

DAN S. WANG

## Two Meetings and a Funeral

*Two Meetings and a Funeral*, directed by Naeem Mohaiemen, 88 min., 2017

At one point in the documentary *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017, directed by Naeem Mohaiemen, Algerian university students amble through the frame, navigating present-day Constantine 1 University, a campus distinguished by a collection of structures designed by Brazilian communist architect Oscar Niemeyer, oblivious to the history that gave rise to them. The publisher and Frantz Fanon scholar Samia Zennadi is asked what remains in Algeria of the halcyon 1970s spirit. She says, “A lot of empty words, speech that sounds fake . . . it’s as if we missed a turn and are now stuck.” Aging modernist gems serving an apolitical student body borne of a disillusioned society perfectly encapsulate the fate of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Continuing filmmaker Naeem Mohaiemen’s attention to the failures of the global left, the story of the NAM as a two-fold loss—first as political manifestation and second as memory—is the subject of this remarkable three-channel film.

The amnesia is not a new problem. By the time my generation came of political age during the Reaganite retrenchment in the United States, the term “third world” conjured up little but images of the forever impoverished. “Third” was taken popularly to mean last—as in last place. Losers. This break in consciousness expressed itself when students of color voted to change the name of our campus group from the Third World Students Organization to the Multicultural Students Alliance. Caught in the mid-1980s hangover between the ebb of a tumultuous time and its eventual historicization, nobody explained to us that by abandoning the term we were accepting the distortions of media sensationalism. It went unspoken, but in hindsight I am certain that changing the name and, indirectly, the name of ourselves, was motivated partly by a wish to dissociate from an assumed abjectness.

When I finally learned that a “Third World” was a political project and an attitude, a “place” collectively produced through a process of mutual recognition, that it had nothing to do with a hierarchy of relative modernization, my worldview changed. Live Aid-type charity spectacles revealed themselves as celebrity-studded moral cleansings, a new type of mystification. Gone were my essentialist obsessions over what traits qualified a particular person for membership in a given identity group. A proper knowledge of history returns us to what earlier generations dealt with, i.e., the realism of contingencies. However wide the horizons of possibility might seem, they arrive bounded as our inherited predicament [Image 1].

Compensating for the ahistorical consciousness that afflicts contemporary political discourse, Mohaiemen builds his inquiry around a globe-hopping timeline, linking touchstone

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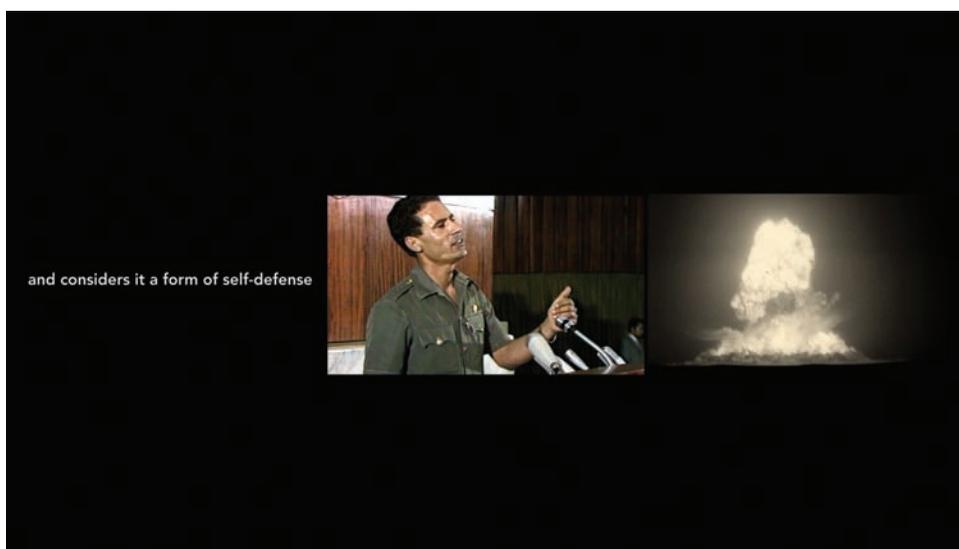


IMAGE 1. Installation view of *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) by Naeem Mohaiemen; courtesy the artist.

events from the launching of Sputnik in 1957 to the signing of the Camp David accords of 1979. Even when not entirely accurate, as with his misdating of Ronald Reagan's declaration that it is "morning in America" to the year 1981 (the campaign ad that made the expression famous did not air until 1984), the arc of interconnected historical events weighs heavily on a viewer. Compared to Mohaiemen's earlier *United Red Army (The Young Man Was, part I)* (2011), which drops crumbs of childhood memoir as a narrative trail for the reassessment of political scarring, and *Last Man in Dhaka Central (The Young Man Was, part III)* (2015), an intimate profile of the sociologist and accidental revolutionary Peter Custers, there are few personal angles in *Two Meetings*. Here it is global political history as a whole that stars.

