

WHAT WE LEFT UNFINISHED

MARIAM GHANI & SANDRA SCHÄFER

Q & A for FORUM BERLINALE 2019

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

MG: I first encountered the unfinished films as a sort of irresistible rumor, 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. At a certain point, I realized that the process of making the film was mirroring a larger process happening in Afghanistan, whereby the fraught and unsettled histories of the Communist period were gradually being reassembled and resurfacing into public discourse. But for me the unfinished films were like a loose thread in history, and I'm always interested in the loose threads or frayed edges at the margins of history.

SaSch: 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's 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 Afghanistans that existed, or perhaps were only imagined, before the wars of the late 20th

century - the lost histories of Afghan modernism, liberalism, and intellectualism - and how that can open up other ways of imagining Afghanistan's present and future.

This process exerted a mutual influence in a few ways. Most directly, it led to the full-scale re-cataloguing and digitization project that Afghan Films has now undertaken. Two of the staff members trained during our 2011 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 these 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.

SaSch: 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. When I first began working with Afghan Films they were most interested in getting the digitization project started 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; and sometimes even to provide emergency tech support over WhatsApp.