Toronto International Film Festival 2012—Part 4

Far From Afghanistan: Significant, moving, uneven

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This is the fourth of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 6-16). Part 1 was posted September 22, Part 2 *September 26 and Part 3 September 28. The WSWS interviews three of the directors of Far From Afghanistan in an* accompanying article.

Powerful at times, contradictory and distinctly uneven, *Far From Afghanistan* is a significant cultural event.

Five American directors, along with a group of Afghan filmmakers, have collaborated on a work that attempts to come to terms with the destruction wrought in Afghanistan by a decade of US neo-colonial war and occupation, as well as its impact on American life.

An ambitious undertaking, and—perhaps inevitably—not entirely realized. But those who have organized and participated in this project deserve full credit for their sincerity, and outrage. At a time when a large portion of the comfortable upper middle class in the US, "intellectuals," artists or not, are discovering the charms of imperialist intervention, the five filmmakers and their collaborators involved with *Far From Afghanistan* represent something different. The film takes its title from the well-known 1967 collaboration by French filmmakers (including Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais), *Far From Vietnam* (*Loin du Vietnam*).

Far From Afghanistan conveys revulsion at the falsifications and hypocrisy of US authorities, horror at the crimes committed in the name of the American people, and a desire for the truth. If it also contains unclarities and even, in my view, certain wrongheaded conceptions, that is hardly disconnected from the present political situation in the US and, specifically, the conditions created by the shift to the right by a considerable section of left-liberal public opinion.

One of the strongest elements of *Far From Afghanistan* is that it begins to consider, if only in a preliminary fashion, the link between the brutal wars and occupations of the past decade and the social crisis in the US. Has any film before this juxtaposed the ravaging of Detroit and sociocide in the Middle East and Central Asia, the foreclosure crisis in America and murderous drone operations in Afghanistan? For that alone …

There's no question, world realities, objective events, a devastating socio-economic crisis, are pressing on the artists, pushing them forward. For those who are sensitive and honest, who don't simply think about their careers and bank accounts, the development has a logic of its own. Those who begin to think will only think more, and more deeply at that. And they will act, both artistically and socially.

Moreover, the artists do not live in isolation from the rest of humanity. What the best of them are thinking about, millions of other human beings are thinking about—economic suffering and sacrifices for the vast majority, and untold wealth for a handful, the corruption and bankruptcy of the political set-up, the violence and atrocities of the system in defending itself, its reckless military interventions, the endless provocations and efforts to intimidate the population, and the endless lying.

It's not only certain of the artists who are made sick to their stomachs by the news outlets, the government, the military, the candidates! Not at all, that is a much wider phenomenon than perhaps the filmmakers themselves realize at this point. That they remain largely apart from the working population and its discontents is not entirely the artists' fault, but the isolation can be a danger, and they should make much more strenuous efforts to break out of it.

Far From Afghanistan is a first step in many ways. It reflects differing impulses, in my view, and the pressure of various social moods. But that is inevitable to a certain extent. It reflects opposition to the *status quo*, which is widespread, and confusion too, which is also widespread.

The five co-directors, John Gianvito, Jon Jost, Soon-Mi Yoo, Minda Martin and Travis Wilkerson, each contribute a segment, all of them quite distinct. Those are supplemented by footage shot in various parts of Afghanistan by local camera people, from "Afghan Voices," which provides a more serious, sobering look at social conditions in that devastated country than all of the American television coverage over the past 11 years combined.

We see poor kids in Kabul, collecting cardboard or shining shoes for pennies. "Why do you collect boxes?," one boy is asked. "We are poor," the boy answers simply and directly to the camera. There isn't any other possible answer. Another is asked what he wants to do when he gets older. He's never thought of it, daily life in the present is too difficult. "I don't know what I want to do." Girls study at a school, running the risk of physical attack from elements who oppose female education. One pores over her few books, heart-breakingly, in miserable conditions. The camera invades a cave where a family of twelve is living. Again, "We're poor." They have no electricity of course. They don't have anything.

