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Social Sciences

2016

Anita

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Recommended Citation

Vohnsen, Mirna, 'Anita', in *Directory of World Cinema: Argentina 2*, ed. by Beatriz Urraca and Gary Kramer (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2016), pp. 147-148

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English Title:

Anita

Original Title:

Anita

Studio/Distributor:

Millecento Cine

Director:

Marcos Carnevale

Producers:

Marcos Carnevale

Jorge Gundín

Inés Vera

Screenwriters:

Marcos Carnevale

Lily Ann Martin

Marcela Guerty

Cinematographer:

Guillermo Zappino

Art Director:

Adriana Slemenson

Composer:

Lito Vitale

Editor:

Pablo Barbieri

Duration:

104 minutes

Cast:

Alejandra Manzo

Norma Leandro

Leonor Manso

Luis Luque

Format:

Colour, 35mm

Year:

2009

Synopsis

Anita, a young woman with Down's syndrome, and Dora, her mother, live in the Buenos Aires Jewish neighbourhood of Once. Anita helps her mother in the family business, a stationery store located in the same building where they live. On the morning of 18 July 1994, Anita is left alone in the store while her mother goes to the headquarters of AMIA (Argentine Israelite Mutual Association), situated nearby. On that precise day, AMIA is bombed. As a result, Dora perishes in the attack and their store is completely destroyed. Amid the confusion, Anita ventures out in search of her mother, but she gets lost in the streets of Buenos Aires. Anita's meanderings lead her to encounter a variety of people. The first person she meets is a failed photographer who gives her shelter for two nights. Next, she is begrudgingly taken in by a Chinese family who runs a grocery store. Finally, she ends up in a deprived Buenos Aires suburb where she is taken in and cared for by a frustrated nurse. Meanwhile, she is sought after by her brother Ariel, who is distraught over the death of his mother and the disappearance of his sister.

Critique

On 18 July 1994, at 9:53 a.m., the AMIA building was the target of the deadliest bombing ever on Argentine soil. The attack left eighty-five people dead and three hundred injured. Twenty-one years have passed since the blast, the perpetrators have never been caught and the case remains unsolved. This open wound in Argentine history inspired Carnevale to produce and direct *Anita*, the first feature film that revisits the AMIA bombing. With a non-professional actress in the leading role, the film is a telling commentary on the suffering of 'a real person'. The story explores the consequences of the tragedy from the point of view of the protagonist – an ambivalently conceived young woman who exhibits child-like qualities. Anita is played by Alejandra Manzo, an adult with Down's syndrome. Her character embodies features associated with childhood: namely innocence, vulnerability and a dependence on adults, as well as behaving, dressing in a childish fashion. Hence, Carnevale skilfully crafts the film as a child-centred narrative. Anita's wandering in search of her missing mother and her own status as one of the disappeared echoes the search for the disappeared under the repressive government regime in Argentina.

The AMIA bombing, which arguably marks the turning point in Anita's life, divides the story into two parts. The first part depicts Anita and Dora's ritualized life in a seemingly safe environment. The establishing shot of a dormant and peaceful Buenos Aires accompanied by shots of the family's daily routine exudes unity and dependence. The prolific use of scenes in which mother and daughter share the same space underscores not only their close relationship but also Anita's complete reliance on her mother. The bomb explosion, however, puts an end to Anita's harmonious life. In shooting the blast from the inside of the stationery store with Anita in the foreground, Carnevale intelligently compels the spectator to be a participant of this traumatic moment in Anita's life.

Aside from tearing family life apart, the blast propels a shift in the narrative structure by splitting the story into two parallel narrative strands: whilst one engages with Anita's search for her mother, the other follows Ariel's search for his sister. Their search is analogous to the situation experienced by the mothers and grandmothers of the disappeared during the last military dictatorship. In Anita's case, however, the roles have been inverted because it is the child who looks for the missing adult. As such, the spectator witnesses the plight of the protagonist who experiences orphanhood, hunger and exclusion. Thus, Carnevale invites the

audience not only to see the AMIA bombing through the lens of the Dirty War, but also by turning the camera on the child.

After the explosion, what emerges is a hostile and decadent Buenos Aires, where rushing passers-by, graffiti-covered walls and closed shops form the backdrop of Anita's roaming. Such a cityscape undoubtedly reflects Anita's own hardships. Despite their bleakness, the city and its suburbs are home to people who, albeit not readily, come to Anita's aid by giving her shelter, food and clothes. The film therefore suggests that the strangers Anita encounters metaphorically represent her surrogate family. Breaking down the barriers of resistance with resilience and humble tranquillity, Anita becomes the child of the Argentine family.

In casting Manzo, Carnevale has chosen a less conventional path to deal with the heinous event, but Manzo delivers an extraordinary debut performance that makes the film endearing. The casting of a person with Down's syndrome in the lead provides audiences with a new perspective from which to comprehend the AMIA bombing. Not only does Anita embody a vulnerable child but she also has an intellectual disability. Yet, she overcomes all challenges, thereby becoming a role model for the Argentine people. Melodramatic at times, *Anita* brings a message of hope to a society that needs to come to terms with the traumas of the past.

Mirna Vohnsen