

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW / MARIAM GHANI + SANDRA SCHAEFER / BERLINALE FORUM

SS: When and how did you come across the unfinished films and decide to work with them?

MG: I first encountered the unfinished films while I was working together with members of the media archiving collective Pad.ma and the staff of Afghan Films, the national film institute of Afghanistan, on a proof-of-concept digitization project in the Afghan Films archive in 2011. I think the very first film that I heard about was THE APRIL REVOLUTION, because we digitized clips from Latif Ahmadi's film ESCAPE and annotated them by watching them with him. He mentioned that he had recycled footage from an unfinished film about the 1978 Communist coup d'état (the eponymous April Revolution), for which he had served as cinematographer, into his later film, whose story covered the period just before, during and after that coup.

Of course it then took me five more years to sort out exactly how many films had actually been left unfinished in the history of Afghan cinema, where those films were, who had made them, and where those people had been scattered by the war. But for me the unfinished films were like a loose thread that could be pulled to unravel one strand of those cultural and political histories of the Communist period.

SS: You worked with the online archive Pad.ma to digitize and disseminate films from the national film institute Afghan Films. How did this process influence the making of your film and vice versa?

MG: The 2011 digitization workshop with Pad.ma was just the beginning of my long and complicated relationship with Afghan Films, built up over many years. We not only digitized films but also put them online; we translated them and made the .srt files available to download; we watched films with the directors and actors, then made transcripts of those conversations into annotation layers in the Pad.ma interface. I organized screenings of the digitized and translated films in universities and museums in the US, Europe and Asia, and the screening fees went back to Afghan Films in the form of equipment and supplies - for example, new canisters for the film reels, and construction materials for a new cafeteria so that staff could be served a hot meal every day. I also wrote essays about films we had digitized, which helped bring more attention to the archive holdings and led to other filmmakers making projects with and about Afghan Films.

And in the responses to those screenings and essays, I saw how powerful it could be for audiences to see all the other Afghanists that existed, or perhaps were only imagined, before the wars of the late 20th century - and how that can open up other ways of imagining Afghanistan's present and future.

That initial 2011 workshop led to the full-scale re-cataloguing and digitization project that Afghan Films has now undertaken, and the re-cataloguing process finally unearthed most of the unfinished film footage I had been looking for, which even the directors had believed to be completely lost. Two of the

staff members trained during the workshop, Hasib Sediqi and Fayaz Lutfi, are now primarily responsible for digitization. In 2017, my DP Adam Hogan and I ran another workshop alongside the shooting of my film, to train those same staff members to use the new Cintel/Resolve system acquired for the full digitization. The footage for my film was among the first footage digitized on the new system, and has served as a kind of test case - it had to be redone a few times as the kinks of the system were worked out.

More importantly, over time I accumulated both a deeper knowledge of the films in the archive and the often contested histories contained in them, and a better understanding of the community around the films both in the past and present. This understanding was critical to my approach to WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED, which I would characterize as evenly split between real affection for the people and materials and healthy skepticism about everything they said to me. After all, as Walid Raad said so well, when we are speaking about a civil war, the truth will be known when the last witness is dead.

SS: You wrote in 2013 that if you work with an archive, you must try to understand what the archive desires of you. What did the archive Afghan Films desire of you?

MG: Well, the desires of an archive are not necessarily static, because the community that makes up that archive changes over time. And every artist who works with material

extracted from an archive becomes one of the interpreters of that archive, thus taking on a certain responsibility for how the work of the archive is understood in the world. But when I wrote that essay for Ibraaz, I was thinking about the particularities of working with archives in places like Afghanistan, where films have been burned, paintings slashed, and museums bombed, all within the memory of the present-day archivists. Because Afghan cultural heritage has so recently come under threat, cultural institutions tend to guard it fiercely. So in order to build any trust, you need to offer some kind of mutual exchange.

When I first began working with Afghan Films, the guardians of the archive were most interested in starting digitization and circulating their films into the wider world. Later, under different leadership, Afghan Films became more invested in restarting their production arm, and wished to monetize the films in their archive to fund their productions. Currently, with the film archive split from the production arm and, at least for the moment, absorbed into the National Archive of Afghanistan, there has been another shift, to regarding the films not only as part of cinematic history but also as part of the larger cultural heritage of Afghanistan. The physical archive has also been rendered more inaccessible by its new location, so digitization has become even more important, and the archive is now interested in making many copies of the films available in other locations across Afghanistan, including universities and museums, as well as putting excerpts online.

