

Letters to Naeem Mohaieman

Lara Khaldi



Naeem Mohaiemen, *United Red Army (The Young Man Was, Part 1)*, 2011. Film still.

Courtesy the artist.

Dear Naeem,

I'm glad that the last time we saw you we confessed that Yazan has been discreetly screening your film *United Red Army (The Young Man Was, Part 1)* [1] (2011) at the Beit Aneeseh Bar in Ramallah for the past two years.

Actually, did we tell you that the authorities recently closed the bar down? Over the past few years, the bar had become an empty signifier through which different political factions blamed for being evidence of the decadence in Ramallah; a place that played host to anti-Palestinian Authority activists; or even a refuge for corrupt Palestinian Authority politicians. In reality, though, it was just a place where we could talk, drink and listen to live music. For us cultural practitioners, it was the place to discuss our projects and our everyday politics. Of course, it had its problems, but this had more to do with class issues than anything else. There was a security company hired to stand by the doors like many other bars in Ramallah, and it was relatively pricy if you didn't have an NGO job or were not somehow tied to a fairly left wing middle class family, who passed on progressive lifestyles as inheritance to their offspring, but had lost their political agendas. Anyway, this scene was all host to your looping film.

*United Red Army (The Young Man Was, Part 1)* left an imprint on my memory. It was played on a loop on that flat screen behind the bar for nights on end. I can recall the images of the airplane in the small Dhaka airport (spelled Dacca back then): the red, green and faded white sentences beaming through the flat screen. While having an intermittent conversation with a friend, sipping a drink during one of those silences when you just stare into the distance, the film would play in the background, as the left-leaning middle class of Ramallah discussed everyday politics, art, NGO gossip. Enclosed and solitary in our enclave, we muffled our struggle within the context of corrupt leadership, international apathy and a hedonist young generation of Palestinians trying to 'figure it all out'.

All the while, the film coiled, reminding us of very familiar scenes from the 70s, when the Japanese Red Army was not only hijacking planes and landing in Dhaka, but also factions were joining the Palestinian guerrillas in Beirut and making films with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), like the *The Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War*, for example, made by Koji Wakamatsu and Masao Adachi in 1971.

Mostly, this history is romanticized by Palestinian returnees, with their glorious heroic stories of the 1960s and 1970s, whose struggle in exile has become a hegemonic history overshadowing narratives of the Palestinians that resisted from within the occupied territories. Or it is simply forgotten, although there are a few initiatives like the Subversive Film collective that have been researching Palestinian films from the 1960s through to the 1980s such as *The Fifth War* (1980) by Monica Maurer and Samir Nimr, or *Palestine in the Eye* (1977) by Mustafa Abu Ali, as well as many other films that were made in collaboration with international liberation movements and Palestinian political factions.<sup>[2]</sup> They have been publishing material on and around militant film critically by placing the films back into circulation whilst asking important questions about the

history of the militant image. They have also led discussions at events such as the Home Works Programme in Beirut in May 2013, as well as at Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah that same year.

But let me get back to your film.<sup>[3]</sup> The film in which your voiceover intervenes, completing parts of the airplane hijack story and pointing out shortcomings in the narrative, like the attempted military coup that happens while the hijacked plane is being negotiated. And the parts that have been left untold, where an act of resistance and solidarity overshadows a bloody military coup! There is something absolutely alienating in that event. When the hostages of one calamity become the witnesses to another.

Perhaps I should point out the event here. While the middleman A. G. Mahmud, Chief of the Air Force in Bangladesh, is negotiating from the watchtower with the Japanese Red Army spokesman, code named Dankesu, who's on the hijacked airplane perched on the Bangladeshi runway, an attempted coup takes place against the Bangladeshi government at that very airport. The Dhaka mediator tells the Red Army representative to shoot anyone who tries to attack the plane. Dankesu replies: 'I understand you have some internal problems'. The attempted coup that ensues turns into a massacre when the government suppresses within metres of the hijacked parked plane, whose hostages become the coup's only witnesses. This is the event within the event that is lost when the story is told. The photographs that are shown in your video are ones taken by the hostages on the plane, depicting the victims of the coup. But this is the very occurrence that also defines those times.