However, the situation is not entirely gloomy. The director of investment at the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency tells us that he issues hundreds of permits a day and that investment growth since 2003 has taken place at "lightning speed." There are "enormous investment opportunities in Afghanistan in various areas," he tells us, and "both domestic and foreign investors come to us with great interest, and we do not notice any considerable effect [of the military situation]."

No doubt, he adds, "the security situation is not good." However, "in a country where the situation is completely normal, the profit is not as much as it is in this country." We feel no reason to doubt him.

I will return to the first section, directed by John Gianvito [see accompanying interview], further on. In the film's second part, *Empire's Cross*, veteran independent filmmaker Jon Jost (*All the Vermeers in New York*, 1990), who spent two years in prison in the 1960s for refusing to join the US military, evokes the circumstances that led to the US invasion of Afghanistan. The segment includes footage of the 9/11 attacks, along with President Dwight Eisenhower's famous farewell speech in which he

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warned about the "military-industrial complex." There is nothing shatteringly new here, but the imagery is striking.

Jost told an interviewer from *Cinema Scope* magazine, "I regard the US government as a criminal/amoral/immoral organization that largely works at the behest of corporate powers and their profit-making/imperial interests. The Iraq War and the Afghan War were intended, however much those goals have backfired, to be resource grabs, cloaked by the argument that we were fighting al-Qaeda (which we more or less invented to fight the USSR's occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s)."

Korean-born Soon-Mi Yoo works in various media and genres, including photography, film, installation and text. One of her important works involved photographing surviving "comfort women" (sexual prisoners of the Japanese army during World War II) in South Korea.

Her part of *Far From Afghanistan* helps expose the falsehood that the US is intervening in Afghanistan to save the country from falling into the hands of *jihadists*. We watch, slightly confused, as Islamic fighters in Afghanistan are treated as heroes in an English-language film. An attack on a tank convoy is highlighted, as well as the shooting down of aircraft. Various fighters are introduced, speak their piece and praise *jihad*.

In fact, Soon-Mi Yoo has made clever use of propaganda documentaries made by the US Information Agency under the Reagan administration in the 1980s, at a time when the American government, military and CIA were financing and inciting Islamic elements, including Osama bin Laden and others, against occupying Soviet troops, as part of the effort to undermine the USSR.

Minda Martin's *The Long Distance Operator* is a very strong piece [see accompanying interview], the only fictional portion of the larger film. The central figure is a drone pilot, John (John Armenta), somewhere in the US, who directs bomb and missile attacks against vaguely identified Afghan targets ("Yeah, that's a weapon … Fire missile … A pile of bodies") on a computer screen.

On the long drive home, across a flat, treeless expanse, the pilot receives a phone call from his mother, who tells him, "It's a tough time … I'm worried about the mortgage. I can't seem to get a job. Who's going to hire a librarian? The libraries are closing down. It's kind of a mess." She needs money to see her through until her Social Security check arrives, and her son promises to send some.

At home, John receives a Skype call from the war zone, from two fellow soldiers (Kevin Baker and Ryan Endicott). They're unhappy with the situation. There have been incidents "of civilian casualties caused by drone pilots." One of the soldiers recounts an episode in which the structures bombed housed nothing but women and children. He had told his superiors that there was "no terrorist activity" in the buildings, but they were destroyed anyway.

The soldiers argue that the "careless, belligerent behavior" of the US is understandably sowing anger and resistance in the Afghan population. "If someone blew up my house, it would motivate me" to join the insurgency, one points out. John, the drone pilot, attempts to defend himself, but the others complain bitterly about being shot at for "a complete lie." Martin's segment ends with the pilot in an obvious crisis. From the television, we hear the voices of Bush and Obama, announcing various troop deployments. John dreams about a military cemetery. The short piece is intelligently and artistically done.

Travis Wilkerson's *Fragments of Dissolution* continues the treatment of these same themes [see accompanying interview]. His stark black and white segment comprises the voices of four women (and the faces of two of them).

Ashley Hagemann is the widow of a soldier who served numerous deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. She painfully recounts his mental deterioration. She begins toward the end, when, after they've separated, he phones her and says, "I need you, you need to come here. I'm contemplating certain things." He had received word of another deployment and told the army to go to hell. "I'm done."

