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The [New York Film Festival](#) is in full swing. Three new films are documentaries of one sort or another, exploring the masterpiece of novelist W.G. Sebald, the uprising in Egypt and the music of legendary Brazilian composer and performer Antonio Carlos Jobim. None of them are wholly successful, but they should all appeal to people with a particular interest in the topics at hand.

PATIENCE (AFTER SEBALD) ** out of ****

Author W.G. Sebald was one of the most intriguing and original authors in the world when a heart attack while driving in 2001 ended his life at the age of 57. He was often cited as a likely winner of the Nobel Prize for

Literature and was that rare writer with a truly distinctive voice. Not since Milan Kundera had a writer appeared to create a radically new style of book. When his classic novel *The Rings Of Saturn* was published in 1995, it marked the third in a trilogy that included *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*. Like the others, it's a curiously bracing and exciting mix of fiction, travelogue, history, memoir, and just about any other label you can imagine. When asked what category he wanted it filed under in the bookstores, Sebald said all of them.

He wasn't translated into English until 1996, but back in 1992 (when *The Emigrants* was coming out in German), British director Patrick Keiller was filming the movie *London*. Released in 1994, it's a remarkably similar affair to Sebald: part documentary; part fiction; part bracing combination of reality, memoir and imagination that's narrated beautifully by Paul Scofield. For years I tried to describe it to

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people and simply said in exasperation, "You just have to see it." Then I read *The Rings Of Saturn* and realized, my god, this is like the novelistic equivalent of *London*, a movie I considered sui generis. And the books came first! Now when I want to describe the movie, I say, it's sort of like the books of W.G. Sebald. And when I want to describe the books of W. G. Sebald, I say, it's sort of like the movie *London*. Since most people have read and seen neither, that doesn't really help but at least I don't fumble around anymore.

As you can imagine, Sebald has passionate fans. His novel *The Rings Of Saturn* is perhaps first among equals or at least the most relatively accessible. A contemporary classic, it tells of Sebald the narrator taking a walking tour in parts of England, always ready to dash off a mini-essay on the childhood of Joseph Conrad or the remarkably significant role of the silkworm in world history. Blurry photographs dot the text and if you think a description of a rambling estate and its odd story seems too good to be true, just go online and it will show that Sebald is essentially accurate in his entertaining historical diversions. It's moving, strange, weird, hypnotic and quite wonderful.

Patience (After Sebald) is a tribute to all that. It's not a film like *London* and it doesn't try to adapt the novel, which would seem as impossible as turning *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* into a movie (and yet, that film was a classic in its own right). Instead it's an awkward, murky hybrid. The film travels to some of the spots Sebald's book ventures to in its walking tour, but then immediately assures us that trying to trace that path is fruitless and frustrating. Voice-overs offer chunks of the book at random. Much of the time is spent talking to artists who love the book and venture tentatively but with deep respect to explain why. Their grappling with it is amusing and bizarre. The sanest person made a "lit-map," using GoogleEarth to pinpoint all the locations the book hits upon and including text from the novel itself in this art piece. Others are far, far more convoluted and confusing.

If you haven't read Sebald, I imagine you'd leave the film wondering exactly what the heck this Sebald guy had written. The film muddies the issue even though it spends most of its time trying to describe it, or rather explaining how difficult it is to describe it. I fear anyone not already a fan will have little patience indeed with the movie and those that do love Sebald won't exactly be enlightened. Best you read the book on your own.

TAHRIR: LIBERATION SQUARE **

Filmmaker Stefano Savona was on the scene for the Egyptian uprising very early on. He won the trust of people risking their lives (and the lives of their families and friends) to overthrow a brutal dictator and filmed throughout the entire remarkable series of triumphs, setbacks and ultimate victory. (Or rather, the signal victory of deposing Hosni Mubarak; establishing a vital democracy is a work in progress.)

It's an exciting prospect that the film ultimately doesn't fulfill. They're in the midst of many of the major moments, even getting on stage or near top officials for key speeches. But we know very little about the young people we're watching argue and debate and hold fast while events spiral out of control. At the end of the movie, they're almost as much a mystery as they were at the beginning. Also, the filmmaker clearly found a warm welcome among those pushing for a secular democracy. The splintering Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots are shadowy presences that we gain no clear understanding of at any point.



