

SOHRAB SHAHID SALESS: EXILE, DISPLACEMENT AND THE STATELESS MOVING IMAGE

One-day International Conference

Date: Friday 19 January 2018

Time: 09:30 – 18:00

Location: Goethe-Institut London, 50 Princes Gate, Exhibition Road, London SW7 2PH

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This one-day conference brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to explore the work of Iranian filmmaker Sohrab Shahid Saless as a conduit for a wider engagement with exiled and displaced moving image practitioners: their ethics, aesthetics and modes of production, as well as their precarious lives and often uncertain legacy today.

- Panel 1: The life and work of Sohrab Shahid Saless

In 1974, facing increasing government pressure and censorship, Shahid Saless left his native Iran – where he had realised two incisive feature films and co-founded the New Film Group – for West Germany. Without permanent residency status, locked into a continual struggle to secure funding, this self-described “guest worker” of German cinema was to create a unique but critically neglected body of films that speak forcefully to the traumas of displacement and migration.

- Panel 2: Creative exiles

This panel considers how experiences of displacement and dislocation have, throughout history, shaped cinema and moving image practices more generally, and how creative exiles struggle to re- and de-construct their identities, to both produce art and re-produce their existence as artists against the complex cultural, political and economic background of their respective “host” societies. Is there a “cinema of exile”, consisting of certain aesthetic, stylistic, financial and socio-political regularities?

- Panel 3: The stateless moving image

This panel confronts persistent problems concerning the archiving and transmission of transnational film – Shahid Saless’ work being a case in point. “Stateless” films, i.e. moving image works that belong to no single nation, present particular challenges for curators, archivists, researchers and film programmers, something which this section seeks to address.

The conference is organised by Dr. Azadeh Fatehrad and Nikolaus Perneckzy, in partnership with the Goethe-Institut London, with support from the Visual and Material Culture Research Centre at Kingston University London, the Iran Heritage Foundation in London, Arts Council England and CHASE (Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England).

Programme

Friday 19 January 2018

- 09:30 Registration
Tea and coffee
- 09:45 Welcome introduction
Dr. Azadeh Fatehrad

- 10:00-12:45 Panel 1: The life and work of Sohrab Shahid Saless

Keynote Lecture by Prof. Hamid Naficy (Northwestern University, USA)

“Slow, Closed, Recessive, Formalist and Dark – the Cinema of Sohrab Shahid Saless”

Dr. Christopher Gow

“Making the Personal Universal: Sohrab Shahid Saless 'Utopia'”

Dr. Matthias Wittmann (University of Basel, Switzerland)

“Of Dictates, Mirrors and Grimaces. Sohrab Shahid-Saless's Protocol Style.”

- 12:45-13:30 Lunch

- 13:30-15:45 Panel 2: Creative exiles

Dr. Michelle Langford (University of New South Wales, Australia)

“Sohrab Shahid Saless and the German *Autorenfilm*”

Naomi DeCelles (University of California, USA)

“Mediating Displacement: Exile as Figured in *The Long Vacation of Lotte H. Eisner*”

Panel Discussion

Chair: Dr. Azadeh Fatehrad

- 15:45-16:00 Tea and coffee

- 16:00-17:30 Panel 3: The stateless moving image

Dr. Michael Mazière (University of Westminster, UK)

“CURATING THE NOMADIC - Chantal Akerman at Ambika P3”

Nicolai S. Gütermann (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Film, History and Society, Austria)

“The Global Village of Babel”

Round Table

Prof. Hamid Naficy, Dr. Michelle Langford, Dr. Michael Mazière and Nicolai S. Gütermann

Chair: Pierre d'Alancaisez

- 17:30-18:00 Drinks
- 18:00 End

Abstracts & Biographies

Professor Hamid Naficy (Northwestern University, USA)

“Slow, Closed, Recessive, Formalist and Dark – the Cinema of Sohrab Shahid Saless”

Iranian filmmakers in the diaspora form one of the most active transnational filmmaking groups in the world. However, they do not form a unified bloc. Their identities are varied and evolving – from exilic to diasporic, émigré, ethnic, cosmopolitan and beyond – and they work in many countries, using different modes of production, making a variety of types of films in multiple languages. This presentation discusses these issues by focusing on the life and works of Sohrab Shahid Saless in Iran, Germany and the US.

