

ARTS GAZE

# The Art & Politics of Documentation



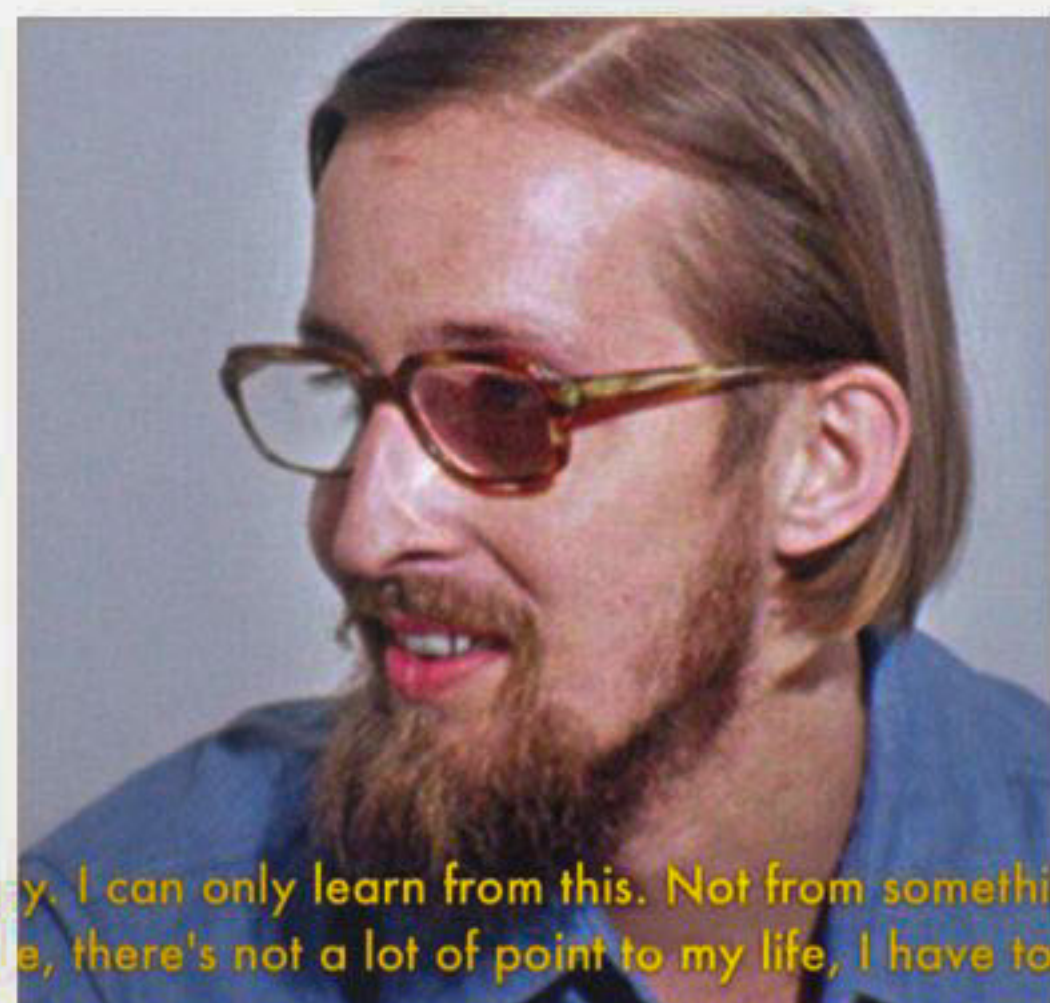
LUBNA MARIUM

For me, watching Naeem Mohaiemen's expository documentary, 'Last Man in Dhaka Central', was essentially a trip down memory lane, reliving a time of hope. We are the children of the 60s who grew up amidst the great cultural movement, protesting oppression on the streets, meeting surreptitiously in study groups where professors spread the word of 'revolution', while our houses hummed with the passionate discussions of leaders of the, then, under-ground communist parties. But, Mohaiemen, as he himself asserts, specializes on the 70s and its concomitant unraveling of hope. Yet, his film exudes the ethos of optimism.

Peter Custers, the protagonist of this film, is quintessentially a romantic, symbolizing faith amidst a time of chaos. A Dutch journalist, he was jailed in Bangladesh in December 1975, accused of belonging to an underground socialist group. The documentary is based on Mohaiemen's interview of Custers. "Interviewed shortly before his death last year, 2015, at age 66, Custers reflects positively on his youthful ambition, delving into both his dreams of Marxist revolution, and the physical and psychological abuse he suffered for it." His heart full of dreams of recreating the magic of the likes of Che Guevara, Custers arrived in Bangladesh and, at some point, met up with the infamous Col. Abu Taher, who on November 7, 1975 orchestrated a socialist uprising amongst the soldiers of the Bangladesh Army. Later, Taher was arrested, tried in a secret court martial and sentenced to death. Soon after, Custers was implicated of con-

niving with Taher, arrested too and essentially only through diplomatic negotiations gained his freedom.

