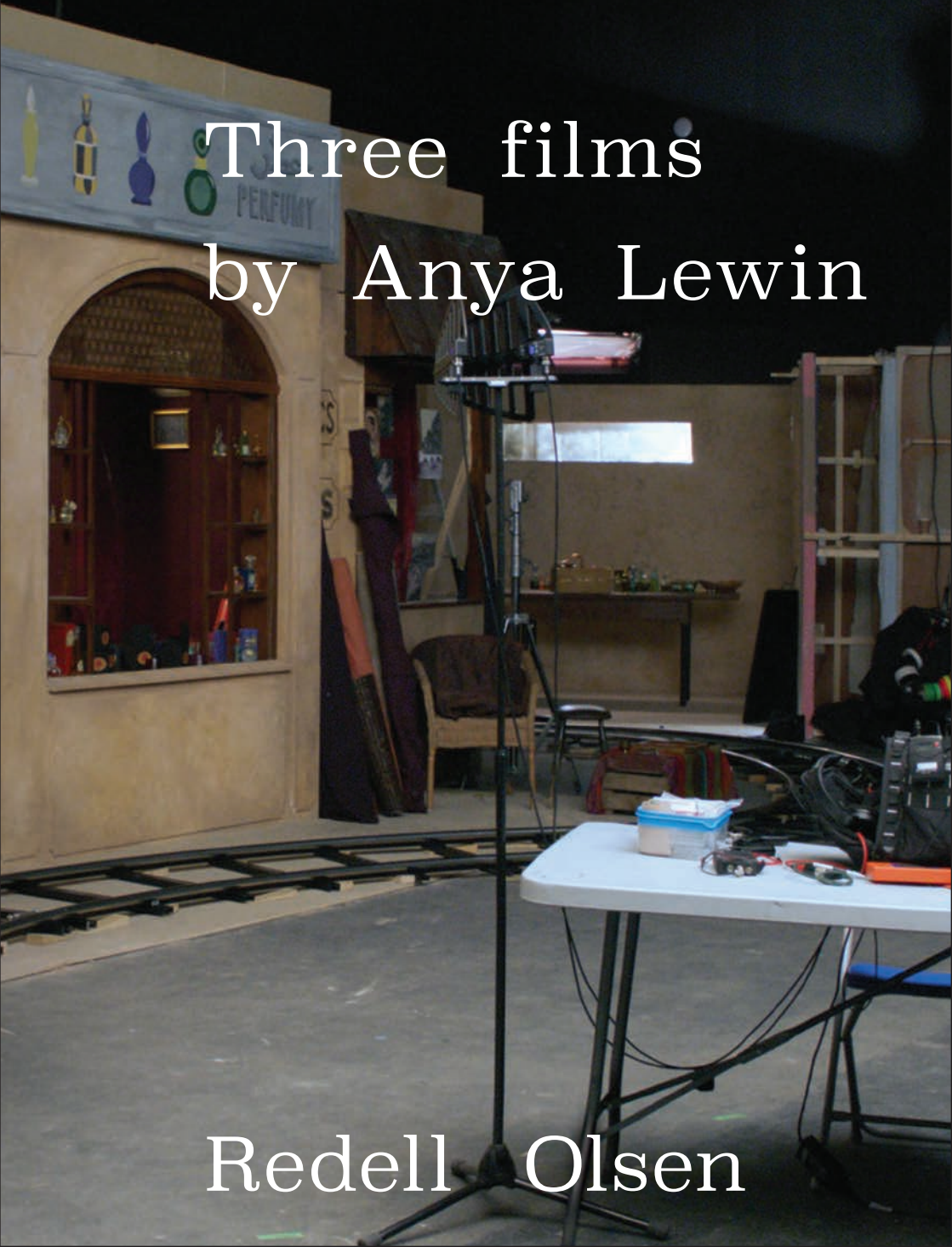


# Of Scents and Sets

Three films

by Anya Lewin

Redell Olsen





“Darling shall we escape to the movies?” reads an intertitle in a scene from Anya Lewin’s film, *With Heartfelt Gratitude for the Painless Treatment* (2008). This is one of the tender ironies that punctuate her film of the Lewin family’s years in Berlin before the Second World War. ‘The movies’ are a powerful influence, but Lewin does not encourage escapism. Her films are for gallery spaces rather than the cinema. These are installed films whose sets play out into the gallery and invite us to enter into as much as they confront us. Lewin’s films nevertheless fall away from and shape shift beyond the apparent realism of their sets. Returning shots linger at the blurry edges of artifice under construction. Objects or furniture migrate into the gallery, unseating our sense of relevance and apartness from the screen.

