

FILM

AV Festival: Meanwhile, what about socialism?

When George Orwell published *The Road to Wigan Pier*, his 1937 account of working-class life in the industrial north, he combined an attention to sociological detail with an argument in favour of socialism. Wigan Pier is roughly only 150 miles from Newcastle, making it a local affair for the AV Festival to reprise as its theme Orwell's question, 'Meanwhile, what about socialism?'. Split into two sessions, the first running for a month from 27 February and the second to follow in 2018, the festival contained ample evidence of a commitment to the rich histories of the British left, ranging from a Marc Karlin retrospective and selections from nearly a century of radical British documentary to an exhibition devoted to Newcastle's own Thomas Spence. But over its 13 venues, perhaps just as prominent was an internationalist impulse that takes one far beyond Wigan Pier. From Ukraine to Bangladesh, France to Nicaragua, Orwell's question resonated across historical epochs and geopolitical contexts, yielding a multiplicity of answers. The screenings held 11-13 March, 'Tracing the Anabasis of the Japanese Red Army: Conversations Across Three Artists', were in this regard exemplary, assembling five films connected to the now-defunct exilic group, formerly based in Lebanon and devoted to armed anti-imperialist struggle in close partnership with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

The series began with Naeem Mohaiemen's *United Red Army (And the Young Man Was... Part 1)*, 2012, which turns to a 1977 Japanese Red Army (JRA) hijacking and the ensuing hostage negotiations that took place at Dhaka airport with AG Mahmud, vice-marshal in the Bangladeshi air force. Mohaiemen explores the resonances of this event within and beyond Japan and the Middle East, calling it both a 'red line' in governments' changing attitudes towards negotiating with terrorists and a 'Trojan horse', since within this spectacular media event hides a second story – of central interest to Mohaiemen – of a failed military coup with traumatic consequences for the young nation of Bangladesh.

The JRA had a special relationship to cinema, counting among its members Masao Adachi, a major filmmaker of the 1960s'

student movement known for his 'pink films', which mixed softcore pornography with political conviction. Adachi's extraordinary A.K.A. *Serial Killer*, 1969, departs sharply from such sexploitation to experiment with a theory of landscape, *fūkeiron*, proposing that social forces become visible in the built environment. To recount the story of a 19-year-old who murdered four people in 1969, Adachi pairs an intermittent explanatory voice-over and a free jazz score with images of landscapes perhaps once inhabited by the titular figure. These anti-spectacular images decentre the human in the organisation of filmic space, allegorically demanding a move away from individualist explanations of pathology and towards a materialist account of contemporary life. En route back from the Cannes Film Festival in 1971, Adachi stopped in Lebanon, producing the agitprop film *Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War*, 1971, later distributed around Japan on a red bus with the aim of recruiting a 'world red army'. Filmed in the camps of the *fedayeen*, this newsreel conceives of cinema as a radical weapon and calls for a violent uprising; it does not simply document revolution but instead seeks to foment it.

Adachi stayed in Lebanon for decades, abandoning filmmaking, an absence referenced in the title of Eric Baudelaire's *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 Years Without Images*, 2011. Baudelaire revives the notion of *fūkeiron*, pairing cityscapes of Beirut and Tokyo with voice-overs from Adachi and May Shigenobu, daughter of JRA leader Fusako Shigenobu (arrested in 2000), who recount experiences of life underground. In 2013's *The Ugly One*, Baudelaire commissioned Adachi to produce a script about memory, conflict and revolutionary failure in Lebanon from which the artist would improvise. This cross-generational collaboration takes its title from the Japanese authorities' nickname for Adachi, who was apprehended in 1997, serving prison terms in Lebanon and Japan before his release in 2001.

Films by these three artists have recently received significant attention, but their presentation together enabled a fascinating dialogue to emerge, raising questions of landscape, violence, commitment and historical representation. Together, the five films proposed not a quick dip into a petrified past but rather an almost pedagogical immersion into a still-live network of affinities, antagonisms and narratives. Crucial to this was the discursive component of the weekend,

structured around the presence of key figures linked to the history of the JRA. May Shigenobu, Mahmud and Carol Wells, a hostage in the 1977 hijacking, were present throughout as discussants, while Mohaiemen and film historian Julian Ross supplied valuable contextual information (Mahmud and Mohaiemen joined via Skype). Mahmud, who negotiated Wells's release, spoke with her for the first time in nearly 40 years; Wells, a JRA victim, asked Shigenobu how she feels about her mother's actions today. Festival director Rebecca Shatwell's introductory text mentions an interest in artists who have 'removed the political from the language of nostalgia and mourning', and this strategy was continued in Shatwell's orchestration of these discussions, which insisted upon unfolding the JRA's connections to continuing struggles and lives.

Shatwell's programming is a much-needed critical rejoinder to the deep melancholia that marks much of the recent surge of interest in the legacies of the 1970s' left. Too often, this past is romanticised as a prelapsarian time fundamentally separated from our own: *then* there was a belief in change, *then* there was a truly oppositional film practice, *then* things might have been otherwise. Mythologised histories of terrorism are mined for a frisson of radical chic. What Walter Benjamin called left-wing melancholy is ever-present today, palpable in exhaustion and inertia dangerously coupled with an endless, nostalgia-twinged harkening back to more heroic, surer days. The cyclical time of melancholia has the advantage of keeping the past with us, but at the price of severing it from the now and simplifying its entanglements. The AV Festival suggested that there are other modes of return worth exploring, among them *anabasis* itself. Most simply, *anabasis* refers to an expedition into the interior of a country. But as the title of Xenophon's most renowned work, it becomes, in the words of Alain Badiou, 'the free invention of a wandering that *will have been* a return, a return that did not exist as a return-route prior to the wandering'. The AV Festival examined the *anabasis* of the Japanese Red Army but, through it, proposed that spectators embark upon their own figurative *anabases* – journeys into the fullness of a contradictory past, possible only in the light of the present, undertaken in service of the now. ■

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