The 82 min documentary 'Last Man in Dhaka Central', echoing Scottish film theorist Grierson's account, is a 'creative treatment of actuality'. Beginning with the strains of the late Lucky Akhond's 'Age jodijantambemomphirechaitam', the camera rolls over Custer's little refuge, in Netherlands, packed with books, many on Bangladesh and by Bangla writers and thinkers. The initial footage, itself, sets the stage for a man recounting his life in a romantic past. While introducing the



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y, I can only learn from this. Not from something else, there's not a lot of point to my life, I have to

screening of the film at the ULAB Auditorium, on June 18, 2016, Liberal Studies scholar Prof Azfar Hussain, quite rightly, observes that Mohaiemen uses the minimum of visual stimulation in an effort to capture the essence of the claustrophobia of Peter Custer's life - the life of a man immersed in the politics of Bangladesh, a land he was unable to interact with, unable to live in.

Almost all throughout the film voice-over narrations provide an explanatory conceptual framework, and images and sounds are used to illustrate and give life to the narra-

tions. The viewer is shown details of Custer's library, including books by Tagore and Nazrul; images of old copies of the 70's magazine 'Bichitra'; press clippings of Custer's journalistic writings on his interactions with the left movement of Bangladesh - including one with the 'red moulana', Bhashani; books by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire et al. Switching between the past and the present, the film is riveting for any student of history, in search of an understanding of the tumultuous political history of Bangladesh. On top of it all, Mohaiemen manages to add a few aesthetic twists to the cut-and-dried account, using music and finishing with interesting footage created with photographs of Peter Custer's childhood in a fairly affluent Dutch family.

Heavily scripted, Mohaiemen's film gives an overt perspective of the events through the eyes of the ambitious, but failed, left movement of the 70s. There can be no denying the archival value of the documentary. However, if any critique is to be made, it is merely an observation about the targeted audience of political documentaries like these. As materialist feminist Paula Rabinowitz points out, "Radical reportage and documentary films often provide the Left, or its various subcultures, with a self-understanding. It represents itself to itself". Though, personally having been thoroughly captivated with 'Last Man in Dhaka Central', as I left the auditorium, I wondered if it could reach beyond the niche viewer and provide a much required perspective of history outside the narratives of the establishment.

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*The author is a Dancer, Cultural Activist and Researcher.*

## The Potential 'Best Director' Contenders for Oscars

The 2016 Academy Awards has been accomplished, and with the winners relaxing and their fellow candidates drafting their next move, we can put the cinematic awards season to rest, for the time being. However, five months after the ceremony, looking to the future, a simple prediction for the next year's challengers can be strategized. With a varying degree of certainty, the picks for 2017's potential top ten 'Best Director' nominees have been mapped. Consider this a sort of 'before the awards season cheat sheet' to have in your back pocket.

1. Damien Chazelle (La La Land) - Continuing on with the hunch that this might be a huge Oscar juggernaut, it makes sense to have Chazelle this high up.
2. Martin Scorsese (Silence) - Would anyone argue with Scorsese potentially winning a second Academy Award?
3. Ang Lee (Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk) - On the flip side, it would certainly be something if Lee won a third time.
4. Ben Affleck (Live By Night) Possible 2016 release - Toying with the idea of Affleck's crime epic being in play this year, as the rumours suggest.
5. Kenneth Lonergan (Manchester by the



Sea) - Perhaps too small a choice to majorly be in contention, but it deserves to be.

6. Jeff Nichols (Loving) - A very safe upper echelon pick, Nichols got plenty of praise for this biopic at the Cannes Film Festival.
7. Nate Parker (The Birth of a Nation) - The Sundance Film Festival launched Parker pretty high up on this list when his passion project was met with acclaim.
8. Tom Ford (Nocturnal Animals) - The sophomore outing from Ford, plenty of eyes will be on this one.
9. Garth Davis (Lion) - The unknown director of the top tier, Davis certainly has a path to a nomination.
10. Derek Cianfrance (The Light Between Oceans) - This seems like such a prestige laden project that you have to expect Oscar voters to at least slightly fall in love with it.

That is what the 'Best Director' race could very well be made up of this year folks. Stay tuned for more similar predictions!

