

Some films from the 2019 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

Kabul, City in the Wind, Midnight Traveler and *What We Left Unfinished: The catastrophe of US intervention in Afghanistan*

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2 May 2019

This is the second of two articles on a number of films screened at the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 10-23. The first was posted April 26.

The 40-year encounter of the Afghan people with American imperialism, beginning with the Carter administration's initiation of a policy in 1979 aimed at destabilizing the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, has been catastrophic. Washington's secret operation unleashed a civil war that has continued to the present day.

Direct US military intervention and occupation commenced nearly 18 years ago, using the September 11, 2001, attacks as a pretext. The war in Afghanistan, which has cost more than 1 trillion dollars, is the longest conflict in US history. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been killed or maimed, as well as thousands of Americans. In 2018 alone, according to Human Rights Watch, 10,000 Afghan civilians were killed or wounded, one third of them children.

The social conditions for the mass of the Afghan population, who live under the rule of thugs and warlords, are unspeakable nearly two decades after the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom.

A survey conducted in 2018 found that more than half the Afghan population were living on less than one dollar a day. The official national poverty rate is 55 percent, and 45 percent of the population live in food insecurity. Some 50 percent of Afghan children are stunted, and 20 percent of Afghan women of child-bearing age are underweight. Half of both the rural and urban populations have no access to clean water. Only 31 percent of the Afghan population 15 years and older are literate (UNESCO). The UN Population Division estimates that 2.5 million Afghan children between ages 6 and 14 are involved in some form of child labor. The country has one of the highest infant mortality rates on the planet.

According to UNICEF, in Afghanistan, "10 million people lack access to essential health services and 3.5 million children (60 per cent of them girls) are out of school. One third of children in Afghanistan have experienced psychological distress related to the loss of family and the constant risk of death or injury due to conflict and attacks on schools. An estimated 2 million children under 5 years are suffering from acute malnutrition, including 600,000 children with severe acute malnutrition (SAM)."

The San Francisco film festival screened several documentary films from the war-ravaged country, which perhaps understandably, given the nearly impossible conditions, provide only a limited or partial picture of

the actual situation.

Kabul, City in the Wind

Aboozar Amini's documentary *Kabul, City in the Wind* is a devastating and intimate portrait of daily life in Kabul.

Abas is a bus driver whose paltry income is dependent upon a dilapidated vehicle he can barely maintain and whose payments are financially strangling him.

Abas: "I fear myself. When I look back on my life, I've had only ten percent peace. I fear I may one day create a morass which could eat me and my family. It's very scary."

Fear is not the product of Abas's personal nightmare, but of the conditions imposed on the population by the endless foreign occupation and by social oppression.

As one person quips bitterly: "500, 400, 200 casualties. It has become very normal for us, hasn't it? ... We don't know whether our turn will come today or tomorrow, but we have to deal with these blasts every day."

Scenes of Abas's life are interspersed with those of Afshin, a young boy, who takes on familial responsibilities when his father, a former soldier, thinks it necessary to exile himself in Iran. Afshin and his younger brother Benjamin wander through Kabul, amid the rubble, make-shift markets and a population living on the edge of abyss.

Wafting through the "City in the Wind" is a song's refrain: "Yellow kite stay home, don't go to war, you may die." The deeply rooted psychological and physical effects of decades of war are effectively captured by Amini. His work's melancholy tone evinces a certain resignation and hopelessness. Nonetheless, it is a beautiful, wrenching witness to the current state of existence.

Midnight Traveler

Washington and its European accomplices have largely destroyed

Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Millions have died, tens of millions are on the run. *Midnight Traveler* records one case.

Filmmakers Hassan Fazili and Fatima Hussaini, a married couple, were forced to flee Afghanistan with their two young daughters. They documented their perilous journey to Europe on three cell phones. Their work is a window into the massive refugee crisis. While the immediate reason for their flight was fear of the Taliban, the family was ultimately the victim of the US and European sociocide carried out in the region.

The movie opens with the intertitle: “The road of life winds through hell. ... Hell is within me and this is a story of a journey to the edge of hell.” As the film explains, in March 2015, the Taliban put out a call for Fazili’s death. The family seeks protection in Tajikistan and for 14 months fill out asylum applications that go unanswered. They are then deported back to Afghanistan. From there they make their way to Iran, then Turkey, eventually reaching Bulgaria. Smugglers cruelly threaten to take Hassan and Fatima’s daughters as a means of extracting money.

At a Bulgarian refugee camp, they are harangued by fascist gangs. Feeling the country is no longer safe, the family makes the 245-mile trek to Serbia. Finding the refugee camp there full, the quartet, with others, sleeps in the forest and then in an abandoned building. In one endearing moment, the eldest daughter Nargis, when eventually situated in a camp, feels free to dance to Michael Jackson. It then takes the family four to five weeks to arrive in Hungary, where they hope their case will be heard. (“For us, the dreams have become a mirage.”)

The film’s postscript states that three years after fleeing Afghanistan, the family smuggled themselves illegally into the European Union. It remains unclear whether they will find a permanent home.

What We Left Unfinished

In 2013, director Mariam Ghani gained access to the Afghan Film Archive, where several uncompleted films—begun between 1978 and 1991, under the various Soviet-backed Afghan governments—had been bricked up behind a wall under the Taliban. Their history and fate form the subject matter of Ghani’s *What We Left Unfinished*.

Ghani’s website explains that the “1978 feature *The April Revolution* [named for the April 1978 uprising led by the Stalinist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan against the rule of President Mohammed Daoud Khan] was commissioned by Hafizullah Amin, who would seize the presidency in a coup the next year. It was not long after that he was overthrown and killed by the Soviets, whereupon *The April Revolution* was obviously an untouchable property. *What We Left Unfinished* covers not just the making of that film but also of *Downfall* (1987), *The Black Diamond* (1989), *Wrong Way* (1990), and *Agent* (1991). ...

