

The
Modern
Jewish Experience
in
World Cinema

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43. Burman's Ode to El Once Neighborhood

The Lost Embrace

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Lost Embrace (*El abrazo partido*), directed by Daniel Burman [A]
Argentina, France, Italy, and Spain, 2003

In the mid-1990s, young directors such as Daniel Burman began making films about ethnic identities and multiple subjectivities in Argentina. Because these filmmakers relied more on personal stories than on overtly political or historical issues, they paved the way for various ethnic communities to be the focus of Argentine films. Although there is a history of Jewish-themed films in Argentine cinema, there have been few Jewish directors who told these tales from a personal, semi-autobiographical standpoint. In previous decades, the few films that represented narratives of Argentine Jews included Juan José Jusid's *The Jewish Gauchos* (1974); Beda Docampo Feijóo's World War II drama, *Beneath the World* (1987); Raúl de la Torre's *Poor Butterfly* (1986); and Eduardo Mignogna's *Autumn Sun* (1996). The directors themselves, with the exception of Feijóo, were not of Jewish origin, but they made thoughtful films with wide-ranging and nuanced depictions of Jews in Argentina.

Currently, Daniel Burman and his contemporaries are making films that expand the traditional notion of what it means to be Argentine, thus including characters who have traditionally been invisible or excluded from Argentine screens. Moreover, many in this newer group of filmmakers do not identify with a European-influenced culture. Rather, they identify with



From left to right, Daniel Hendler (as Ariel), Adriana Aizenberg (as Sonia), and Jorge D'Elia (as Elias), at the family shop in the Once. From *Lost Embrace* (2003), directed by Daniel Burman. NEW YORKER FILMS/PHOTOFEST

ethnic minorities and working-class people living and working in urban areas such as Buenos Aires. One of their aims is to project a more varied and heterogeneous face of national identity in Argentina. Along with Burman, the filmmakers Ariel Winograd (*Cheesehead* aka *My First Ghetto* [2006]) and Gabriel Lichtmann (*Jews in Space, or Why Is This Night Different from All Other Nights?* [2005]) are shedding a more youthful light on the Jewish community in Buenos Aires. Told from a twenty-something perspective, peppered with a lot of bittersweet and self-effacing humor, these movies recall early Woody Allen films.

One might call Daniel Burman the godfather of the new Argentine-Jewish cinema. In fact Burman has become one of the most important Argentine filmmakers to come on the scene in the

1990s as the auteur par excellence of the Argentine Jewish community. Director of ten films, he is best known for his trilogy dealing with Jewish identity: *Waiting for the Messiah* (2000), *Lost Embrace* (2004), and *Family Law* (2006). His first feature film, *A Chrysanthemum Bursts in Cinco-esquinas* (1998), features an Orthodox Jewish man in a supporting role. His documentary *Seven Days in Once* (2001) profiles Jewish community members of Once, a historic Jewish neighborhood and in the garment district that forms the backdrop for all of Burman's Jewish-themed films. His most recent documentary, *36 Righteous Men* (2011), follows Orthodox Jews on an annual pilgrimage to the tombs of *tzaddikim* [righteous men] in Russia, Ukraine, and Poland, culminating at the tomb of the seventeenth-century founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov.

With the current Jewish population estimated at roughly 250,000 inhabitants, Argentina's Jewish community is the largest in Latin America. Historically, the Jewish community settled in two Jewish neighborhoods in Buenos Aires; the aforementioned Once and Villa Crespo. The principal setting and actions in *Lost Embrace* are the daily goings-on in a galleria in Once—a mall-like arcade, with all of the shopkeepers' daily lives keeping the story abuzz with the various business transactions and social interactions that form daily life in the barrio. The protagonist of *Lost Embrace*, Ariel Makaroff, is our tour guide, taking the viewer into the labyrinthine passageways of the galleria, where he and his mother, Sonia, work at the family-owned lingerie shop. In a quirky, sputtering, voice-over narration, Ariel introduces us to the multicultural scene that is the galleria, with members of Italian, Korean, Jewish, and other ethnic groups selling their wares and eking out a living during a difficult economic downturn. Ariel informs us that while they may not be earth-shattering stories, each store owner or worker has stories to tell. These are personal, sometimes humorous, pieces describing average people in a small, intertwined world that they inhabit—something akin to what a modern-day Isaac Bashevis Singer might produce. Rather than a typical omniscient narrator, Ariel resembles a native informant interested in exposing those who may not be familiar with them to the local cultural codes transmitted in this spirited and busy workplace.