My role in all of this has been, at various points over the years, to help fundraise for new equipment; to find experts to teach the staff new skills; to serve as an occasional mediator in relationships with other partners, like Pad.ma, the Goethe Institute, and the National Film Board of Canada; to curate and circulate screening programs and write critical essays, as mentioned above; and sometimes even to provide emergency tech support over WhatsApp. And throughout the process of making WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED, I was thinking about ways that the film could fulfill both expressed and latent desires of the filmmakers and the archive - most critically by opening up a space for conversations like this, about the larger questions and histories of Afghan cinema, but also in a number of smaller ways.

For example, forty minutes of the unfinished film THE APRIL REVOLUTION disappeared from the archive in 1979, after Afghan Communist leader Hafizullah Amin's assassination by the Soviets. According to Latif Ahmadi, the film's cinematographer, the footage was taken by the Uzbek filmmaker Malek Kayoumov to use in his own documentary about the 1978 coup, AFGHANISTAN: THE REVOLUTION CONTINUES. The lost footage was the most unique part of the film, in which Hafizullah Amin played himself, re-enacting the events of the day of the coup. This abduction has been a sore spot for Afghan Films for many decades. So during the research for my

film, I tried to track down the lost footage and return it to the archive. I was only able to find the three and a half minutes that were used in Kayoumov's final film, because a copy of that film is in the Krasnogorsk Archive in Moscow. The raw footage was most likely stored at UzbekFilm in Tashkent, and no one knows exactly what happened to any of the film reels located at UzbekFilm when it was shut down after the dissolution of the USSR. But I purchased the footage I did find from Krasnogorsk—since they flatly refused to give it back for free—and brought a copy back to Afghan Films.

SS: What role do the unfinished films play in the wider context of Afghan Cinema?

MG: There are of course many more finished films than unfinished ones in the history of Afghan cinema. I became interested in the unfinished films for two reasons. First, because they clustered around periods of political turmoil and transition, 1978-79 and 1987-91 in particular, when the state that usually supported Afghan film production was too beleaguered or in too much flux to provide reliable cover. Second because, as the filmmakers discuss in WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED, most films made during the Communist period were censored at multiple stages of production and post-production before reaching audiences in cinemas. The unfinished films, because they were never edited, never went through the final level of censorship, in which (as I understand it) a representative

from the Ministry of Information and Culture would go through the final cut and literally snip out every frame to which he objected. So I believe the raw footage from these unfinished films contains elements that probably would not have made it past that final censor—moments when the actual violence of everyday life under Afghan Communism seeps into the idealized portrayals more usually seen onscreen.

SS: In your film, you deal with an unfinished past reflecting on it with different protagonists in the present. How does it affect the imagination of a future to come?

MG: WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED, like a number of my earlier works, departs from the understanding that a nation is an imagined community, which is to say a fictional invention or form of collective storytelling. It looks at the roles films and filmmakers can play in that work of imagination: weapons wielded by the state, subverters of official narratives, dreamers of alternative spaces, creators of new norms. But it is also a film about the gaps and contradictions in the stories that both people and nations tell about their pasts.

Did the secular Afghanistan depicted onscreen in these films ever actually exist? Does it matter? If the films exist, then this other Afghanistan was imagined once, and could be again.

SS: What role does your film What We Left Unfinished play in the context of your artistic practice that you describe as a research based artistic practice?

MG: I generally say that I work at the intersections of war, trauma, memory, identity, migration, language, loss and reconstruction, so WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED is very much continuous with the rest of my practice. WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED most directly follows the two-channel installation A BRIEF HISTORY OF COLLAPSES and the book *Afghanistan: A Lexicon*, both commissioned for Documenta in 2012, which were concerned primarily with Afghanistan's modernist period and its reverberations in the present. The film also touches on a number of my recurring preoccupations, including national imaginaries, state archives as repositories of those imaginaries, and what I think of as the loose threads or frayed edges at the margins of history. I have also been described as "the artist who makes work about things that aren't there" (the "things" including redactions, black sites, no-mans-lands, ghosts and genius loci), so it was natural, though by no means easy, for me to organize this film around the gaps between what people said in the present, and the images they made in the past, and between the Afghanistans imagined before and existing today.