Hamid Naficy is Professor of Radio-Television-Film and Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani Professor in Communication at Northwestern University, where he is also an affiliate faculty member in the Department of Art History and a core faculty member on the Middle East and North African Studies Programme. Naficy is a leading authority on cultural studies of diaspora, exile, postcolonial cinemas and media, and Iranian and Middle Eastern cinema. Naficy has published and lectured extensively, nationally and internationally, on these and allied topics. His English language books are: *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking; Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place; The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles; Otherness and the Media: the Ethnography of the Imagined and the Imaged* (co-edited); and *Iran Media Index*. His latest work is the award-winning four-volume book *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, published in 2011-12. He has also published extensively in Persian, including a two-volume book on documentary cinema theory and history, *Film-e Mostanad*. He has also produced and directed many avant-garde, educational and documentary films.

Dr. Christopher Gow (Glasgow, UK)

“Making the Personal Universal: Sohrab Shahid Saless 'Utopia'”

Sohrab Shahid Saless' three-hour epic film *Utopia* (1983), about the relationship between five sex workers operating out of a brothel in West Berlin and their abusive pimp, is one of the director's most complex and multi-layered works. While it can clearly be interpreted on the one hand as a kind of allegory of Shahid Saless' own status as an exiled Iranian filmmaker, living and working in Germany (despite his frequent assertions to the contrary), it is also a damningly powerful critique of patriarchy and the violence that men perpetrate against women. Moreover, while it can be viewed primarily as a metaphor for the sense of imprisonment and alienation that Shahid Saless undoubtedly experienced, it also represents a continuation of the themes and motifs that had come to characterise his oeuvre even before he left Iran, such as his obsession with family, memory, trauma and loss. Via a detailed analysis of *Utopia* and with reference to Shahid Saless' other films, this paper will argue for a holistic and polysemic understanding of the director's work, that takes into account his personal history and ambiguous relationship with German society, and the way in which this manifests itself in his films, as well as the universality and artistic cohesion of his body of work. It will examine how and to what extent the film strikes a delicate balance between its immediate allegorical import and the powerful, nuanced treatment of its bleak subject matter.

Dr. Christopher Gow undertook his postgraduate research into Iranian cinema at both the University of London (School of Oriental and African Studies) and the University of Warwick, exploring the relationship between the New Iranian Cinema and émigré Iranian filmmaking. He currently resides in Scotland and has taught courses on Iranian cinema at the University of Glasgow. *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places In-Between* (published by I B Tauris, 2011) based on his doctoral thesis, was his first major publication. He has presented papers on Iranian cinema at a variety of international conferences and has published articles on various aspects of Iranian cinema, including *Moviement, Asian Cinema* and *Directory of World Cinema: Iran 2*.

Dr. Matthias Wittmann (University of Basel, Switzerland)

“Of Dictates, Mirrors and Grimaces. Sohrab Shahid-Saless's Protocol Style.”