For example, when the audience is introduced to the Saligani family, the Italians who own the radio repair shop and the beauty salon, Ariel says that they are known to speak loudly or shout, but that although the viewer might think they are angry people, for them, culturally, "yelling is their way of communicating." He goes on to

show other tenants in the galleria, such as the Korean couple who own the feng shui shop, the cousins—not brothers—who own the Levin Brothers fabric shop, and other characters, like Ariel's brother, Joseph, who would have liked to be a rabbi but instead sells cheap imported tchotchkes (knickknacks) from an upstairs office.

Critics have noted that the galleria is a microcosm for life in Buenos Aires reflecting the period after the economic crisis that befell the country in 2001 (Lerer). What was once a Jewish neighborhood has been transformed by Koreans, Peruvians, Armenians, and Italians. According to Burman, they work in this multicultural milieu "without any problems of intolerance." (Burman quoted in Feinstein) Burman's "Ariel" trilogy (all three films have a protagonist with the same first name, although they have different surnames) are all semi-autobiographical films, with Daniel Hender, a Uruguayan Jewish actor, as the lead and Burman's alter ego in all three films. The script of *Lost Embrace* was written with Marcelo Birmajer, an Argentine Jewish novelist who also writes on urban themes. Moreover, César Lerner, who composed the original score, and Alejandro Brodersohn, the film's editor, are also Argentine Jews.

Because Burman grew up in Once, his objective is to tell everyday stories characteristic of the area. To add verisimilitude to the project, Burman rented an abandoned shopping mall two blocks from where he grew up and created a movie set there. The film's documentary feel is accentuated when scenes take place out on neighborhood streets amid the traffic and the noise—for instance, on Tucumán and J. E. Uriburú streets, near the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA)—and in interior spaces such as the Jewish club Hacoaj, where Burman spent much of his childhood.

Carolina Rocha (344) notes how the film uses

the formalist qualities of documentary filmmaking, such as the use of the zoom lens, the constant reframing of the image, and the hand-held camera. Burman noted his reason for using these techniques: he “needed the immediacy of contact with the characters, which explains why [he] chose this [form of filming] device.” (Metzger quoted in Rocha) In the “Making of *Lost Embrace*,” a feature on the DVD of the film, Burman states: “I think that El Once is very ugly, and it is always a challenge to find the beauty among such ugliness. All of that noise and chaos makes it impossible to believe that in every moment and every frame of that chaos, there are a ton of stories that one wouldn’t know about otherwise . . . a person carrying rolls of fabric, a person screaming on his cellphone arguing about the price per meter of fabric.”

Despite the neighborhood’s depiction as a densely inhabited space—with people from all walks of life milling about, carrying out their business—it is also seen as a space of danger. Burman alludes to security concerns in the earlier *Waiting for the Messiah*, when the viewer sees orange safety pylons outside of synagogues and Jewish community centers. This brief mention in the opening of the film refers to a horrific attack on the Jewish community (and the community at large) on July 18, 1994, when a car bomb exploded in front of the AMIA building, leaving 85 people dead and wounding 300 others. It was the biggest attack on Argentine soil since World War II.

In *Lost Embrace*, Ariel Makaroff often seems confused, inarticulate, and neurotic. He frequently wishes to escape his comfortable, insular surroundings (which he calls “the bubble”) in pursuit of something “out there”—whether that be a better life in Europe, or an illicit relationship with an older, leggy, blond, non-Jewish woman who runs an Internet café (and who invariably

disappoints his mother). Traumatized by his father’s abandonment and the breakup of the family, Ariel later learns that his father did not leave Argentina for Israel in pursuit of the Zionist ideal, as Ariel had thought. Rather, he wanted to escape the infidelity of his wife with the shopkeeper next door. Instead of confronting the situation, the father left. Like his father, Ariel prefers to run away in times of crisis.

