
FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Volveremos. Director **Ignacio Fradejas-García**. 2008. 57 minutes. B & W and Colour. Distributed by Nomadas em Acción. DVD

Who is the director of *Volveremos*? The question is not what is his name, but who is he? This is the truly valuable unsolved mystery that this Spanish documentary traces. With a precarious camera, far from the standard long-distance shooting of televised football, it raises some atypical questions about this spectacular sport.

‘Who would you be if you were not a soccer player?’ At the beginning of the film, the unknown filmmaker presents this question to the young players of the Real Oviedo FC team. It is a key question because it allows us to escape from the standard ‘Phoenix-like’ portrayals so common to current sports journalism that present epic histories of teams and players who are reborn from ashes to conquer a glorious destiny.

They would not be athletes if they could not manifest on the field the desire of their fans to rise and be reborn. If they cannot fulfil this desire, they would have to return to the limbo of everyday life and other professions as: plumbers, students, salesmen, computer repairmen... What would have they been if they had not been caught by the almost religious power of this ‘serious game’. The film relates the players’ responses to their subjectivities. In their everyday life they experience the feeling that they would not be athletes if they could not embody this myth.

We gradually discover that the camera has different communicative aims. Although every film has an audience, the

camera in *Volveremos* does not speak to a specific category: not everything is portrayed on the screen. Or perhaps is it? The answer to the urgent question behind the images remains the film’s central focus. The ‘non-professional’ camera seems to become more and more intimate and affected by players experiences. It announces a successful outcome for this football team, a rebirth that seems to have been foretold.

But the question ‘who is the director?’ remains to be answered. It seems this is what the director wants to tell us. His aim is reached only partially, but the camera is intimate enough to focus on the old — from an anthropological and philosophical point of view — question of alterity. ‘Who’ is always a confused space. The camera intersects the director’s individuality to examine collective agencies related to heteronomic epical narrations. Thus, these moving images allow a radical distancing, and propose original paths for communication. Not everything is a screen. The camerawork in *Volveremos* shows that there is something behind it. Maybe it only wants to tell us what the director’s life would be like ‘if he was not a soccer player’.

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Dell’arte della guerra (On the Art of War). Directed by **Silvia Luzi** and **Luca Bellino**. 2012. 85 minutes. Distributed by Lab 80 Film, Indieair Films, Tfilm.

Prologue. The documentary begins with a warning: ‘The historical INNOCENTI,

currently called INNSE, is about to close. The machinery will be dismantled. The buildings will be demolished'. Agitated camerawork arouses our attention, then becomes slow and blurry. Male voices begin narrating an adventure. Four former workers are occupying the factory, to fight against its dismantling. Images appear of the factory surrounded by policemen, union officials, journalists and local residents. The situation is tense. A narrator continues: 'We entered by car through the rear gate. We opened a window and climbed in silently'. Vincenzo Acerenza, Fabio Bottaferla, Luigi Esposito and Massimo Merlo are going to enter a 40-meter high crane to fight against the factory closing.

On the art of war. We are now in the ruins of an old factory with empty spaces and abandoned machines — interspersed with narration. The camera explores the inside of a dilapidated building. The story begins to unfold. The documentary advances, showing the events from various points of view. There is a perspective from the *outside*, that of the television media and the outside agents it presents. These images blend with footage captured by the filmmakers at the moment of the factory occupation. The film begins to recall the main events experienced by the principal characters — Enzo, Fabio, Luigi and Massimo — workers with thirty years on the factory floor. They begin their act of remembering by describing the support of the other workers, the mobilization of the residents of the region of INNSE, which was the only still-active factory in this industrial district of Milan and their increasing disillusionment with the union movement, over the past thirty years. The

audio-visual narration changes. We pass from initially imprecise images of faceless shapes to crisp, clear images of old working men walking in a decaying industrial area. The camera serves as a chronicler of workers' past experiences. The documentary advances both from a distance and from outside the old industrial district of INNSE, and from close-up and inside the old factory structure. Through the men's voices we enter the environment of oppression, marginality and poverty that engulf the lives of the region's workers. The factory closing reveals the intense absurdity of the senseless void it signifies for these workers, whose lives have been stolen each day by the owner. It is a war without truce, where the only end is the master's elimination. In this fight, with no deserters, workers present their detailed logistics. They discuss the art of war: the importance of surveillance in shifts, and the support of local residents, and the solidarity against the police. These issues shape the events in this workers' fortress in Milan.