Scenes of education and disciplinary action are a recurring motive in Sohrab Shahid Saless' films. The school dictates in *A Simple Event* (1974) and *Time of Maturity* (1976) are followed by the rhythmic fabric machines in *Far from Home* (1975) and the instructions given to the sex workers in *Utopia* (1982). Within those processes of reification and forced rationalisation – registered by Shahid Saless and his cinematographers with protocollaric, micrologic attentiveness – one can find revolutionary moments in which the characters become a distorting mirror for the compulsions they have to bear: be it the hysterical laughter of the railroad guard at the end of *Still Life* (1974) or the conversation between the old lady and the Turkish guest worker Husseyn (Parviz Sayyad) in *Far from Home* (“Guter Mensch, sehr guter Mensch! A good man, a very good man!”). In those moments, Shahid Saless' characters parody their own tragic life, with the cartoon masks they put on and the grimaces they make become 'counter-protocols' to the protocols of society. “That is the secret of the *keep smiling* attitude. The face becomes a dead letter by freezing the most living thing about it, namely its laughter. The film fulfils the old children's threat of the ugly grimace which freezes when the wind changes or the clock strikes”, Theodor W. Adorno writes about Charlie Chaplin. According to Adorno, a *protocol* is always Janus-faced and can be both: a technique of relementation in service of rationalisation, naturalisation and automatised enlightenment – what Adorno calls *mimesis to the dead* – and at the same time an artistic form of materialist resistance to control and to the bourgeois 'cult of the soul' by including the ephemeral, what Adorno calls the *mimesis to the living*. Against this theoretical background, this talk carves out the interplay of striking clocks, mirrors and grimaces, between protocol shots and counter-protocol shots in Shahid Saless' films. What Adorno writes about Kafka can also be regarded as being valid for Shahid Saless: his “hermetic memoranda contain the social genesis of *schizophrenia*”.

Dr. Matthias Wittmann is a film and media scholar, film critic, film curator, and research assistant at the Seminar for Media Studies (University of Basel) focusing on Iranian cinema, which he is currently exploring in the framework of an ongoing project supported by the SNSF (Swiss National Science Foundation) on “Afterimages of Revolution and War. Trauma- and Memoryscapes in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema”. He is author of the book “MnemoCine. Die Konstruktion des Gedächtnisses in der Erfahrung des Films” (Zürich/Berlin: Diaphanes 2016). His upcoming publication is “Im Warteraum der Filmgeschichte. Nachbilder der Revolution in Mohsen Makhmalbafs *Nāşer al-Dīn Shāh Āktor-e Sīnemā* (Iran, 1992) und *Salām Sīnemā* (Iran, 1995)” in: Agnes Hoffmann, Annette Kappeler (Ed.), *Theatrale Revolten*, Fink: München 2017.

Dr. Michelle Langford (University of New South Wales, Australia)

“Sohrab Shahid Saless and the German *Autorenfilm*”

When Sohrab Shahid Saless moved to Germany in late 1974, he found himself in the midst of one of the most vibrant new filmmaking movements in Europe. Led by the likes of Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Helma Sanders-Brahms and Volker Schlöndorff, the New German Cinema was reaching a high point, garnering recognition and prizes at film festivals around the world. Shahid Saless was no stranger to the power of festivals and prizes to boost the careers of innovative *auteurs* (or *autors* in German) in this period. Indeed, his first two feature films produced in Iran had received many accolades and awards earlier that year at the Berlin Film Festival. During his first few years in Germany, Shahid Saless continued his filmmaking career, but struggled to find himself 'at home' in Germany. In addition, he felt marginalised from the New German Cinema, even though the conditions that made that filmmaking movement possible also contributed greatly to Shahid Saless' own capacity to re-launch his career in this new environment. This paper will situate Shahid Saless within the political economy of the New German Cinema and consider how the emergence of a 'cultural' mode of production in Germany, which relied heavily on state subsidies and television co-productions, helped him not only to re-establish his career in exile, but to emerge as an important proponent of what the Germans called the *Autorenfilm*.

Dr. Michelle Langford is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies in the School of the Arts and Media at the UNSW, Sydney in Australia. Her research spans the cinemas of Iran and Germany. She is author of *Allegorical Images: Tableau, Time and Gesture in the Cinema of Werner Schroeter* (Intellect, 2006) and editor of *The Directory of World Cinema: Germany* (Intellect, 2012, 2013). Her work on Iranian cinema has appeared in leading film studies journals including *Camera Obscura*, *Screen* and she has published on Sohrab Shahid Saless in *Screening the Past*. She is currently completing a book titled *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance*.