As Pablo Suárez (59) rightly observes, Burman’s preferred camerawork has been characterized as “frenetic handheld movement, jump cuts, and maddening rhythms,” clearly influenced by the French New Wave. Burman uses this camera technique to emphasize Ariel’s inability to articulate his feelings and thoughts. For example, in one scene between Ariel and his grandmother, a Holocaust survivor from Poland, Ariel asks for her Polish citizenship papers so that he can apply for Polish citizenship and move to Europe in search of better economic prospects. Ariel arrives at her apartment, and the camera focuses on him asking for the papers. He asks for them in fits and starts; there are rapid, jerky editing movements demonstrating how difficult it is for him to ask her for the documents. The audience can infer that he is aware of her discomfort at the request. She loathes the experiences she witnessed in Poland, and he worries that she will not want to talk about them and probably does not approve of his plan to gain Polish citizenship, a country where her people were annihilated.

The grandmother acts as a repository of cultural memory. She once lived a blissful life as a young Jewish girl in Poland. She grew up to love singing in Yiddish, her mother tongue, until her husband forbade it, perhaps because Yiddish was a marker of difference. Ariel, in contrast, tries to skirt the issue of what gaining Polish citizenship for a Jewish person might imply. It is one of the

many personal issues that he has yet to confront, but in this particular instance he does not engage in an interior monologue about the conflict between his Jewish identity and his desire to leave Argentina.

His decision might also be a product of the times. During that period, after the 2001 economic crisis, many Argentines tried to secure citizenship papers from the Old Country—that is, from their grandparents who had immigrated from Italy, Spain, or Eastern Europe. Thus, in a reversal of their journeys to Argentina to *hacer la América* [to have the American dream], the immigrants' grandchildren were heading back to Europe in search of greater economic opportunity. Indeed, even the sage rabbi who gives Ariel advice decides to leave for greener pastures in Miami Beach, to serve the Latino Jewish community there. And Daniel Burman in real life used his Polish ancestry to move temporarily to Poland during an especially severe economic downturn in Argentina. In the end of the scene, Ariel's grandmother relents and gives him her papers, but not without fulfilling her wish to burn her Polish passport. Ariel offers to witness and assist her in this cathartic act.

In addition to his difficulties dealing with an older generation, Ariel also has trouble relating to Jewish women. The film demonstrates that he cannot sustain a long-term relationship with his girlfriend, Estela, who is now pregnant and has moved on with her life. Meanwhile, Ariel, always in a holding pattern, has a vapid fling with the manager of the Internet café. This tension of not rushing to marry the “nice Jewish girl” next door in spite of family expectations to do so is a narrative thread that runs through both *Lost Embrace* and *Waiting for the Messiah*. Burman himself faced that dilemma and has been quoted in an interview as saying that there was needless pres-

sure for him to marry within the faith, and that in his opinion, there was no such thing as a “Jewish-ometer” that calibrated if one was a “good enough” Jew (Quoted in Falicov 136).

In essence, then, Burman's films explore questions of Jewish identity in the context of a largely Catholic country. Although these films treat the Argentine-Jewish experience in specific ways (from the perspective of a bewildered, bumbling, youthful, and naive male, peppered with a lot of humor), they attempt to grapple with age-old questions that plague all minority communities: about continuing the legacy of traditions, intermarriage, getting along with one's elders, and how to interact with members of the dominant culture and one's own community.

In the “The Making of *Lost Embrace*,” Burman explains that for him, the most important facet of the film is the relationship between father and son. He is interested in the construction of paternity and how Elias, the father, abandons his sons and how this shapes young Ariel's worldview. This focus becomes more pronounced with the revelation that the father left for Israel to “pursue his ideals” the day after Ariel's ritual circumcision, which occurs eight days after birth. His father's departure affects Ariel's whole life, and, as Burman points out, “the father's absence has a more profound effect on him than if he were present” (“The Making of *Lost Embrace*,” DVD). In essence, Elias assumes mythical proportions in Ariel's mind. Any memory, story, or rumor about Elias is seized on by his impressionable son, who has no personal memory of Elias. Ariel seems to always be waiting for his father, despite resenting him for leaving without any explanation. Norberto Padilla (300) points out that it is no coincidence that the name Elias in Spanish is Elijah in Hebrew. Perhaps the waiting for and the return of Elias has resonance for those who await the ghost

of Elijah, the prophet who heralds the coming of the Messiah each year during the Passover seder.

Lost Embrace met with much critical acclaim when it was released, winning two awards at the Berlin Film Festival: the Grand Jury Prize and a Silver Bear for best actor (Daniel Hendler). The film went on to be Argentina's nomination for best foreign film in the 2004 Academy Awards.

Background: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Argentina.html>.

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