Mounting an army. The documentary intensifies. The viewer realizes how little he or she knows about this history. This pre-declared war, which began fifteen months ago, is becoming more radical. The aim is to win, against the owner's interest, prevent the factory closing and save the jobs. The protagonists guide us through transformations in the contemporary Italian union movement. The worker's struggles conflict with the political agenda of the local unions, the state associations and national federations and follow other paths. At one moment the audio-visual narrative plays with the contrast of the action taking place in the *world-time*, which is always in

colour, and that of actions recalled in *lived-time* which are always in black and white. The audio-visual narrative then provides details of the efforts of the *worker's social army* and its confrontation, on the 'factory-floor' with their enemies, the owner.

Defending the territory. The narrative takes another turn. The documentary goes back in time to try to return to the events through these workers' voices. We pass through the events before this final struggle by Enzo, Fabio, Luigi and Massimo. The taking of the factory by the four workers, through its tunnels, which recalls their previous efforts to keep the plant productive without the presence of the owner. The declarations are made from inside a totally destroyed factory space, in empty warehouses strewn with rubble. There is only one bench from which the men talk about the past events. We learn about their intimate relationship with the machines they operated and tried to save. Their attachment to the factory involved a defence of the machinery and of their working-class identity.

Mounting strategy. Images appear of a large empty space circled by new real estate developments. Cranes and machinery work the land. We gradually accompany the reflections of the men about their picketing of the territory of the INNSE factory for 15 long months and the situation of abandonment and lack of care with which they were treated most of the time by authorities: 'the months seemed like years', said one of the men. This is what led to the occupation of the factory grounds. We briefly return to the televised images of the four workers shut into the crane at the factory. They are joined by

images of the filmmakers who accompany them and record the events in ethnographic time. For the characters in our story, many things were lost in the view of those 'from the outside'. But what is interesting is that, by constructing an audio-visual narration, those 'from the outside' served the proposal for a collective workers action that sought to weaken the all-powerful vision of the owner. And this, they affirm, is not a myth, but a fact!

Epilogue: After 8 days and 7 nights, Enzo, Fabio, Luigi and Massimo win the cancelation of the operation to dismantle the INNSE factory. *At the end of the summer, the factory doors reopen and the workers go back to work.* Images of celebration at the factory doors conclude the adventure of our 4 characters.

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Cast in India. Directed by **Natasha Raheja**. 2014. 26 minutes, Colour. Produced by The Program in Culture and Media, Department of Anthropology, New York University.

The film synopsis reads, 'Iconic and ubiquitous, thousands of manhole covers dot the streets of New York City. Enlivening the everyday objects around us, this short documentary is a glimpse of the working lives of the men behind the manhole covers in New York City. How

does the built infrastructure of New York City conceal the labor infrastructure on which it stands'. The film is a brilliant take on a miniscule and ignored fact that tells a very interesting story. Who could imagine that a manhole cover could take us from the streets of New York to the streets of Kolkata and then to a factory where you discover, 'Oh! So this is where it came from!' Indeed, it makes you wonder. In *Cast in India*, Natasha Raheja raises questions about disparate conditions that shape the geographies of production of everyday urban objects.

The film travels from New York to the Howrah railway station in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal State in eastern India. It also travels from bright expensive shoes to broken slippers, from dust-free streets to dust galore and through the wiring of a production and marketing network that uses cheap third world labor, to hide the filth of the developed nation.

Once you reach the factory you are introduced to laborers working in dust, smoke and dirt. Two women are seen brushing the dust from a manhole cover without masks to cover their faces. The material in every mold is compressed by the tired feet of the men. They almost look like they are dancing on each mold. The truck loads of iron ore are emptied by the hands of laborers who then tie a double padding on their head to sustain the weight of the baskets of iron that they take to the factory. The molten iron ore looks like molten lava from a volcano. The hot ore is steered to the molds by bare hands. Sparks from a blowtorch fly all around, although no eyes are protected. The workers sing folksongs of their distant lands while doing this hazardous work. They decide to

protest for higher wages, but to no avail. They earn only Rs. 7.20/-per metric ton. Laborers are seen sleeping, joking, laughing, singing and remembering their loved ones. With the shift over, they put on clean clothes to go out into this beautiful world with a wish to go to America, whose manholes are covered by the lids they literally make with their own hands.