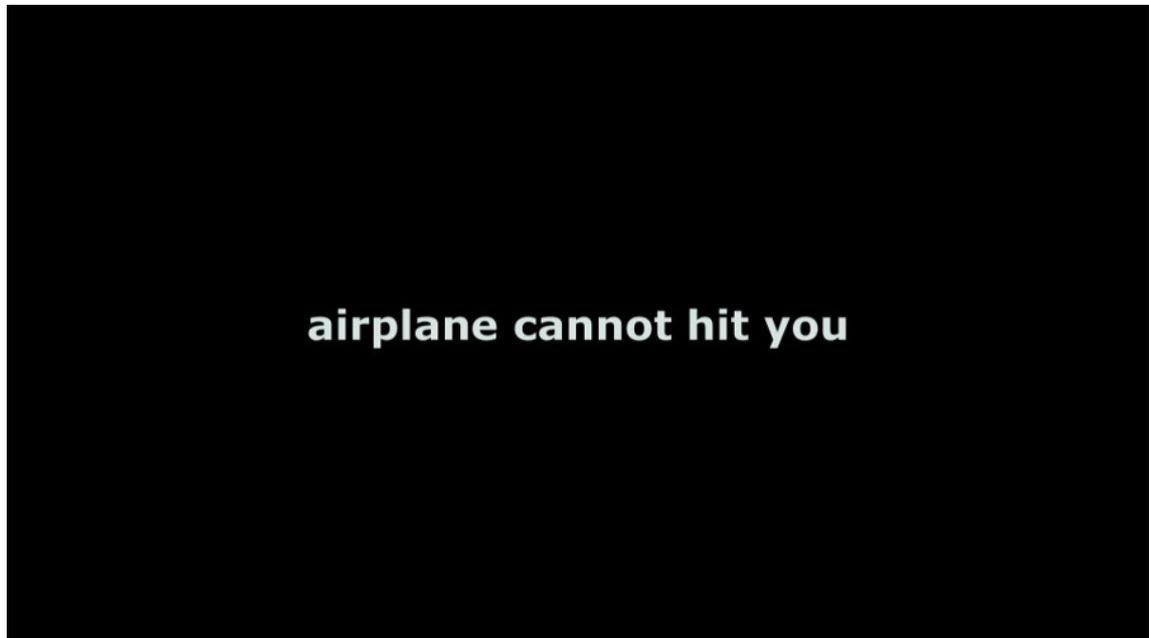
Perhaps this is where the question of solidarity comes in. The request by the Japanese Red Army to land in Dhaka was based on seeing in Bangladesh an ally of the political South-South relationship: two entities struggling for emancipation (albeit one that just won a struggle for independence and the other fighting against its government). It was based on a show of solidarity. But what your film questions is this naiveté or perhaps a misunderstanding or an act of realpolitik based on a Universalist idea of struggle. Calling on a newly decolonized state in turmoil with a new Islamic nationalist government to empathize with a radical leftist group from Japan is slightly myopic. What is interesting is that the solidarity seems to happen later, and not before, through a traumatic shared experience. It is incredible to trace in your film the relationship that Mahmoud and Dankesu develop over the five days in which these events occurred. Sleep deprived and under a mass of pressure, they both become interdependent – one can trace a sense of solidarity emerging between the two.

And at the same time, while those two events unfold in your film, we learn of a third event: a young boy of eight years is waiting for his favourite programme, 'The Zoo Gang', on Dhaka

television. He is very upset at the sudden live transmission that interrupts the regular broadcast of the Bangladeshi TV station and its pre-recorded programme, which turns out to be the result of the Japanese Embassy needing a live monitoring of the situation and providing the Dhaka TV station with the required equipment. This disruption in one kid's daily routine is simultaneously a lapse of memory because he did not understand what was going on. And so the film is a kind of restructuring of memory around this loss-the missing episodes of 'The Zoo Gang'-to comprehend in adulthood why they were missed. These stoppages might be the collective inheritance that we must address, not in pious earnestness, but rather hesitantly, doubtfully, and critical of the next international leftist waiting at the corner in constant disappointment.

Best from a surprisingly sunny day in Amsterdam,

L.



Naeem Mohaiemen, *United Red Army (The Young Man Was, Part 1)*, 2011. Film still.

Courtesy the artist.

