

Falling Stars

Eduardo Mendoza

(catalogue ARABIAN STARS)

We met Jordi Colomer by pure chance at Heathrow Airport on New Year's Day this year. For someone who's limited himself to spending a few days in London and is going home, finding a friend in the airport is a pleasure but hardly a surprise. On the other hand, he was on his way home after a long stay in Yemen and this chance encounter was for him something really out-of-the-way and unexpected, almost like extra proof of the unreferenced relativity that makes up the contents, but not the meaning, of the non-documentary which he had just completed in that country and which is the subject of these lines. It was precisely in London, several decades ago, that I became aware, on the occasion of some trouble there, that Yemen exists outside the school atlases. The trouble was apparently so serious that the United Kingdom, which at that time was the powerful administrator of the country, was pushed to bomb Aden, provoking the resulting international scandal.

I was then living in London. It was the time of the Vietnam War and the last death throes of colonialism. The British Empire was collapsing inexorably, but not without putting up a fight. Although the Beatles and the Rolling Stones could be heard everywhere, the girls wore miniskirts and the underground smelt of marihuana, many city gents still wore bowler hats and the atmosphere in the city was sombre and serious. After that incident, Yemen became one more item tucked away in the recesses of my store of general culture, a memory barely brought back by occasional images of the mud skyscrapers and the interchangeable news of some brutal incident or some nasty and oppressive law. This was a country divided by the Cold War, like Korea and Germany, later reunified and recently included in the axis of evil by the biblical rhetoric of Bush's advisors. Now, in a London very different from in those years, a city that has been turned into the world paradigm of fashion and postmodernity, I had happened upon a friend who was returning from Yemen, where he had spent a long time making a film called Arabian Stars.

My ignorance of the country didn't stop me from getting an idea of what this non-documentary describes superficially: an ancestral society which lives alongside the most sophisticated and superfluous of products, where deeply rooted beliefs don't hinder the influx of commercial trash, and where mysticism is not incompatible with the adoration of pop and football stars. But hearing about it is one thing and seeing it on screen is another. In this respect, Arabian Stars dynamites the conception of the world as presented by the National Geographic Magazine and the TV anthropological documentaries which lull us to sleep in the afternoons. Contrary to these formats, which have served to create our imaginary albums of pending travels, Jordi Colomer appears to have gone much further in the search for everyday life. He hasn't searched out the strange or the unexpected, and neither the ugly nor the common. Quite simply, what's there. His images don't reject the occasional beauty of the landscape, the architecture,

the colours, or the light, but neither does he avoid ugliness or disorder. There is no exaltation or denouncement. The third world reveals itself as scarcity without tragedy. The economic and social conditions are a day-to-day reality for the people who live in them, not a spectacle to provide information and, even less so, to raise the consciousness of outsiders.

Seen in this way, emptied of imagination, Yemen becomes a non-place where men of different ages, alone or in groups, wander around displaying coloured placards bearing names in Arabic. A subtitle explains to us that these names are the Arabian Stars, because they are really stars and because the names are written in Arabic. The placards are of various sizes; some are simple hand signs. Some of the men walk, with a sure step, while others ride in some vehicle, tattered but luxurious by local standards, but it's obvious they are not going anywhere in particular. It doesn't matter: There is nothing philosophical or symbolic in their attitude; no fatalism is associated with their activity or their route. Nothing seems to make them do what they do and it's clear that they haven't been tricked or coerced, or induced by some extraordinary method. For this reason, one has to come to the conclusion that their behaviour is voluntary and that, whatever has motivated them to take part in this non-documentary, there exists a deep and tacit complicity between them and the film's producers. There is no doubt that all of them understood the non-intention of this non-story. When they are in the eye of the camera, some laugh, to themselves rather than out loud, but the majority walk naturally, relaxed and inexpressive. There's no sign of derision or irritation in their faces. And tiredness neither. They behave as if they were carrying out an easy and unimportant assignment, but definitely an assignment, and they do so conscientiously, without overdoing it, like a postman taking a letter to its destination with the efficiency and seriousness required by the job, but independent of the contents of the letter he has to deliver. The result is a sort of inverse performance, in which the public acts before the artist, who confines himself to contemplating and taking in the performance without interference or comment.

The stars that shine in this prosaic firmament belong to various groups. There are flesh and blood individuals of universal renown, such as Picasso or Mies van der Rohe, or locally famous persons, such as the Yemeni poet Abdullah Albaradoni; and more popular figures, such as Zidane, Maradona or Michael Jackson. But these are in the minority. The majority are characters from fiction: Batman, Homer Simpson, Sheherazade, Sherlock Holmes, Lolita. It is not easy to imagine what these characters represent in Yemen: We'll never know what the setting for Sherlock Holmes is in the imagination of a Bedouin. Whatever the case, the selection doesn't follow any criteria, not even personal ones, and we are not given the reasons for this arbitrariness. On the other hand, it is obvious that in the selection and the fact of organising a series of modest non-religious processions with placards, there is no attempt at parody. Nobody goes to Yemen to play a subtle and repetitive joke.

And the men who carry the placards know what they are doing, because the names are clearly written in their language, even if the person is not familiar to them. Nobody walks around carrying an ostentatious sign without finding out

first what it preaches, particularly in a country where certain disrespectful behaviour has serious consequences. The impeccable photography and production put the finishing touches to the disconcerting atmosphere of this film, which is, without a shadow of a doubt, a work of art. No less and no more. Reality is real when a work of fiction captures and explains it. Reality without subtitles is a story heard in an unintelligible language. Contrariwise, as Jordi Colomer himself stated in an interview, reality, once captured and transferred to a medium of expression, irredeemably becomes fiction, in the same way that fame, once it takes hold of a human being, converts that person into a fictional character.

Seen from Yemen, Picasso and Batman are two of a kind, and perhaps Batman is the more genuine of the two. As regards the film, we know that there's a plot that unfolds, but we don't know what it is. What can one think of a healthy-looking young man walking out along an unsurfaced road, disappearing over the horizon into the desert, while he carries a placard that bears in Arabic script the name of Tony Manero, a character played by John Travolta in a film made in 1977? Nothing at all. Everything in this strange and fascinating work has been chosen with the deliberate intention of eluding metaphors. The end result, if there is one, is the suspension of judgement, a moving silence.