Naomi DeCelles (University of California, USA)

“Mediating Displacement: Exile as Figured in *The Long Vacation of Lotte H. Eisner*”

While there has been much thoughtful analysis of the way filmmakers negotiate their own identity in exile, Sohrab Shahid Saless' documentary *The Long Vacation of Lotte H. Eisner* (1979) presents an unusual approach to the theory of a “cinema of exile” for at least two reasons: firstly, the film foregrounds its subject's experience of exile (not merely a refracted vision of the filmmaker's experience), and secondly, it emphasises the historiographical negotiations of identity-in-exile that take place in criticism, historical analysis and archival work. Born in 1896 to an upper middle class Jewish German family, Eisner received her PhD in art history in 1924, and worked as a journalist in Berlin during the Weimar Republic, participating in many of the period's key aesthetic and cultural debates about film. In 1933, Eisner fled Berlin, and after escaping internment at a prison camp for enemy aliens, she lived as a fugitive in unoccupied France until the end of the war, when she returned to Paris to work at the Cinémathèque Française as chief curator, translator and scholar. During this formative period, the Cinémathèque Française cannot be described without reference to the displacement, estrangement and trauma that attended its very conditions of possibility as a cultural arbiter. It was there that Eisner remade herself as an interpreter of a fleeting vision of German identity that was foreclosed by the rise of Nazism, and as a mentor to a transnational cohort of young filmmakers riding the New Wave movements in and beyond Europe, including Saless. In this way, the documentary is a mise en abyme of the cinema of exile, and an analysis of the film and its production context offers unique and rich potentialities, and coalesces with the questions around Panel 2, “Creative Exiles.”

Naomi DeCelles is currently completing her thesis – a critical re-evaluation of Lotte Eisner's work and its afterlife in the field of academic film studies – at the University of California, Santa Barbara. DeCelles received a BA in Comparative Literature from Stanford University in 2012, and an MA in Cinema and Media Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2014. DeCelles is a curatorial assistant and researcher at the Carsey-Wolf Center; her areas of interest include transnational European film history, aesthetic theory and archive studies.

Dr. Michael Mazière (University of Westminster, UK)

“CURATING THE NOMADIC - Chantal Akerman at Ambika P3”

Chantal Akerman was a Brussels-born and Paris based artist and filmmaker and one of the first to move from independent film-making to engage with the gallery space in the mid 1990s expanding her audience and addressing issues of installation and visual art. Akerman's work was in pursuit of a critical investigation into geography and identity, space and time, borders, itineraries, identity and states of mind. This presentation will examine the challenges of curating the first exhibition of Akerman's body of installation work in the UK including a new commission as its centrepiece. How to curate Akerman's work in a way that was accessible but also discursive and complex that challenged our accepted forms of exhibiting the moving image? How could the exhibition shed new light on the history of artist's film and video which is still fragmented and undocumented? And how to curate an exhibition which would engage the audience in a nomadic and open trajectory yet retain the specificity of each film and video work?

Dr. Michael Mazière is an artist and curator, currently Reader in Film and Video at the University of Westminster. His practice encompasses the production of artworks, the curation of exhibitions, lecturing and writing about artists' film and video. He is the co-founder and curator of Ambika P3 an experimental research space for international contemporary art whose recent moving image exhibitions include Anthony McCall (2011), David Hall (2012), Ilya & Emilia Kabakov (2013), Victor Burgin (2013), Elizabeth Ogilvie (2014), Chantal Akerman (2015) and Lindsay Seers (2017).

Nicolai S. Gütermann (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Film, History and Society , Austria)

“The Global Village of Babel”

