward, always, to another victory of the human rights activists: they are the ones who sometimes manage to embarrass governments and powers. However, when it comes to film festivals and cinema, one has to raise questions: what makes a film qualify for the human rights programme? If you don't qualify for it, does it mean that you are inhuman? If you do make it into the programme, does it mean that you speak about the victimized?

I've seen so many bad films that talk about such good issues. With their tendency to sensationalise, they ally themselves with the power structure. I think what cinema can do is to retell a story and to be critical of the way it is telling that story. When you go and watch a film you are presented with an aesthetic dimension, a space in which you can participate, that is a kind of desire-space which produces a form of pleasure-seeking. You may go home and feel hungry, or feel a cluster of desire inside you. You may feel a sense of love, in the very old cliché (that I think should be revived) of wanting to make love and not war. As a filmmaker I can do a lot with that. It is not a matter of stimulating an immediate response, but a question of self-reflection and self-criticism – an evaluation of who we are and what we want to be."

Suleiman's intervention fell on deaf ears – the panel's as well as the audience's. However, a small number of films and videos in the 'subsidiary' sections did manage to make their mark. First among them was Harun Farocki's *Erkennen und verfolgen* (*War at A Distance*, 2003), a remarkable and, in my opinion, well overdue investigation of the Gulf War's iconography that focuses on the cross-over between hard-core military operations and media reportage (see interview with Farocki in this issue). Consisting primarily of digital images (from, for example, military training simulation films reproducing the view from the camera attached to on-target missiles) too abstract and too devoid of human life to lend themselves to sensationalist anti-war humanism, Farocki's painstakingly researched film-essay addresses the viewer directly as the pro-active consumer of such imagery. Who are we when we look at this imagery? Self-reflection and self-criticism, in this context, means understanding the more and the less sophisticated visual processes by which today's superpowers conduct their wars 'at a distance' as part and parcel of broader processes of economic, social and cultural production in which we – as viewers – are inextricably involved.

Digital technology featured prominently in the section 'In Progress', open to a variety of formats, including shorts and installations. Definitely worth noting was Annelies Strba's *Aya* (Switzerland, 2003), a short experimental portrait of a woman moving sensuously in front of a camera recording what looked like heat waves exuding from the woman's body. While *Aya* could be mistaken for a fauvist painting in motion, Strba's earlier *Paris* (2000), *New York 2001* (2001), and *Tokyo* (2003), use analogue technology to dissect the urban landscape through extreme slow-motion pans (*Paris*), or to recompose it in any such a way as to convey the director's perception of the city's character. Thus, in *Tokyo*, the original footage, shot from one of the city's high-speed trains, is broken down into small rectangular slices that, super-imposed at high speed, render effectively the impression of Tokyo's fast-growing, high-rise architecture.

More rooted in a nationally specific constellation than Strba's globe-trotting lanscapism was the work of the young Brazilian avant-garde filmmaker Carlos Adriano. His complete works, also in the 'In Progress' section, were shown for the first time outside Brazil. The author of no more than seven shorts, each of them made with found footage, including three excellent documentaries (*Vassourinha: The Voice and The Voice*, 1997-98, shown at the Rotterdam Film Festival 1998; *The Pope of Pulp: R. F. Lucchetti*, 1999-2002; and *Militancy*, 2001-02), Carlos Adriano is an interesting case for two reasons. On the one hand, he comes highly recommended by luminaries of the Brazilian cultural scene, such as filmmaker Carlos Reichenbach and critic Joao Luiz Veira. On the other, his work met with a cold reception because, to some European spectators and journalists, Adriano's 'modernism' appeared 'old' –a passive and delayed incorporation of some European and American filmmakers' work. His *Remainiscences* (1994-97) consists of re-elaborations of the first eleven frames ever shot in Brazil. Similarly, the three documentaries re-propose subjects that, while central to the cultural history of Brazil, Brazilians themselves have now forgotten: Sao Paolo-born black samba singer Vassourinha, Brazilian pulp fiction and comics writer Lucchetti, and 19th century Brazilian photographer and magic lantern projectionist Militao. All of Adriano's shorts are non-linear narrations with no dialogues, but why dismiss them as 'old hat' modernism or as imitative postmodernism?