“The reels for the aborted film projects were kept in the archives of Afghan Film, the state film company. There they remained for many years. When the Taliban came to power, they destroyed much of the company’s archives, but staff were able to protect some of its contents. Ghani has been working with Afghan Film to preserve what remains in its library since 2011.”

Ghani interviews a number of the directors, including Juwansher Haidary, Faqir Nabi and Wali Latifi. They refer to the relatively primitive conditions—for example, those playing soldiers in their films used real bullets and explosives as they didn’t have any fake ones! The directors make clear that the successive government wanted propaganda films praising the Kabul leaders for trying to better the lot of the people. The fragments we see indicate the films—often crudely—were in part directed against various forms of social backwardness, the drug trade and so forth, as well as the government’s mujahadeen opponents.

However, the interviewees also indicate a certain nostalgia for that “golden time” in Afghan cinema under the Moscow-backed regimes, when, as one of the directors explains, five film crews would start out each morning from a central location. The movie industry was then “thriving,” and films would make their way from Kabul to various cities in the provinces. The glimpses we get of Afghanistan at the time suggest a society not in a state of complete disintegration.

What We Left Unfinished attempts, with only partial success, to grapple with Afghanistan’s complex, tortuous history. Missing is an understanding of Great Power politics and the geopolitical driving forces of the decades of war and occupation.

The US foreign policy establishment’s ultimate goal from 1979 onward was to destroy the USSR and promote an expansion of US power in strategically located, oil-rich Central Asia. At the same time, the reactionary nationalist Stalinists in Moscow were utterly incapable and fearful of mobilizing the Afghan population on a genuinely progressive basis. Their brutal, pragmatic policies merely inflamed Afghan nationalist and Islamist tendencies and played directly into the hands of US strategists.

The WSWS noted in 2009 that with “the assistance of right-wing Muslim regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the US promoted Islamic fundamentalist warlords within the [Afghan] resistance. Washington turned a blind eye as they exterminated competing mujahadeen factions and funded themselves through large-scale opium sales.

“When the mujahadeen proved incapable of organizing attacks on Kabul and strategic roadways, the CIA armed and trained international Muslim recruits to launch terrorist attacks and suicide bombings. The young Saudi billionaire Osama bin Laden oversaw these global recruitment networks, which later formed the core of Al Qaeda.” (“Thirty years since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan,” 30 December 2009)

Rojo from Argentina

Benjamín Naishtat’s *Rojo* is set in 1975 in a provincial Argentinean city, shortly before the coup d’état against Isabel Perón in March 1976. The coup marked the onset of the “dirty war” prosecuted by the US-backed military junta against political opponents, resulting in an estimated 30,000 deaths, between 1976 and 1983.

Establishing a certain mood and tone, Naishtat’s film opens with an abandoned house being ransacked by scavengers. *Rojo*’s central character is Claudio (Dario Grandinetti), a respected lawyer, who is a pillar of the community. But when a stranger in a restaurant taunts him, Dario-the-victim quickly becomes Dario-the-victimizer and law-breaker. His serene middle class world has a rotten underbelly.

Speaking to *IFFR.com*, Naishtat asserts that his film has “many layers behind it, for example at the key dramatic moment, there is a strange, sort of red eclipse, but also, of course, there is a political nuance to it, because in many parts of the film, people talk about some danger or some evil force, as it is stated by the detective character [Sinclair] played by Alfredo Castro—he is referring to what in the 1970s was seen as the Red Danger, because of the Cold War and the clash between the Left and the Right.”

In an interview with *Filmmaker* magazine, the director mentions that researching “*Rojo* was easy because many of the stories are from my family. My grandparents and my father were visiting the city of Córdoba in 1975; they were leftist militants, and my grandmother was a prominent union lawyer. She was disappeared into a secret prison, and her house, my family house, was torched. My father escaped before a commando unit came to his house, and he had to flee. He lived 10 years in exile, which is

how he met my mother, in Paris—another exile.”

It's unfortunate that Naishtat delves so little into the actual political conditions that made possible the horrors that swept up his own family. Instead, he seems to be arguing that the moral vacuity and corruption of the Argentine people as a whole set the stage for the 1976 coup. According to this logic, an ethically compromised population becomes the facilitator of military dictatorship. The movie's eerie, ominous atmosphere is legitimate, but can't substitute itself for historical concreteness.

The Little Comrade from Estonia

In 1950, Stalinist authorities in Estonia, the Baltic state then part of the Soviet Union, are attempting to stamp out an incipient resistance movement taking shape in the countryside in Moonika Siimets's film *The Little Comrade*.

Six-year-old Leelo (Helena Maria Reisner) is bewildered when her mother Helmes (Eva Koldits) is arrested by the secret police as “an enemy of the people,” and sent to a prison camp. She also does not understand why her father Feliks (Tambet Tuisk) disparagingly calls her “little comrade” when she wants to join the “young pioneers,” a Stalinist youth group.

Siimets's film is an adaptation of two of Leelo Tungal's autobiographical novels: *Seltsimees laps ja suured inimesed* (*Comrade Kid and the Grown-Ups*) and *Samet ja saepuru* (*Velvet and Sawdust*), which are based on memories of her childhood in postwar Estonia.

The film's depiction of the crimes and stupidities of Estonian Stalinism is no doubt accurate within limits, but *The Little Comrade* takes the opportunity to advance anti-communism and Estonian nationalism, which have their own foul history and political trajectory.

Concluded



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