One could argue that we live in the global village of Babel. [Neil MacGregor] The assimilation of the plurality of cultures and peoples by the global turnover of modern technological developments is an ongoing and accelerating process. But – much like with biological diversity – the diversity of tongues and stories, the “myriad voices of humanity” [Wade Davis] are our repertoire for dealing with the challenges that will confront us in the future. Our mnemonic institutions – museums, libraries and archives – represent a potent assembly of practices and processes. They decide on the surfacing or disappearance of utterances. They don’t reflect history, but produce and code it through procedures, systems of taxonomy, logics, and technologies. As epistemic formations, they set the rules of what exists within a culture to remain for the future. The institutions write themselves, partly unconsciously, into the gathered documents, or much so into their gaps. From here stories emerge, shaping historiography, while others disappear. [Michel Foucault]. We need humane curatorship and self-conscious storytelling — handverlesen — to ensure diversity and, through that, humanity altogether. Our pasts and futures compel varied and contradictory or opposing readings. They consist of fragments that can never reveal a uniform image but therefore an even richer multilayered collage of interpretations of human life. “My hope for the 21st [century] is that it will see the first fruits of the balance of stories among the world’s people [...] the process of ‘re-storying’ peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession.” [Chinua Achebe]. We are all storytellers. We are collectors and curators, artist, scholars and producers, –potential senders as much as receivers. And it is up to each of us to challenge the status quo. And to participate in the empathic writing and shaping of the future – and the institutions that inform it through our individual and collective stories.

Nicolai S. Gütermann is a storyteller. He works as an independent curator of film programs and film talks. He is an assistant at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Film, History and Society in Vienna. From 2011 to 2015 he was project leader for Small Gauge Films and the Digital Archive at The Austrian Film Museum. He studied Film and Media Studies at the University of Vienna and under Harun Farocki at the Academy of Fine Arts. He was co-organizer of the Home Movie Day, Vienna and gave talks at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies (IFK), INEDITS Films amateurs mémoires d’Europe conference and the »Cinema in the eye of the collector« conference in Montreal. »Le Chiffonnier, la Glaneuse and The Rest of Us: Collecting, Gleaning and Filming Future Memories«, with Carina Lesky was recently published in »Rethinking Density: Art, Culture, and Urban Practices«, SternbergPress 2017. He is currently preparing the program series »Changing Seasons • Beyond the Arab Spring«. As artist his works have been featured in international exhibitions and film festivals.

Pierre d’Alancaizez is a curator, and founding director of *waterside contemporary* in London. Alongside curating some forty exhibitions at *waterside* and offsite, d’Alancaizez has presented numerous public performance works, talks and screenings, and was publisher of a gallery magazine and a series of exhibition catalogues. d’Alancaizez has presented a programme focusing on engaged and determined art practices, particularly those pertaining to and stemming from the political periphery, working mostly with mid-career UK and European artists. He commissioned a number of significant works, including *The Unreliable Narrator*, a moving image installation by Mirza and Butler, or *Animal with a language* by Oreet Ashery. (<http://waterside-contemporary.com/>)

Dr. Azadeh Fatehrad is an artist and curator based at the Visual and Material Culture Research Centre, Kingston University London. She works primarily with still and moving image in the context of historical representation. Fatehrad has conducted diverse public programmes including exhibitions, screenings, conferences and workshops as part of her ongoing research, such as ‘Witness 1979’ at The Showroom, London, and the ‘Feminist Historiography’ at IASPIS, Stockholm, among others. Fatehrad has presented academic papers at a variety of conferences such as ‘The Captured Everyday Life: Akerman and the Politics of Representation’, After Chantal: An International Conference, Westminster School of Media, London; ‘Moving Pictures and Photoplays: New Perspectives in Silent Cinema’, York University, York; ‘The Communal Social and Inter-Political Stage of Curatorial Practice’, Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE; and ‘Double Agency: The Formation of Diaspora’, Ruskin School, Oxford; among others. Fatehrad is currently Cultural Programme Curator at Herbert Read Gallery and curator of Beyond the Frame in partnership with Iniva, UAL and the Liverpool Biennial. Fatehrad is co-founder of *Herstorographies: The Feminist Media Archive Research Network* in London. (www.azadehfatehrad.com)

Nikolaus Perneczky is a writer, researcher and curator. He is currently working on an AHRC-funded PhD project at Goldsmiths, University of London, on West African cinemas in the aftermath of independence. Perneczky has organised film programmes in London, Berlin and elsewhere, on Third Cinema, the Hollywood 80s and contemporary Chinese cinema, among others. He is co-editor of a volume on the afterlife of the Third Cinema (2013), and co-author of a book on contemporary US comedy between old and new media (2016).