The camera movement captures subtle expressions, providing a glimpse of the humanity of workers who would otherwise be camouflaged along with the iron, the molds and the casts. It is a very unique film with an innovative and brilliant take on the production cycle. It is a must see for policy makers, economists and sociologists to understand labor relations in the new world.

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A Media Archaeology of Boston. Directed by **Jesse Shapins and Olga Touloumi**. 2013. 120 minutes. B & W and Colour. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources. DVD

This film offers two hours of video clips, takes from films, television, documentaries and soundscapes about Boston and its metropolitan region from 1904 to 2011. The media archeology of Boston is conducted through carefully selected video and audio material beginning with a short film clip portraying Boston in 1773 (*Johnny Tremain and the Sons of Liberty*, by Robert Stevenson, 1956). It concludes by accompanying Peter, a collector, back alley browser, urban archaeologist and trash picker. In between is a collection of 28 clips, some of them complete, others

just brief selections. The archival research is impressive. The directors had assistance from the Harvard Film Archive, the New England Phonographers Union, Northeast Historic Film, WGBH's Media Library and Archives and the personal archive of Lawrence Rosenblum and others.

The film has no clear topic or chronological order, yet subtle threads link one scene with another, digging up essential issues of metropolitan Boston as seen by the authors, Jesse Shapins and Olga Touloumi. It presents landmarks that shape the image of the city; selections from televised news broadcasts of the 1970s about the Boston school desegregation busing crisis, mob violence, and the neighborhood known as the 'Combat Zone' when it was a red-light district. There are crowded Boston streets in 1906 — a brief glimpse from *Jordan Marsh Magazines*, including a reminiscence about Revere Beach. There are scenes of a run with Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone in 2004, while he presents his city and opening clips from the 1977 documentary 'Neighbors' about the South End Urban Renewal Project. It has scenes of the Boston Harbor Islands in 1969 and a presentation of how Boston was looking forward to the year 2000 in 1981. Brief blank images carry sounds of the Boston harbor, an escalator, the commotion of Union Square and the Deer Island Sewage Treatment Plant (2011).

This is not an easy to watch conventional documentary. It is an intriguing film that allows viewers to construct their own understanding of the city history through media archaeology. After viewing all the clips, you do not have a one-sided, unified image of the city and

its suburbs. I wonder how this film would be perceived by a person who does not have direct knowledge of Boston. Those interested in urban studies or the visual representation of cities will find ample and interesting material to watch if they accept the experimental dimension of the film. There are many ways of watching this film; it is up to the viewer to decide how to relate to it. I found the film interesting, surprising and thought provoking. The Boston I have learned about is not the one even a curious visitor would find, yet it presents a composite of pictures of the main trends that have transformed the city.

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The Shebabs of Yarmouk. Directed by **Axel Salvatori-Sinz**, 2013. 78 minutes. Colour, Distributed by DOCKS 66.

The Shebabs (which means youth in Arabic) are a group of 3rd generation Palestinian youths, male and female, who live at the large refugee camp of Yarmouk, in the suburbs of Damascus, Syria. Director Axel Salvatori-Sinz, who has studied anthropology, conducted 3 years of sporadic participant observation in an intimate space of the Shebabs, on the roof of an ugly building, sharing with them a love for filming and performing arts. Through the film we experience the youths' precarious lives, lack of citizenship and suffering from discrimination in their efforts to meet their basic needs for dignified work, education and quality of life. Because the protagonists are Palestinian refugees without full

citizenship in Syria, they suffer social exclusion, yet must follow strict Syrian government rules. Both young and old face conflicts caused by lacking citizenship and limited opportunities. The young males are nevertheless obliged to serve long periods of military service in the Syrian army.

The narrative of the film is based on the eternal dilemma of youth, trying to fulfil their dreams, and meet demands of family and community. From the first moments of the film we realize that this dilemma involves the difficult decision to either leave or remain in the camp. When they must decide whether to enter the army or not, we follow their discussions and poetic discourses regarding their dreams, expectations, conflicts and impasses. The director, using images from significant moments of everyday life, as well as scenes of dialog between boys and girls, youth and elderly, succeeds in reminding us of the traumas of the Palestinians' exile from their homelands, and presents their dilemmas as those of simple human beings living in the camp. Through the lives of the protagonists we discover the personal difficulties of Palestinians refugees before the Syrian revolution began in 2011.