Now that Hollywood is ruthlessly appropriating elements of Latin American modernism – witness the blockbuster-generated craze for Frida Kahlo – we would do well to remember that Brazil had, and continues to have, its own modernist movements, and that these, unlike their European counterpart, have tended to fuse political nationalism with aesthetic internationalism. A more pertinent historical reference to Adriano's work than the European and American models is Oswald de Andrade's notion of 'anthropophagy' – a form of cultural cannibalism mobilised by the Brazilian modernist avant-garde in the 1920s as a strategy of national resistance to cultural colonialism. Brazilian artists were to digest imported cultural products and exploit them as raw material for a new formulation, thus turning the imposed culture back, transformed, against the coloniser.[1] From this perspective, to choose, as Adriano did, the music of Laurie Anderson, along with more recognizably 'Brazilian' tunes, to accompany the first eleven frames of Brazilian film history is no ventriloquism, but a courageous attempt to reclaim a history for Brazilian filmmakers and their audience, in spite of, and against the advances made by US cultural imperialism in Latin America (as elsewhere). The least one can say about these shorts is that, unlike most films screened as part of the Human Rights programme, Adriano's articulate a critical understanding of the complexities that may be involved in re-writing, in the early 21st century, not European or American modernist history, but Brazil's own critical take on that history of imperial-colonial modernism. In many ways, Adriano's work re-asks a question reminiscent of Jean-Marie Straub's engagement with cultural cinematic history in *Too Soon Too Late*.

Focused on a similar issue but using radically different formal strategies is *Ramad* (*Ashes*, 2003) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, two filmmakers, installa-

Opposite: Carlos Adriano, *The Pope of Pulp: R F Luchetti, Remainescences, Militancy*

Below: Mariana Otero, *Histoire d'un secret*

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tion artists and writers from Lebanon with six films to their credit, including *Yemen, the Lost Film* (2002), a documentary about the disappearance of a copy of their film in Yemen, *Khiam* (2000), and the feature *Around the Pink House* (1999).[2] *Ramad* looks at contemporary Lebanese society through the eyes of Nabil, a young man who returns to Lebanon after a long absence to carry out his father's last wishes and scatter his ashes into the sea. The whole 26 minutes of *Ramad* take place during the funeral, and the surreal atmosphere that takes over during the ceremony ought to be read, partly, against the fact that, in Lebanon, cremation is not officially accepted. In *Ramad*, for the large family gathered in the living room waiting to pay their last respects to the deceased, the problem is that Nabil's father died abroad and that, as a result, there is no body. Determined to preserve appearances, Nabil's aunt has decided to resort to an impersonator – a man who, much to Nabil's amazement, agrees to lie in the coffin in lieu of the deceased, his head covered by a white sheet, as custom dictates. The film begins when all of this has been decided, irrespective of Nabil's view on the matter. Yet, the polite conversations between the older members of the family, the relatives walking in and out of the room where the coffin lies, the aunt alone, next to the coffin, talking to the impersonator as if it was her brother, and, most disconcerting of all, the impersonator, whose performance is so convincing that he appears to have stopped breathing and his hands turn blue – all is seen from Nabil's point of view. The more we proceed into the ceremony, the more abstract and surreal it appears. We never even find out whether all those present don't know about the impersonator, or, if they know, whether they are 'playing along', or if it is all the effect of Nabil's imagination.