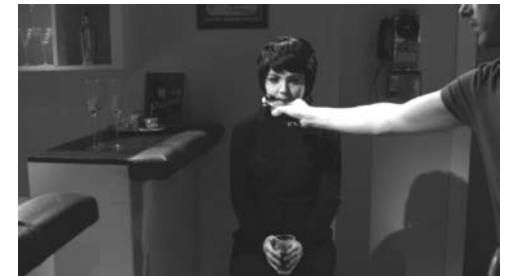


In the trilogy’s earlier films Lewin leaves in moments just before or after a conventional take might cut, leaving in the actor’s transition from her performance: the detective knocking bottles with her feet, a poet dropping intensity at the end of a performance. Edges where performance and self meet and are exchanged fascinate Lewin. The Detective’s remark, “I’ll be there in one cut or maybe a dissolve” (*Chez Paulette on the Sunset Strip*, 2013), suggests that, for Lewin, these states are not as distinct from one another as we might imagine. Disjunctions of voice-over, sound, text and image and her multi-lingual scripts render the surface of these films curiously uneven, with



mediating devices foregrounded, and the shape of these elements evident in process rather than as equivalents. She creates an elusive play of interpretations (“I got something but I need a translator...” *Chez Paulette*, 2013) that are not necessarily defined by one geographical place (Yiddish, American English, Arabic); sub-culture (Beatnik speak); mode of representation (Silent Film, Film Noir); or a religious affiliation (Jewish, Muslim, Copt). Each enacts multiple reference points that cannot be contained in a single frame or representational system. This extends into the negotiation of the gallery and the viewing time within it. The gallery enables juxtapositions across these films, allowing movement and attentive frequencies between screens out of time with their narrative sequences.

Anne Waldman’s poem, as spoken by the enigmatic Barrie in *Chez Paulette* (2013), ‘Art Begins With A Lie’ alerts us to the ever evolving ‘more than story’ nature of radical narrative practices. There is no reliable ticket to anywhere else but here. Narrative sites refigure entanglements within a conceptual historical framework that is not to be toppled by exposure of its reliance on the imagination. The scaffolding goes up around the evidence: a photograph of a perfume shop, two photographs of a boy and later as a man in Oriental costume, the story of a map, a clutch of autographed photographs of 1930s movie stars, a photograph of the inside of a dentist’s treatment room, the panning shot of an archive. These







apparitions of evidence appear to confirm each plausible tracking shot, but they also threaten to evaporate.

“Just look at the camera and do nothing/ Let the camera see who you can be” a voice says in German and the translation appears as a subtitle that seems aimed both at the audience and the shadowy inhabitants of the screen. Their sharply made-up faces seem aware of their future audience and parallel face-off. In Lewin’s films the face-off is staged as confrontation but also as invitation. The implication is that we, like them, are engaged in our own performative constructions of fragile and circumspect identity making. The act of filmmaking interprets and mediates their faces, however blank they appear to be in the archives of the past and memory.



The inverse of the face-off is the *rückenfigur* an image familiar to us from Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings of a person, sometimes two, standing in a landscape or at a window with their backs to the viewer. In *With Heartfelt Gratitude for the Painless Treatment* (2008), Ada and Ignatz stand in such an attitude in a compelling image that hovers between a still and moving image. The audience cannot see their faces, as they stand ready to leave Berlin for America. There are limits to the possibilities of the camera. Sometimes the incomprehensibility of another’s pain is better turned away from the viewer.