Filming from the interior to the exterior, or from windows of surrounding buildings, and using images of the sky are the main techniques the director uses to overcome severe censorship and supervision by the Syrian intelligence service. This filming option becomes one of the main poetic devices that metaphorically expresses the need of these young people to 'fly' out from the camp.

However difficult the life of these youth might seem in the film before the revolution began, we remain speechless

before the drama of recent events, 4 years after the end of the shooting in 2011. By 2015 2/3 of the Yarmouk camp was destroyed and 90 per cent of its people no longer live there. One of the protagonists was tortured to death by the regime, because of his satirical critique against authoritarian rule. The rest have fled to various parts of the world.

It is no accident that this poetic film about the dreams and expectations of youth has impressed and captured audiences in documentary film festivals and won various awards. The film is profoundly touching as a fragmented, poetic and meaningful ethnographic attempt, but also serves as an archive of material that depicts former ways of life of the Palestinians in Syria. As a fascinating, poetic and ironic anthropological narrative, the film evokes the serious social consequences of civil war, disaster and the huge wave of Syrian refugees.

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J. M. Mondésir. Directed by **Alice Colomer-Kang**. 2012. 24 minutes. Colour. Distributed by Le Fresnoy – Studio National des Arts Contemporains.

J.M. Mondésir focuses on an account of the tragic death of Georges Mondésir, who was also known as Jean-Michel and Jimmy. Surfing between the genres of fiction and documentary, Colomer–Kang forcefully engages viewers in paradoxical *ritournelles*. To grasp better our attention and generate a specific form of subjectivity, she uses a style of repetition of the discourse about police brutality of the

inhabitants of the garden city of Butte–Rouge in Châtenay–Malabry, France while continuously playing with a multiplicity of images — some of them distorted.

What is most striking is the sense of indifference the video seems at first to embody. The contrast between the images and the audio provokes uncertainty and uneasiness. Who is watching whom and to what effect? One may even ask if there is even a point in watching the ‘spectacle’. When the film opens we hear police sirens in the background while we discover a covered corpse surrounded by a familiar crowd: police officers, medics and ‘modern’ spectators, some of whom are recording the scene on their telephones. However, the theater of the absurd does not suffer, since death does not move everyone in the same way. Close to the corpse, yet ‘so’ far, Colomer–Kang makes a point of implying that death expects nothing less than life: nearby, some adults are playing with or watching their children in the playground. We even see a girl playing with what seems to be part of the gold–tinted blanket placed on Jean–Michel’s body. Nonetheless, amid the noise lies a cherished silence that is a decisive part of the cast.

Going against what may be expected of a film dealing with one more death from police brutality, and that of an individual suffering from mental illness, *J.M. Mondésir*, creates both a sense of exteriority and interiority that questions an unknown. Yet, this unknown is increasingly ordinary, it is the effort to erase any kind of singularity with warlike methods ‘if need be’. The main question the film raises concerns basic human relations. It is an interrogation that is

perfectly depicted in a tense scene where two men who are afraid, angry and dismayed seemingly cross paths. While they both exit the screen without an expected encounter, we are left in an oppressive landscape. Despite this sense of confinement, Colomer–Kang presents surreptitiously an alternative scene with a tree. This is probably her abstract way of emphasizing that life always has potential. Hope, joy and renewal creep in.

J. M. Mondésir is an important production that can be of interest to anyone. Its seeming weakness is probably its true strength, as its sluggish pace pulls us slowly but certainly out of the ordinary and invites us to think outside the box for 24 minutes. While Colomer–Kang provides minimal information about the case, her use of theatrical devices, the overlapping and flow of images, as well as the camera’s movements, emphasize that the location does not really matter, since the central themes of the film are life and hope. What matters is for you and I to think and live as a more concrete ‘us’. Insanity percolates in all of life and in all of us. Just as it did in Jean–Michel’s life. As a celebration of life and hope, the film concludes with a gentle response to Jean–Michel’s last words ‘Je vous aime les enfants’. ‘He’s not gone! He’s not gone!’ scream the kids.

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