Until the mid-1970s Lebanese society was driven by a project of economic and social modernisation, with Beirut as its metropolitan centre. In 1975, civil war between Christians, Muslims and Druises, and the invasions by Syria and Isreal, put an end to all that. "Lebanese people do not want to talk about the 25 years that followed – explained the directors of *Ramad* – It is as if a grain of sand entered into the clock and froze time. These are the years in which our generation grew up, but it is very difficult to talk about them. 17,000 people disappeared during that period; we still don't know what happened to them. Today religion is institutionally inscribed and everyday life revolves around the family – communities that seek to rebuild themselves. Lebanese society is full of contrasts; many different belief-systems co-exist within a single culture. In *Ramad* the funeral is a point of departure to dwell on the difficult interaction between different practices and ways of thinking, while at the same time addressing the friction that can, and inevitably does, emerge between an individual and the collective. How can a person live within a community when its customs and rituals have the capacity of annihilating him/her? Nabil fully belongs to his community and must go through his bereavement as customs dictate. At the same time, different individuals experience bereavement differently, and Nabil has difficulties in coming to terms with his own sorrow. We tried to convey this tension through Nabil's gaze, as he pulls away from, and is drawn back into, the events." Shot with a masterly control of mise-en-scene which, however, rejects too orthodox a use of continuity rules, all the better to convey Nabil's sense of psychological estrangement, *Ramad* explores the question of national identity from the perspective of an individual's right to be. It is to the directors' credit that they succeed in sustaining that subjective viewpoint without abstracting it from the historical context that gives it substance.

Also centred around the notion of absence or death is Mariana Otero's *Histoire d'un secret* (*History of a Secret*, 2003, France). Otero's decision to reconstruct the events around her mother's – a painter – death, in May 1968, when Mariana was four and a half years old, enables the filmmaker to open up an otherwise very personal experience to the broader social reality of French society seen through the prism of women's rights. Determined to break her own internalisation of the silence, imposed by the family, about her mother's sudden disappearance, Mariana initiates inhibited exchanges with her uncle and aunt, with whom she grew up in the conservative countryside. She also

Opposite: Annelies Strba, *New York 2001* and *Aya*

Left: Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Ramad*

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engages in intimate conversations with her sister and her father, undertakes to study her mother's paintings, which have been locked away in a cupboard, collects newspaper clippings, and interviews doctors. As a slow-paced, scrutinising camera takes us through it all, it emerges that the true cause of the mother's death was not, as Mariana and her sister had been made to believe, peritonitis, but an abortion, which, for lack of money and of support from the doctor, Mariana's mother had to perform on herself. Another child would have prevented her from dedicating herself to what she wanted most: painting. In the process, as the contours of a woman's strong personality emerge with more and more clarity, and especially through the rediscovery of her painting, we also learn that, until 1979, when abortion was finally legalised in France, 90 percent of women's deaths officially recorded as peritonitis were, in reality, back alley abortions.

Histoire d'un secret did not make it to the Human Rights programme. Yet, if cinema is indeed about creating a desire-space for self-reflection and self-criticism, *Histoire d'un secret* succeeds not simply in creating that space, but, what is more, in evoking it in the shape of a woman's desire. Feminist history at its best? The director explains: "*Histoire d'un secret* sits at the crossover between fiction and documentary. I wanted the film to be inhabited by my mother and for it to evoke things that cannot be seen or heard. I wanted to make her presence felt despite her absence. So, I chose locations for their evocative power and I looked for places where something important had taken place. I hoped that seeing these places would make memories resurface."

It may be too much to ask of any major film festival, let alone Locarno, that they put the films of Farocki, Adriano, Hadjithomas & Joreige and Otero at the centre of their programming policy. But it was not so long ago that this cinema was given a place of honour in the festivals which refused to value cinema exclusively as a popularity context, mainly arbitrated by journalists and publicity budgets. Locarno, in spite of its recent history, still does have the potential to honour Elia Suleiman's request and to concentrate on films that tell a story in ways that are critical of current models of story-telling. In that way, it would never again be possible to treat 'human rights' as if they were a special interest that belongs, tragically, in a separate 'niche' programme.

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1. Veira, Joao Luiz and Stam, Robert 'Parody and Marginality: The Case of Brazilian Cinema' in *Framework: A Film Journal* 28 (1985) (Special Issue: Brazil – Post Cinema Novo), p.38.
2. Two of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's installations will be on show at the Tramway gallery in Glasgow from 14 November 2003.