San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

Radio Dreams, about Iranian Americans—and the problem of images without insight

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This is the third of several articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 21–May 5. Part 1 *was posted May 11 and* Part 2 *on May 13.*

Radio Dreams, directed by Iranian-born, London-based director Babak Jalali, is a pleasurable experience. The film takes place for the most part in a Farsi-language radio station in the Bay Area during the course of one day.

Numerous tensions exist, side by side. The programming director, Hamid Royami, is an Iranian émigré, a novelist, well-known in his own country (played by the Iranian singer-songwriter, Mohsen Namjoo). He has artistic ideals, and some sort of leftist past. He wants to present something about life, including the lives of Iranians in the US, in poetry, songs, stories.

Maral (Boshra Dastournezhad), the daughter of the station's owner, worries only about the income coming in from advertisers. The station owner himself is mainly interested in wrestling. Maral's noisy, crass commercials for pizza shops and dermatologists interrupt and cut into Hamid's artistic programming, threatening to send him over the edge.

Bizarrely, everyone at the radio station is waiting for the appearance of Metallica, the rock 'n' roll band. The three members of the Afghan band, Kabul Dreams, in particular are sitting around in hopes of meeting their idols. One of the band meanwhile falls in love with Maral and reads her a poem, in which he explains that he will wait "120 years in the gutter" for her to whisper his name.

An English-language interviewer asks Hamid why he has invited Metallica to the station. The latter explains, with and without the aid of his inadequate translator, that he was thinking of the tragic history of the two countries, the US and Afghanistan, and wanting to bring the two bands together, "without war, without violence."

Out of the blue, the station has the opportunity to broadcast an interview with Miss Iran USA. On the way to the station, an employee points out to the young woman, who is dressed in full beauty queen attire, that "No one can see you on radio." This is the sort of programming that appalls Hamid, her eventual interviewer. The pageant winner has a history of modeling and aspires to be a pharmacist. She is also a poet of sorts. "Do you want me to read one of my poems?," she asks on air. "No," Hamid replies, leaving it at that.

In the end, one of Metallica's members makes an unlikely appearance, but it may be too late for Hamid.

Radio Dreams is appealing. Namjoo, with his amazing shock of grey hair, is an intelligent and sensitive presence. "Poetry like bread is for everyone," he explains early in the film. How can he reconcile his artistic feelings and his social views with life in America, where he can barely speak the language, and, specifically, with the philistine goings-on at the radio station?

Taking into account the situation in the Middle East and Central Asia, one might wish for a greater urgency. Nor is the social layer represented in Babak Jalali's film the most oppressed or hard-pressed. But there is a painful element here too: the strangeness of emigration, the indifference of the new country and its population … This is a rather sad comedy. If it were an American film at present, unhappily, the various episodes would be vulgarly done, over the top and terribly unfunny. Jalali brings humanity and sophistication to the work.

Neither Heaven Nor Earth

From France, *Neither Heaven Nor Earth* (directed by Clément Cogitore), although effectively and carefully done, is another of the many essentially non-committal films about the subject of the neo-colonial wars in the Middle East and Central Asia.

A French unit deployed in Afghanistan in 2014, toward the end of the former country's official military engagement, mysteriously begins to lose men. They simply disappear into thin air. The unit commander, Capt. Antarès Bonassieu (Jérémie Renier, a performer in a number of the Dardenne brothers' films), at first suspects the Taliban and then the local village people. Cogitore's film, to its credit, does portray the foreign troops' brutalization of the Afghan population and the latter's hatred and contempt for the occupiers.

The French and the Taliban forces nervously, cautiously agree to a truce and carry out an investigation of the disappearances. A local boy explains that the area from which French soldiers, insurgents and animals are all vanishing is "Allah's land." He tells them, "If you sleep, Allah takes you." Soldiers have dreams in which they see the disappeared gathered in a cavern. Further inquiries prove the boy's account to be true, as far as anyone can tell. Bonassieu is more or less driven mad by the discoveries.

Neither Heaven Nor Earth apparently bases itself on a chapter of the Koran, which relates the story of the People of the Cave, about a group of those persecuted for their religious beliefs who take refuge in a cave and sleep for many years until, when they awake, the general population has been converted to righteousness.

To dissolve the concrete historical criminality of the US-led, French imperialist-supported war against the Afghan people into this sort of supernatural semi-thriller is not helpful. A good deal of talent and intriguing imagery is largely wasted on a light-minded project that, in the end, lands the viewer back at square one.

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The Event: the 1991 attempted putsch in the USSR

Imagery without commentary, without understanding can be worse than useless.

Following up on his *Maidan* (2014), dedicated to the protests that brought the extreme right-wing, Washington-backed regime to power in Ukraine, Sergei Loznitsa has edited found footage shot during the attempted coup in August 1991 by Stalinist elements against Mikhail Gorbachev. The result is *The Event*.

Loznitsa's bad perspective can be gathered from his comments on the Maidan protests: "Freedom doesn't come for free—there is always a price to pay for human dignity, for human rights. The question is whether the people are actually prepared to pay the price. And if they're not prepared to pay this price, can we call them dignified humans? Do they have dignity?"

The protests in Ukraine in 2013-14 had nothing to do with freedom or human dignity, despite the initial desires of certain elements in the demonstrations. The violent protests became part of a major regime change operation conducted by the US, Germany and other powers to install a government in Ukraine that would carry out further attacks on the working class and prove an obedient tool in the drive to encircle and ultimately reduce Russia to colonial status.