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Dr. Peggy Drexler
We Can Be Thankful for Each

Tahrir has a certain visceral jolt at times as we see the people reacting to events we saw transpire from afar on CNN. It's moving to see them risk so much with so little hope of success and actually succeed. But it definitely helps to be somewhat informed of what was going on at the time. Anyone who didn't follow it will leave the movie having only the vaguest idea of what they were protesting, what was happening from day to day and why it ended so well. In the movie, we get harried and confusing reports of attacks and events on the other side of the square. If you watched CNN, you might know about thugs paid by Mubarak's corrupt government to create havoc and foment violence. From the movie, it seems women are front and center throughout. From CNN and other news reports, you learn the ebb and flow of their treatment -- early on women were a vital presence; later they were harassed by some and told they had no business being there and why weren't they properly dressed?

So *Tahrir* has a genuine immediacy and clearly the filmmakers put themselves at risk with the people in the square to make this movie happen. It's passionate and gives a sense of what it must have been like to sit there and not quite know what was going on but be convinced you had to stand fast. For any sort of perspective or coherent story, however, you'll have to go elsewhere.

MUSIC ACCORDING TO TOM JOBIM ** 1/2

Here's an almost foolproof idea for a movie that's rather bungled in its execution. Antonio Carlos Jobim is one of the all-time great composers and a key figure behind bossa nova. His music has been covered by so many world-class artists in so many different settings that the director Nelson Pereira dos Santos said, why bother with lengthy biographical information and tributes by others? Let's just gather as many film and concert and video clips that we can of the best artists in the world singing Jobim's music and cut them together into one glorious film. Wonderful!

The movie gets off to a strong start, combining concert footage with scenes of life in Brazil to show the world Jobim came from. Soon we glimpse scenes of carnival and *Black Orpheus*, the movie that sent bossa nova into the stratosphere for many people around the world. Soon enough there was "The Girl from Ipanema" -- one of the most recorded songs of all time -- and the rest is history. We see artists like Gal Costa and Ella Fitzgerald and Elis Regina and Judy Garland and Dizzy Gillespie and Caetano Veloso and on and on and on all delivering his many classics with verve and style. We also hear bits of his symphonies and art song ventures, though the movie always returns to the songs that have become standards.

So what's the problem? First, almost no songs are heard in their entirety, or to be more exact we almost never get to hear one artist cover a song from beginning to end. (It does happen once or maybe twice but this is clearly the exception.) That works great for "The Girl From Ipanema." At the center of the film that song is turned into a mega-medley with a fast version dissolving into a slow version into a version sung in English into a jazz instrumental into a (happily brief) contemporary dance pop version) and on. That showcase deftly demonstrates what a popular song it is and how a standard can be adapted brilliantly into so many styles.

Unfortunately, to a lesser degree that's how every single song is treated. Judy Garland may be breaking your heart but you can be certain we'll cut away from her to another version. Great performance after performance is cut short so they can move onto another one. But a third of three great performances most assuredly does not add up to one great musical moment. All three are ultimately lessened. *Music According to Jobim* becomes 90 minutes of teasing.

By the end, the movie reaches for a grand finale by drawing from performances at all-star tribute concerts. Seeing a glittering array of stars on stage certainly makes clear how cherished Jobim had become by the end of his life. But group sing-alongs are rarely interesting musically so the movie climaxes with some of the least interesting clips. I may not be right, but I also think Stan Getz wasn't included; maybe no good film footage was available but that's a shame as well, though of course many other acts couldn't be fit in either.

A movie that let the songs breathe, that chose certain performances and let them play out would have been much, much more satisfying. It can't help but send filmgoers out to their local record stores to check out some of the marvelous music heard in the movie. But it should have been a satisfying musical



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'Bikini Girl' Goes Home For the Holidays



experience in its own right. Jobim had a terrific collaboration with Frank Sinatra and he certainly made one of the best albums of his career (if not indeed *the* best) when they recorded 1967's *Francis Albert Sinatra & Antonio Carlos Jobim*. The film includes only a section of this medley, but here's a clip giving you the entire performance. Now run out and buy some bossa nova.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

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