

“Ingredients of the Creative Self: Intimate film on Edward Said”

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Film: “Selves & Others: A Portrait of Edward Said”

Directed by Emmanuel Hamon, 2004
54 minutes in English

“Selves and Others” offers a compelling portrait of a steely and complex man. In the months before his death, a film crew captured Edward Said at his family apartment and New York environs. French director Emmanuel Hamon cuts back and forth from Said’s interpretations of family photos, both humorous and dour, and a reflection on his academic accomplishments to street scenes of Manhattan and a concluding panel discussion with Daniel Barenboim.

Taking his cues from Said’s moods, body language and train of thought, Hamon’s cinematic strategy is careful, detached and bereft of sentimentality or romance. This deprivation builds and we are forced to scrutinize and dwell on the sheer power of Edward Said’s words and his persona as an ordinary man who happens to be an intellectual giant. This deprivation is ruptured by a painfully intimate piano performance showing Said’s intense love for music.

The first anniversary of Edward Said’s death was commemorated by the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, San Diego chapter by showing Hamon’s “Selves and Others” as part of their monthly film series. A lively discussion followed the film when the audience focused on the fact that even though Said makes compelling arguments for Palestinian rights, he, tends to display a distanced stance toward Palestine as a land or a *baladi* that he longs for.

The film confirms that Edward Said did not have the usual attachments that we recognize as an integral part of the Palestinian experience – to a plot of land, a stone house or grove. This can be disconcerting as we hear him insisting on a permanent state of exile from his homeland as well as from the United States, his country of citizenship. Said discusses his tenuous relationship to New York City and because so many disconnected lives reside within the city it is a perfect space for an exile, he reasons.

Hamon’s formal strategies accentuate Said’s dilemma. The cuts of Manhattan’s mid-town and upper west side scenes are anxious and spliced in at regular intervals, patterned as if to measure and punctuate Said’s remaining time. These jarring scenes are used, perhaps unfairly, as haunting reminders of alienation and mortality. Hammon’s choice of metaphor underscores Said’s self-described “out of place” reality, which Said may consider necessary for an astute mind engaged in creative pursuits.

The greatest thinkers and contributors to humanity have often been outsiders and usually have lived alienated and exilic lives, metaphorically if not in fact. Palestinians are arguably today’s perennial exiles, not accepted within their

own lands as citizens and often not accepted elsewhere. They are certainly outside the socio-political frame of discourse in the United States. However, through certain prodigious individuals, such as Edward Said, an exilic point of view may have the unexpected and stealthy ability to grasp and synthesize truths for all of us.