In terms of Loznitsa's new film—in August 1991 elements within the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, supported by sections of the military and KGB, staged an abortive coup attempt. As the WSWS noted: "The so-called August putsch, which collapsed in just 61 hours, reflected the fears within some sections of the bureaucracy that Gorbachev was losing control, opening up the threat of an independent movement of the Soviet working class, as well as concerns over the divisions the spoils from the ongoing process of capitalist restoration."

The footage in Loznitsa's 73-minute documentary (which we see without commentary or explanation of any kind, in the director's usual style) was filmed in St. Petersburg by eight cameramen. It shows crowds, not massive, but substantial, who are organizing themselves in protest against the coup taking place in Moscow. The speakers who address the crowd are without exception reactionary, anti-communist demagogues. Prominent among them is the mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, a pro-free market politician and mentor of Vladimir Putin, who left the country in a scandal in 1997. A Russian Orthodox priest also gives his medieval blessings to the protests.

Bystanders at the rallies seem bemused by the events, obviously hostile to the putschists, but somewhat ambivalent about what's taking place. For demonstrations of such size, they are oddly lacking in enthusiasm. Anti-communist slogans and chants dominate, along with a lot of chatter about "freedom" and "democracy." Through no fault of their own, many in the crowd are being manipulated by the social elements organizing the demise of the USSR and are on the verge, not of seeing their social problems resolved and "freedom" flourish, but of losing everything while a handful of oligarchs prosper beyond their wildest dreams. The imagery has that tragic character.

What does Loznitsa hope we will make of the footage? One fears the worst. The Ukrainian filmmaker is indefatigable, but to what end?

Chantal Akerman and Jem Cohen: "experimental"?

Chantal Akerman was a Belgian-born, independent filmmaker and academic. She died in October 2015. *Le Monde* reported that Akerman, aged 65, had committed suicide.

What I have seen of Akerman's chilly, detached, "hyper-realist" filmmaking is not appealing, although there is an obvious intelligence at work. Her works have that discouraged, quasi-"deconstructionist" feeling that came to dominate a portion of post-1968 European art filmmaking. Everything is taken apart except the really important things.

In discussions of her work, the absence of the desire, or the ability, to take on the concrete-historical complexities of the period directly and bravely is justified by references to "anti-illusionism" and "formal rigor." Identity politics and feminism (although Akerman rejected the "ghettoization" of her films in this category) clearly played a harmful role. The film results in Akerman's case are often quite tedious. Many others continue to tread this cinematic path.

No Home Movie consists of conversations between Akerman and her mother, Nelly, during the last months of the older woman's life, interspersed—or, rather, surrounded, dominated—by images primarily of Israeli desert countryside (one learns from notes on the film).

Nelly Akerman is endearing and fascinating. Although it is not discussed directly, she was an Auschwitz concentration camp survivor. (In fact, she had fled Poland to Belgium only to be captured and sent to the hell of the death camp. Many other relatives died.)

Instead, seated in her home in Brussels, she discusses various aspects of family history over Skype with her globe-trotting daughter. Nelly refers to her own mother's secret love. She affectionately talks about her father, whose two little daughters sat on his knee and twisted his moustache. When the girls had to be disciplined for not studying, the father called on his wife because he didn't have the heart to do it. Nelly also speaks with affection about Chantal, "Such a beautiful little girl. I was so proud of you."

The old woman still has all her wits about her. She also ventures into a bit of the social-political history. Her father, she explains, was sick of Orthodox Judaism and its "stories." He was "a bit of a socialist" from the Dror, the Labour Zionist youth movement. Another relative wrote for a Communist newspaper.

These snatches of conversation are worth a great deal. One only wants to see more of and hear more from Nelly Akerman. Unfortunately, her daughter's artistic conceptions stand in the way. For long stretches of time, we see nothing but desert, or still shots of the elderly woman's apartment.

It is a terribly mistaken notion to believe that images by themselves reveal historical and social truth. Whatever Akerman may have thought, the extended use of such footage is a substitute for coming to terms with the traumas and tragedies of the 20th century.

Jem Cohen's *Counting* has the defects of Akerman's *No Home Movie* without the benefit of the presence of a Nelly Akerman. It is made up of footage shot in various cities, New York, Istanbul, Moscow. Cohen (*Museum Hours*), in a director's statement, writes that the new film "continues in a mode that I sometimes think of as life-drawing, in which free observation of uncontrolled events plays a crucial role."

There are obvious concerns with "real-estate destruction" and NSA spying, with protests and "street life," among other things, but none of this stays with one. There is no coherent theme here, in the end. There is simply disparate imagery intended, again, to add up to something that never emerges and cannot emerge on its own. Such a process requires the intervention of the thinking, conscious artist. The results here too are tedious. This vague, self-indulgent effort belongs to what passes for "experimental" filmmaking today. The artist, Hegel explained, does not come upon important work in his or her sleep, or stumble upon it by accident.

Five Nights in Maine (directed by Maris Curran) is one of those little films that is watchable and tolerable until you think seriously for a moment. A man (played by David Oyelowo) who has just lost his wife in a car accident goes to visit his irascible, cancer-ridden mother-in-law

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(Dianne Wiest) in Maine. Small, supposedly telling details about the various relationships in question emerge over a few days. In the last analysis, this is petty, horribly self-involved stuff. There are bigger things going on in the world!

To be continued

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