


roughly dozen of Landrián's documentaries that are known to exist show a preoccupation with the lives of ordinary Cubans as they are lived. At the same time, the films resist the interview format, profitably using a striking array of other modes, including newsreel, observation, agitprop and even melodrama, while often employing a confrontational editing strategy that recalls the 'nervous montage' of another, better remembered Cuban documentarian, Santiago Álvarez.

Conspicuously and deliberately, Afro-Cuban culture features in several of these films, including *En un barrio viejo* (1963), a *vérité* portrait of a crumbling Havana neighbourhood, which concludes with the immersive ethnography of a Santería ritual. The insider-ethnographer's gaze extends and deepens in *Los del baile* (1965), an energetically syncopated snapshot of Afro-Cuban nightlife in the capital, an ode to joyful abandon at a time when the revolution was exhorting the population to increase economic production.

Such a focus not only suggests the obvious – race exists – but also that race matters, a distinct provocation in a context where class is putatively no more. Further provocation came with *Ociel del Tío* (1965), a poetic and even sensual study of poor rural lives, which repeats an idea used in previous films of having participants break the fourth wall in wordless close-ups that challenge the viewer's gaze. Its succinctly politicised intertitles underline the idea that the revolution's gains are yet to be felt beyond Havana. To Landrián, these films were reflections of his reality. To others, operating under a different logic, they indicated something else, and his initial prison term ensued.

Released and returned to the film institute two years later, Landrián was given his first commission, a didactic piece about coffee production. He would go on to direct a few more films before being expelled from ICAIC, followed by a second prison spell as well as various periods of enforced hospitalisation and house arrest, eventually enduring a total of 14 years in confinement. Some of the later titles are worthy of note, yet of all Landrián's extant films, *Coffea Arabica* (1968) feels most like the work of a filmmaker in full apprehension of the possibilities of his medium.

At just under 18 minutes *Coffea Arabica* is the longest of the films Landrián directed alone. An eloquent hurricane that unleashes every formal gambit at its disposal, the film somehow manages to fulfil its brief as it constructs a through line across Cuban history, from the privations of slavery to post-revolutionary disenfranchisement, while on the soundtrack The Supremes plead to be set free and a shot of coffee blossoms fades into Fidel Castro's beard. It's ironic and urgent, accusatory and playful, a film memorably emblematic of a director thrust into a "vortex of oblivion", as he would come to term it, for presuming to be his pleasant, intelligent, affectionate self.

 A selection of Landrián's short films, and the documentary *Landrián*, screen at the Barbican, London on 29 April, as part of Open City Documentary Festival

## The art of resistance: the 19th Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival

A celebration of political and aesthetic radicalism, the festival took liberation as its theme this year, shining a spotlight on a trio of films exploring Arabic histories of conflict and resistance

BY LAURA STAAB

It rained a lot. It was really windy. Even the Northumberland locals commented on how bad the weather was in Berwick-upon-Tweed that weekend in March. Yet for aficionados of avant-garde and nonfiction film who had gathered there for the Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival, bluster and drizzle did little to dampen spirits. As the rousing title of the opening film had it: the hour of liberation had arrived.

Known for its radical reputation on aesthetic and political fronts, the festival was founded in 2005 with an inaugural theme of 'crossing borders', reflecting the location of the festival on the frontier between England and Scotland, as well as the internationalism of the programme. That challenge to borders continued in this 19th edition, which took as its pluralist theme "the desire for liberation and the ambivalence of hope". From the north-eastern coast of this little island, we were, for a brief moment, exposed to a wider world of socialist possibility.

In a retrospective sidebar, 'Essential Cinema', three out of five features traced Arabic histories of conflict and resistance. Nadia El Fani's feature film *Bedwin Hacker* (2003), for instance, re-envisioned the nomadic movements of Bedouin desert tribes for the new millennium. Jumping between France and Tunisia, the cyber-queer story zeroes in on a woman who breaches any border that she comes across: national, sexual, technological. She circumvents French immigration in one scene. She hijacks television news to broadcast dissident messages to Maghreb people in the next.

Revolt was everywhere in Berwick: even the well-manicured women of the 'Real Housewives' franchise spoke back to power in Cécile B. Evans's video installation. In just a half-hour runtime, *Reality or Not* (2023) glitches its speculative way from the 1871 Paris Commune to an alternative contemporary

reality in which content creators strike and *banlieue* teenagers subvert the space of an airport, abolishing border controls as well as debt and time itself. Since the turn of the millennium and the pixellated lo-fi of *Bedwin Hacker*, techno-utopianism has fallen out of fashion (thank you Bezos, thank you Musk). Yet Evans's excitedly hyperlinked work is anti-accelerationist, looking back and looking askance instead of irreversibly forward to the 'newphoria' of the next update.

Basma al-Sharif was suspicious of progress too. Born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents and raised in France and the United States as well as Gaza, the itinerant artist was one of two filmmakers in focus (Eduardo Williams was the other). Across the 77 minutes of *Ouroboros* (2017), footage that ran in reverse signalled repeated, failed attempts to move forward, to free Palestine. Shattering geographical distance between a devastated Gaza and the rest of the world in a clamorous closing montage, *Ouroboros* flouted borders to insist that what happens in Palestine happens to us all.

Outside the programme and on the streets on the Saturday of the festival, demonstrators called for a free Palestine from the front of Berwick Town Hall. That pro-Palestine rally echoed nationwide protests and statements of solidarity issued by the festival – statements that, from other film festivals, can often fall flat. But Berwick is as political as it promises. And that resolve is not without risk.

Arts Council England, the main funder for Berwick, put out new guidance advising its beneficiaries against overt activism in February. While the nervous motion was rescinded after outcry from art-world professionals, that it was advanced at all is indicative of a censorial, conservative mood that is pervasive in the present moment. If Berwick closed itself off to anything, then it was, most markedly, to this.



ABOVE Nadia El Fani's *Bedwin Hacker* (2003)