

FILM

The Method in the Madness

by Erica Hellerstein

Awizened old man reclines on a sun-dappled staircase, pontificating about cinema between sips of *mate* before an audience of three young film students.

“We are all living in a movie of our own making.”

The camera zooms in on his face, punctuated by prunish wrinkles, taupe sunspots, and a Homeric gray beard. He shoots an impish grin.

“Do you think reality would be like this?”

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The intangible lines separating madness from sanity, reality from fantasy, and memory from imagination, have captivated artists for generations.

In “Vanishing Landscapes,” renowned Argentine writer-director Eliseo Subiela explores what defines — and breaks — these lines through the story of his maddeningly incongruous protagonist, Remoro Barroso.

Barroso, played by Latin American film giant Fernando Birri, is an elderly psychiatric patient who claims to have once been a famous movie director. With his billowing beard and penchant for esoteric one-liners, Barroso is the picture of pensive sagacity. He spends his days enshrined inside the bleak halls of an insane asylum, absentmindedly muttering and scribbling in a mysterious notebook.

One day, Barroso is jolted out of his routine when three ambitious young film students cross his path. They are interested in producing a documentary on the elusive director’s fall from success to obscurity. Barroso and the

hospital staff agree to let the students film him, offering a glimpse into the life of an accomplished cineaste, overtaken by something that resembles madness.

Conflict keeps the plot steadily moving along. The students’ first stumbling block is a crucial part of Barroso’s identity — his name. After scouring online movie databases in search of clues about Barroso’s past, they soon discover that his name is nowhere to be found. It is as if he never existed. A false name, they conclude, whipped up by Barroso to conceal who he truly is — or was.

And who is that person? The students debate his cinematic claims one day on the train. Is he a lunatic posturing as a venerated director past his prime? Or is he who he says he is: an old-time filmmaker, inexplicably erased from the chronicles of Argentine film?

Their research soon uncovers a twist in the plot. Barroso, they find, bears a remarkable resemblance to the vanished Mario Gerding, an alcoholic director accused of murdering a famous actress in the 1960s. As they continue their search, more clues begin to link Barroso to Gerding. According to one of the students’ film professors, Gerding lost the majority of his films in a laboratory fire that ravaged Argentina’s collection of silent films. In a moment of lucidity, Barroso informs the students that his films cannot be found because they were lost in the same fire.

To further complicate matters, Barroso begins revealing puzzling technical film tips to the students. A director, he says, should never film a traveling shot that circles his actors, because they will remain trapped inside that circle



and the film will have no soul. His musings, while bizarre, demonstrate familiarity and experience with filming and directing. The documentarians are left to wonder who the film is truly about: the forgotten Remoro Barroso of the present or the mysterious Mario Gerding of the past.

The latter half of the film seeks to answer these questions, while tackling broader themes of memory, the confines of orderly society, and the artistic definition of reality.

In the process, it renders a touching picture of a charming auteur past his prime. A man perennially outfitted in a black hat and coat, prone to bouts of depression and euphoria, cackling and wailing, a savant shrouded in cloaks of nonsense. Sure, these are notable traits of the insane. But they are also attributes of the sane: the roguish playground where the mind comes to romp after sleepless nights, crushing stress, romantic disappointment, and profound trauma.

Throughout his career, Subiela has produced a wide range of works that explore many of these topics. Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1944, he received early recognition for his talent, creating his first film, “Un Largo Silencio” in 1963, when he was just 19 years old. That film thrust him onto the country’s stage, and he has stayed there ever since. His works often muse on love, madness, death, and the metaphysical and psychological problems that people confront throughout a lifetime.

CLAS organized a screening of “Vanishing Landscapes,” followed by an intimate discussion with Subiela. A small crowd of fans filled the room, eager to engage in a dialogue with the director.

He discussed the process of working with Fernando Birri, an Argentine filmmaker often considered “the father of new Latin American cinema,” as a “pleasure and adventure.” Birri, who convincingly played the idiosyncratic Barroso, added his own artistic flourishes to the role, improvising and inventing lines on the spot, explained Subiela.

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Fernando Birri as Remoro Barroso.

(Photo courtesy of Orgon Films.)



And the character they molded embodies one of Subiela's most recurrent thematic interests. Madness is a topic that permeates many of his films. The subject has always attracted him, he said, but he does not know why. Other concepts that loom large in the film — reality, death, and time — are also present in many of his works. "All of my films are connected," he said, "each one is like a scene of a larger movie."

To create a successful scene, the angle of the camera must be impeccable, Subiela explained. Barroso's stated aversion to encircling actors with a traveling shot was not a metaphor or the obsessive rant of a lunatic. What he really spoke of was the importance of camera placement. But sometimes even the masters make mistakes. After a long day of shooting, Subiela explained that he would often ruminate on his work over a whiskey. Sometimes, he would realize that he had placed the camera at the entirely wrong angle, and ruined the scene. But by then, it would be too late.

The celebrated Russian director Tarkovsky once said: "There are two basic categories of film directors. One consists of those who seek to imitate the world in which they live, the other of those who seek to create their own world. The second category contains the poets of cinema."

Audience members would likely agree that Subiela is in the latter's elite ranks, among the iconoclasts who challenge the boundaries of reality and the world they inhabit. He certainly paints his ideas upon a Tarkovsky-inspired canvas in "Vanishing Landscapes." But the film's real success lies in its humorous treatment of the protagonist. Though the topic may be somber (an old man withering away in an insane asylum), its exposition is anything but.

Subiela reminds the audience not to take life too seriously. His serenity is a breath of fresh air to a generation stuck on overdrive. During the discussion, he reenacted a simple exchange he had with a young film student on the set.

"Eliseo," she asks, "have you heard of the internet?"

For a brief moment, he is silent. His cartoonish face reveals nothing as he contemplates the question.

"I've heard something about it," he finally concludes, earnestly, "but I just don't have time."

CLAS screened "Vanishing Landscapes" followed by a discussion with Argentine filmmaker Eliseo Subiela on October 16, 2012.

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Fernando Birri as Remoro Barroso.



Photo courtesy of Orion Films.