Dear Naeem,

I just came back from a walk around the city – I needed to snap out of a sentimental mood. I went into the bookshop as I have been feeling an urge to read a novel all summer, but have really found the time nor the right novel. Today I found a few (of course because of other looming deadlines, like a thesis due next month!), and spent some time leafing through them. I eventually bought two: Jean Genet's *Prisoner of Love*, which oddly enough I've never read, and

Roberto Bolano's *The Savage Detectives*, a book I had been planning to read since Ruanne and Basel speak very fondly of it and have used it quite often in their recent series of works, *The Incidental Insurgents* (2012–2015). Whilst there, I also leafed through a book of collected letters of Italo Calvino. In one of the letters to a friend he says that a lot of what he has written in the letter is 'drivel'; that he produced it in order to distract himself from studying, and that in posterity people will think it cryptic and conflate it with a 'profundity in thought'. He writes that 'posterity is stupid'!<sup>[4]</sup> Is it? Is it not of absolute necessity that the revolutionary should have her/his actions read in posterity? Actually, maybe the Japanese Red Army knew that their actions would be understood only in posterity?

I watched the second part of the series, *Afsan's Long Day (The Young Man Was, Part 2)* (2014)<sup>[5]</sup> again last night. You ask such essential questions about our parents' generation and an inheritance that is difficult to harness but that must be articulated. The voiceover describes them as: 'always men, slightly broken, talking about the what-if moment of the last century', and I of course instantly think of my fathers' generation – who belonged to the anti-colonial radical socialist/communist struggle – men completely broken who never speak about the what-if moment of the last century, even though they not only lived it but produced it. The women speak about it though – they're perhaps bitter, but not broken, maybe because for the women part of the struggle is not over. They have not failed completely yet because their main struggle is not against state chauvinism but against chauvinism. It is this generational issue that you address so eloquently in your two films.

The opening scenes from *Afsan's Long Day (The Young Man Was, Part 2)* show youth demonstrating in Dhaka in recent years. It is this aspect of the work that made me mention the looping video playing in Beit Aneeseh in Ramallah in my last letter. There is this tensile, unspoken history that alienates us yet intimately connects us to our parents' struggle; it shows us that we need to at least understand in order to act or formulate a response. Perhaps the first act of solidarity needs to be with the generation of our parents and perhaps through that we can find a solidarity that binds us? We have a somewhat common portrait of slightly broken fathers and mothers. The young man's encounters with the armless and legless resistance fighter in your film reflects the difficulty of those encounters – how do we speak to a generation of impotent and hopeless figures that refuse to speak to us? They usually refuse to speak about their struggle. But it seems you found a way for them to speak that is more poetic, more about them today than their heroic past. Recently, I have understood why they refuse to speak. It is because they know it has not yet ended and to speak would mean to put an end to it and archive their struggle. They've seen it happen many places. It is an event that loops in every bar.

But to get back to your film, *Afsan's Long Day*, I have been trying to understand why you entangle the Baader-Meinhof Group into the intricacies of the struggle in Bangladesh. In the opening scenes there is image and video documentation from a demonstration in the streets of Dhaka. The voiceover narrates that on the same day two rallies took place, one for mostly left wing parties and the other for new Islamist groups. And while the young men look the same and chant more or less the same anti-imperialist slogans, the T-shirts are branded differently – some with Che Guevara prints, the others with Islamist anti-western slogans. The signs held are secular in one rally while they are clearly Islamist in the second. What is the difference between the two? The voice over wonders if it's only the icons!

Recently, while discussing the insanely brutal rise of ISIS, a friend said that this might be a perverse Frankenstein return of the failed anti-colonial project in the Arab world of the 1960s and 1970s. In the absence of any grassroots, anti-colonial political left in the Arab world due to years of tyranny; in the shadow of failed nation states built on neoliberal economies; and while living within the historical extension of Sykes-Picot borders; a desperate and misled generation emerges out of this gap of suppressed, postponed politics, resurrecting a dormant project. We all know what happens when projects are buried for too long: they resurrect as monsters that haunt us. But, my friend could be wrong about all of this, as after all, our fathers have responded and formed opinions and positions too quickly while events were unfolding. This could all change tomorrow, and in posterity could be read completely differently.