Hagemann explains how he once opened up to her "about a lot of things he saw and did." He didn't want to be around their child. He told her about a baby that was killed in the war. "No god would ever forgive him, he was going to hell. … He didn't deserve happiness, he had hurt and killed so many innocent people." Hagemann's husband ultimately ended his own life. That was "the only thing he had a say in."

Mary Corkhill, the mother of another veteran of the current wars who committed suicide, describes her son's ordeal and self-torture. "He didn't laugh that much any more … He told me he was a murderer."

Intercut with these women's deeply moving stories are the voices of Charlotte Nash, whose two disabled brothers died in a January 2010 house fire in Detroit, and Sylvia Young, who lost three children to a blaze the same winter in the same city. Both fires were brought about by shutoffs carried out by utility giant DTE Energy.

The tragic and horrifying cases of the Allen brothers and the three young children, which the two women from Detroit emotionally describe, were taken up by the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs as part of the fight against DTE and various levels of government.

Wilkerson's episode is moving, disturbing and tragic, illustrating the brutality of the powers that be, the human waste, and the sadness of those left behind.

To return to the beginning: John Gianvito's opening segment, *My Heart Swims in Blood* (from the Bach cantata), raises a number of questions. In the filmmakers' own description, "As fog descends upon the landscape, a man attempts to lull himself to sleep. Across the nation, Americans embrace their pleasures. Seven thousand miles away U.S. and coalition forces leave behind a trail of death, destruction, and profound resentment among many of the people of Afghanistan. Business as usual."

This accurately sums up the piece. Over images of a tanning salon, dog show, dance club, shopping center and amusement park, narrators read accounts of atrocities in Afghanistan involving the deaths of civilians, including some of the more notorious ones. A voice laments, "So we leave [Iraq and Afghanistan], the damage is done." She refers to "imperial impunity" and asks "Where is the outrage?" and "When we will ever grow up?" The "restless sleeper," in his isolated country house, eventually puts on an eye mask and falls into a deep slumber.

The implication of the images, whatever the filmmaker's intent might be, is that the American people were oblivious and indifferent to the suffering in Afghanistan, that "While Afghanistan burns, America fiddles," as the filmmakers put it.

This is ill-conceived. The responsibility for the catastrophe in Iraq and Afghanistan rests with the American ruling elite, its political parties, institutions and media. The corporate-owned political system in the US allows for none of the sentiments or feelings of the people to intrude on its sinister operations. The Republicans, who launched the illegal, aggressive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, were tossed out of office in 2006 and 2008, in part because of the unpopular conflicts, but the Democrats continued the interventions and escalated them. Is that the fault of the people?

Furthermore, the economic crisis has caused immense suffering in the US, as two of the five segments in *Far From Afghanistan* allude to. Who was "embracing their pleasures" and carrying on "business as usual" in America? Not those who were laid off, had their wages, pensions and benefits slashed, saw their life savings disappear as housing values plummeted, or were forced to join the military as a means of economic survival.

Gianvito has an important intuition, in my opinion, but it is not concrete enough or properly directed. When he speaks about the absence of "outrage," *he is quite right* as far as the traditional quarters of opposition, so to speak, are concerned, the liberal protest circles, the official anti-war movement. Resistance to imperialist war in those layers *has disappeared*; these forces are "on board," notwithstanding the occasional hand-

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wringing and complaints, and not only because a Democrat is in the White House.

The well-heeled academic today, the erstwhile “radical” journalist, the trade union official, media consultant, think tank fellow, etc., these elements, who identify with the stock exchange and the fate of American business, support the current occupations in the name of “democracy” and “human rights,” and will be only too eager to join in cheering on direct brutal interventions against Syria, Iran and who knows where else.

The artists lag behind this situation. The serious ones will have to take a cold, hard look for what passes as the “left” in America. And orient themselves to the emergence of opposition to imperialist war within a very different social layer.

In any event, *Far From Afghanistan* is an achievement, with all its contradictions and problems. The fact that it was made, the important truths it contains, the self-sacrifice of those involved, is encouraging and will only encourage further efforts.

To be continued

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