Each film makes a new start out of the fanciful and painful stuff of



memory, recollection, history, fact and anecdote, and unfolding imagination of new lines of relation and research. A biographical approach to these films might consider their very different but linked negotiations of the traces left by the chameleon-like selves of Anya Lewin’s father. Born in Berlin in 1922 to Polish parents, Max Lewin was a café owner and bit part actor in L.A. during the 1950’s and 1960’s. His café *Chez Paulette* was a notorious Beat hangout attracting fashionable movie stars, musicians and poets. A recreation of the café – including Max ‘playing himself’ featured in the 1958 American television series *77 Sunset Strip*.

In his daughter’s films his character also has bit parts: he proves to be an elusive figure. In her latest film *Fez: The Royal Scent* (2019), Max is evoked again, this time as an even younger child of parents who have moved from Berlin to the multilingual Cairo of the 1920s in search of a new life and this time he is played by Lewin’s own daughter, Max’s granddaughter. This narrative is recalibrated through the focus on the dilemma of Ada, Max’s mother (the film-maker’s own grandmother), forced to surrender her highly successful profession as a perfumier so that her husband can take up his post as a cosmetic dentist.

Unlike Max, Ada appears as a character across all three films. In *Chez Paulette* (2013), she is a comic interruption whose cake decorated with the Star of David is persistently rejected by her son, the café owner.





She is a cipher for the complicated past and neglected Jewish identity of her son. She ends the trilogy as her younger self at the height of her powers at the moment when she has to decide whether to give up on this success. The trilogy enacts a neat reversal of the tide of history by her granddaughter that also appears to be one of identification. ‘The perfume is the poem of the chemist’ she notes and so becomes another foil for the director of a film who must also make something happen out of the air.



“How do you play yourself?” asks the detective in *Chez Paulette* (2013). “Can’t you play yourself?” Enayat, the descendent of Mahmoud asks? “It is not how I imagine the director” answers ‘the director’ from off camera. In *Fez: The Royal Scent* (2019), Lewin finds new freedoms to imagine further: ‘I am the storyteller now’ the narrator (Lewin herself) asserts at the beginning of the film. The risks of such fabrication are many. In one scene Enayat appears to taunt ‘Lewin’, who remains off camera, for her linguistic inability to understand what she is saying in Arabic. “So it is a metaphorical trip? A romantic interpretation? Where are you locating yourself?” she asks, and “Out of frame” comes the muted response. By staging the face-off between Enayat (played by Rebecca Banatvala who also plays the young Mahmoud, Enayat’s grandfather) and another figure, who may or may not be the actual director herself, the film is able to raise important questions of cultural appropriation that exceed



the acknowledged limitations of the available representational frameworks. “What archive would the Mahmoud have been filed in?” asks Enayat as she highlights the fragmentary and difficult nature of the official historical record. What might have begun as a series in mourning for a lost father becomes the reframing of stories of deracination, immigration and emigration, but now with relevance to everyone forced to move or compromise for the sake of their family or by the state.

What is *apparently* so is always circumspect, ‘something more than stories’: as intangible as scent on the air; as fragile as a jar smashed on the stone floor of an apothecary’s shop in Cairo in the 1920’s; as delicate as a crystal bowl marked with the Star of David and carried from Germany to Hollywood in 1938, or, as slight as a ‘first clue’, the shadow of Louise Brooks’ smile, perhaps encountered by a child on a staircase in Berlin and recounted by a star-struck café owner would-be-actor to Marlon Brando as they stood together on a Warner Brothers’ Lot in LA. Threads of determined possibility and self-making flicker in the uncertain ‘conflict of narrative, history and imagination’, or that is how the narrator, ventriloquizing Edward Said, puts it at the beginning of *Fez: The Royal Scent* (2019). As I follow the receding tracks of the dolly system out to the edges of the set, I have no reason not to believe her every word.





Anya Lewin  
*More than Stories: A Film Trilogy*

John Hansard Gallery  
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Gallery 2, 3 and Barker-Mill Gallery

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#JHGLEwin

Anya Lewin is an American artist and academic based in the UK. Her projects often reflect her own personal history, which includes stories of immigration, translations from multiple languages, and fictional connections to real events. She is an Associate Professor (Reader) in Art and Moving Image at the University of Plymouth.

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