I'm drivelling again, sorry. Tomorrow I promise to write a more coherent letter...

Best from a gloomy tree-yellowing city,

L.

Dear Naeem,

I woke up this morning thinking of the Baader-Sartre meeting of 1974 that you chronicle in *Afsan's Long Day*. It reminded me of another meeting: that of Sartre and Edward Said in Paris a few years later, in 1979. When I found a diary entry about the encounter by Said in my early 20s I was reading both Sartre and Beauvoir veraciously – my 'Sartrean adolescence' was at its peak. Said<sup>[6]</sup> writes about a meeting that he was invited to in Paris along with other Arab, Israeli and French intellectuals, and how Sartre's views on the Palestinian struggle were troubling, even non-existent, and how he was influenced by his entourage. There is even an interesting twist if you look at those two meetings that have Sartre in common, the Sartre/Baader meeting in your film and Said/Sartre meeting from my youth. In your *Afsan's Long Day*, we see how

during the meeting between Sartre and Andreas Baader in prison (where Baader was held in West Germany), Baader, frail and incomprehensible due to the hunger strike, confronts Sartre in a manner that is difficult to decipher and whenever asked to explain a sentence he would seem confused. In the 1979 meeting with Said, it is Sartre who – when prodded by Said to give his stance after two days of silence - reads a pre-written statement the next day, which is described by Said as 'as informative as a Reuters dispatch', devoid of any position, and any mention of the Palestinians...[7]



Naeem Mohaiemen, *Afsan's Long Day (The Young Man Was, Part 2)*, 2014. Film still.

Courtesy the artist.

It was such an interesting moment, for all of us – Andreas Baader, Edward Said, and myself finally meeting the father figure, Sartre, someone who both informed and eased our adolescent angst and suddenly discovering that he was somewhat misguided when it came to certain issues... disenchanted, we all felt betrayed and grunted in rebellion. Baader was angry with Sartre for not supporting him fully, and it seems Sartre was aghast at Baader because his own political left had given birth to a mischievous, misled, violent child! Perhaps disappointment is somehow a form of freedom?

In *Afsan's Long Day (The Young Man Was, Part 2)* I find it gripping how you condense the events from the 1970s German collective hysteria to Joschka Fischer's downfall in realpolitik as he leads a campaign for intervention in Kosovo. His photographs as a young man engaged in street fighting juxtaposed with diplomatic smiles on his visits to see George Bush are tragic... humorously dark. All the events are present, each causing the other to spill over – not in a linear

chain but more like a domino effect, in which one poke could make it all collapse. The images from Kosovo with the music track playing over the scene is bewildering: very telling of an almost celebration of war and destruction for a new Eastern Europe to emerge into the welcoming lap of Western Europe. As long as it's away, and we're ok, burn old Bombay!

I just came back from a cigarette break. An old couple were sitting outside, and they gestured at me to move away because of the smoke. They said that I was smoking too intensely, that it's bad for me. I said my usual cranky, 'I know but I'll eventually die anyway'. They said, 'Yes but why die early? You'll be sorry'. Perhaps Joschka Fischer didn't want to die early; perhaps it is in old age that you are sorry for the divine rebellion of your youth, or for the intensity of youth itself...

Best,

L.



Naeem Mohaiemen, Afsan's Long Day (*The Young Man Was, Part 2*), 2014. Film still.

Courtesy the artist.

Dear Naeem,

I woke up this morning with a heavy heart, perhaps it's because of the rain, the grey weather, but this sometimes happens in the summer as well. Do you know that feeling? Like something bad is about to happen?

The ensuing and last parts of *Afsan's Long Day (The Young Man Was, Part 2)* about Suleman, the crippled former fighter, are heart wrenching. As your voice spills over the footage of the Bangladesh 1974 famine, 'always post-liberation disenchantment', I think to myself: it's not only disenchantment that post liberation brings forth, but also a paralysis very similar to Suleman's.

