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MOVIE REVIEW

Oblivion (2008) NYT Critics' Pick



Icarus Films

This 14-year-old shoeshine boy in "Oblivion" tells the filmmaker Heddy Honigmann that he hardly ever dreams.

In Peru, Making the Invisible Visible

By MANOHLA DARGIS
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In documentary cinema, the distance between empathy and exploitation is sometimes nowhere more visible than in the face of the weeping subject. Television news tends to err on one side of this continuum (think of the reporter who asks a mother how she feels about her child's murder), though plenty of documentaries mistake misery for entertainment. And then there's "Oblivion," a movie so suffused with feeling for its human subjects that when a man starts weeping, you don't feel dirty about watching his tears fall. You see what I think the filmmaker Heddy Honigmann wants you to see: a man holding onto his dignity despite everything.

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The everything in this case is the catastrophic hyperinflation that was one legacy from the first term (1985-90) of the Peruvian president [Alan García](#) and that left the weeping man, a shopkeeper and leather worker named Mauro Gómez, almost broken. (Mr. García was re-elected in 2006.) But as she makes clear during this lucid, quietly moving and quietly angry movie, Ms. Honigmann isn't blaming Mr. García specifically: his first term is just one in a series of man-made disasters visited on Peru, in part by its leaders, including the former president [Alberto K. Fujimori](#), who was convicted of human rights abuses last week and sentenced to 25 years in prison. (Born in Peru, Ms. Honigmann became a Dutch citizen in the 1970s and now lives in the Netherlands.)

Mr. García and Mr. Fujimori are two of the most recognizable figures in "Oblivion," though by no means the most important. Rather, what interests Ms. Honigmann are the men, women and children who usually play invisible roles in Great Men histories. Shooting in Lima, she makes the invisible visible. She doesn't just point her camera at two

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young sisters who turn cartwheels for spare change in a crosswalk, seeking tips from idling drivers waiting for the light to turn green. She also talks to the girls and their mother, who in one breath insists that she doesn't force her children to imperil their lives, while in the next describes how another daughter died after being hit by a driver running a red light.

Ms. Honigmann refuses to judge this woman, who in any event has already been condemned by poverty. Instead she asks the girls about their dreams. Though one fidgets wordlessly, the other says she hopes to become an Olympian. Dreams are particularly precious for those with so little else. That, among other things, is the lesson of a crushing exchange between the filmmaker and a 14-year-old shoeshine boy, Henry, whose face looks more emptied out than empty and, who, when asked if he has any nice memories, flatly answers no. And does he dream? "I hardly ever dream," says the unsmiling boy, who then shoots a furtive, sidelong look at the camera. There's pain in those eyes, but perhaps also the hard glint of rage.

Ms. Honigmann infuses her scenes with an intimacy that brings you close to her subjects without making you feel as if you'd crossed some line. Working with the cinematographer Adri Schover and shooting in high-definition digital that allows her to capture the night in eerie, spectral detail — and with mercifully steady and attentive framing — she comes across more like a deeply engaged visitor than like an interloper. Though her audible, off-screen questions can be pointed, her images tend to speak far more forcefully, as when the camera lingers on two sleek dolphins swimming in a tank in an expensive bar frequented by Peruvian presidents. Like the child street performers of Lima, the dolphins do fanciful tricks. The difference is that the dolphins look well fed.

OBLIVION

Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.

Written and directed by Heddy Honigmann; director of photography, Adri Schover; edited by Danniell Danniell and Jessica De Koning; produced by Carmen Cobos; released by Icarus Films. At [Film Forum](#), 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, South Village. In Spanish, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 33 minutes. This film is not rated.

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