Afsan Chowdhury is introduced to us in the film as the disappointed intellectual, but when he speaks about his youth, something in his voice and eyes changes. The diary excerpts that you read from Afsan's texts over the lingering photo of a man holding an x-ray close to his chest showing a bullet lodged in his lungs is really a great portrayal of how the events of the 1970s are still very present.<sup>[8]</sup> Since the 1971 Independence War (an aftermath of British colonialism and partitions, where after nine months of deadly guerrilla fighting against Pakistani forces Bangladesh was formed), losing limb after limb is an extreme image of this disenchantment. And so is Afsan's story from the 1970s as told by the voiceover in the film. Afsan is suspected of being politically active because he's dishevelled and growing a beard, a Marxist by reputation, and when soldiers storm his house they think those red books with Marx's photo on the back cover in his library are by him, which jeopardizes his life. What a story! You know, I grew up in a house with red books. In the 1980s they used to say if it rained in Moscow the Palestinian communists held umbrellas in Ramallah! There's a whole generation of Natashas and Sachas in Palestine born in the 70s and early 80s. It was an adoration of an image as much as it was a means to a struggle... But I do understand the desolation this generation must suffer, I was raised by it. Where bullets are lodged somewhere between the heart and the lung, and where diabetes makes your hands shake constantly; where Suleman and Afsan both have to endure the fireworks of Independence Day...

I just happened upon an article written by Afsan Chowdhury this August during the massacres by the Israeli military in Gaza.<sup>[9]</sup> The text poses questions about why there might be a wide sympathy in Bangladesh with Palestinian victims in Gaza, while the Tuba Group Garments Workers' hunger strike goes unnoticed. Of course he is not blaming the Palestinian cause, and insists on solidarity, but wonders why such an important strike at home does not gain the same popular support. I would add another question: why would the Garment Workers' hunger strike in Bangladesh go unnoticed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories? Isn't it because of a growing nationalism on both sides? That, while the Palestinian cause is instrumentalized by governments to divert attention away from other related and similar issues at home, many Palestinians have also become blind to other struggles? That's why a film like yours needs to constantly flash in the background in a Ramallah bar.

I could go on, but perhaps my letter should stop here: the rain has stopped, there's a bit of sun,

and I should probably go out before it starts again.

Till soon,

L.

[1] *United Red Army (The Young Man Was, Part 1)*, 2011, is the first instalment in a long engagement exploring the international left especially in relation to South Asia. The first part pivots around the hijacking of JAL 472 by the Japanese Red Army that lands in Dhaka in 1977.

[2] Watch here: <https://vimeo.com/22209771>

[3] The film begins with scenes from the hijacking of flight JAL 472 leaving from Mumbai en route to Tokyo, but the Japanese Red Army forced JAL 472 to instead land in Dhaka. The film meticulously follows the negotiations between the hijackers and the Dhaka control tower through the original recordings of the conversations. Meanwhile an attempted coup de tat takes place in Dhaka adding to the complication of the on-going negotiations. The images of the events find their way to the film maker's living room who is then an eight year old boy waiting for his interrupted favourite TV show.

[4] Italo Calvino, 'Italo Calvino: Letters, 1941-1985', 2013, Princeton University Press.

[5] *Afsan's Long Day (The Young Man Was, Part 2)*, 2014 is a film interconnecting the international left with Bangladeshi political struggles through events surrounding public intellectuals and political activists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Joschka Fischer, Afsan Chowdhury, the Baader-Meinhof group and others.

[6] Edward Said, 'Diary,' *London Review of Books* 22.11 (2000): pp.42-43, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n11/edward-said/diary>.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Quoted in the film credits of *Afsan's Long Day (The Young Man Was, Part 2)* as: 'Afsan Chowdhury, *Conversations with Suleman and Dhaka in the Seventies*'.

[9] Afsan Chowdhury, 'Why do we care about Gaza but not our Tuba victims?' bdnews24 website, 04 August 2014, <http://opinion.bdnews24.com/2014/08/04/why-do-we-care-about-gaza-but-not-our-tuba-victims/>.

### **About the author**

#### **Lara Khaldi**

**Lara Khaldi** (born in Jerusalem) received her B.A in Archaeology and Art History in 2005. Lara curated the Jerusalem Show IV: *On/Off Language*, October, 2011. Khaldi has curated several video and film programmes in Cairo and Jerusalem. She was Assistant Director for programmes at the Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE from 2009 to 2011 and Co-edited Provisions I&II (Sharjah Biennial 10 catalogues). She currently lives between Beirut, Amman, and Jerusalem.