Without the partisan mission of the earlier generation's Third Cinema, nor the paranoia of an Errol Morris film, nor the dramatic treatment of a biopic like Olivier Assayas's 2010 film/TV miniseries *Carlos* (which deals with the same insurgent era), this is political filmmaking of another sort. If anything, *Two Meetings* advances an aesthetics of sorrowful detachment closer to the collaged trauma-scapes of another South Asian documentarian, Amar Kanwar. But where Kanwar generates poignancy through voiceovers and poetic detail, here Mohaiemen steadies the emotions with screens of geometric flatness. He turns massive banks of disused United Nations index cabinets into pleasing grids. He visits the empty chambers of deliberation, the site of bygone geopolitical jockeying, and captures the silence seen as patterns of assembly hall seating. He uses the three channels to alternately chop perspective, interject text, and enlarge otherwise intimate movements into abstractions of curve and flow. The lines and shapes of visual regularity lend a counterpoint of elegant coolness to the political turbulence and contemporary conundrums that make the story.

Carrying forth the consciousness lit at the Bandung Conference in 1955 by the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation, the dozens of nations that organized themselves as



IMAGE 2. Still from *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) by Naeem Mohaiemen; courtesy the artist.

the NAM, many of them in the infancy of their independence and together comprising a global majority, opted out of client status in relation to the superpowers. Instead, they proclaimed themselves a “third world,” neither capitalist imperialist nor totalitarian communist. Having the political wisdom to foreground the search for a different path—and the belief that developmental narratives outside of client status were even possible—might have been the first, last, and best visionary moment for the NAM. As with most projects founded primarily upon a refusal, the way forward devolved rather markedly [Image 2].

The second of the titular meetings is a focal point, a convening of leaders at the fourth NAM summit in Algiers, Algeria, in 1973, delivered in historical documents that are both formally and politically ghostly. Two clips leap out, thrusting the viewer into “as it happens” moments previously lost to history. The first captures a pause in the conference due to a technical fail in the audio equipment, interrupting the necessary simultaneous translation. Instead of the easy humor with which we accept A/V glitches at conferences today, S. Rajaratnam, a cabinet-level leader of the young city-state of Singapore, takes the occasion to offer an impromptu lecture on a contradiction the NAM faces: namely, that the movement members cannot communicate with each other even at their own conference without technology invented, produced, and supplied by the superpowers. Never was it more clear that political independence does nothing to lessen material dependence.

The second notable clip is a statement delivered from the rostrum expressing support for distressed NAM member nation Chile and its president, Salvador Allende. Now often called “the Other 9/11,” the events of September 11, 1973, today are universally understood as the rollout of a CIA-backed fascist-corporate coup against a democratically elected socialist government. But at the time of the conference it was the unfolding news of the day,

outcome unknown. The crisis coincided with the opening of the proceedings that Allende was scheduled to attend. The statement includes wishes for success against the “international capitalists.” Just after the summit ended, under the duress of the turncoat Pinocheted military, Allende died by suicide—another updated detail missed by Mohaiemen, who captions Allende’s demise as an assassination.

Not that it matters. Beginning with Allende in absentia, the leaders figuring in the archival passages constitute a roster of eventual political elimination. Seen on screen in their charismatic prime are the subsequently assassinated (Anwar Sadat, Indira Gandhi, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman), the executed (Zulfikar Ali Bhutto), the unceremoniously murdered (Muammar Gaddafi), and the mysteriously dispatched (Yasser Arafat). The vexing question of historical memory gets conflated with the problem of decapitated leadership as a cause of political discontinuity. When visionary heads are neutralized and survivors are forced into the repressive cynicism of self-preservation, what does a later generation know but the vapors of disillusion?

To bridge the present and past, Mohaiemen features the live musings of the aforementioned Zennadi, Bangladeshi labor leader Zonayed Saki, and the Indian Marxist historian-journalist Vijay Prashad, all members of a planetary Gen X born just beyond the lived experience of the 1960s. Their screen moments are set across the three channels in compositions dictated by their unhurried musings on the disappointments and losses that constitute the preexisting conditions of their generation’s political awakening. Heirs to the earlier history, the commentators grapple with the shattered potential that provides both inspiration and caution for their current work, each acutely aware of the added challenge of renewing our capacity to dream.

Of the trio, it is Prashad who takes command of the screen. One memorable scene has him strolling through the La Coupole d’Alger, the squat, pod-like Niemeyer-designed indoor sports arena. Prashad, who over the course of his prolific writings connects the promise of Bandung with existing struggles for equality and peace across the Global South, takes in the cavernous space, gobsmacked by its monumental roundness. His impromptu reflections call attention to the immature aspirations that produced such gigantism. For many of the young nations, intoxicated by newfound independence, erecting architecturally significant structures was the preferred manner of expressing the confidence that flows from successfully throwing off colonial masters. But as Prashad remarks from within the empty arena, building to massive scale was always easier than maintaining the resulting facilities. He imagines that the arena “looked shabby from the day after it was built,” and wonders aloud about it resembling “a Mayan ruin” within another half century [Image 3].

Overshooting in ambition is but one of the variations on the theme of failure sketched in this film. Intra-movement dissensus also figures as geopolitical problems continue to arise. Member states split on issues such as the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the purported neutrality of Cuba. Then there is the historical shortcoming of gender inequity, on the levels of both leadership and lip service, so obvious to contemporary viewers. That the NAM’s project was propounded exclusively in masculinist nation-state terms renders the politics dated if not quaintly oppressive. A final surprising turn comes in the last quarter of the film, after the setting shifts to Dhaka, the site of the “funeral,” i.e., a planned 1979 NAM summit that never took place. Rather than a present-day NAM event (the

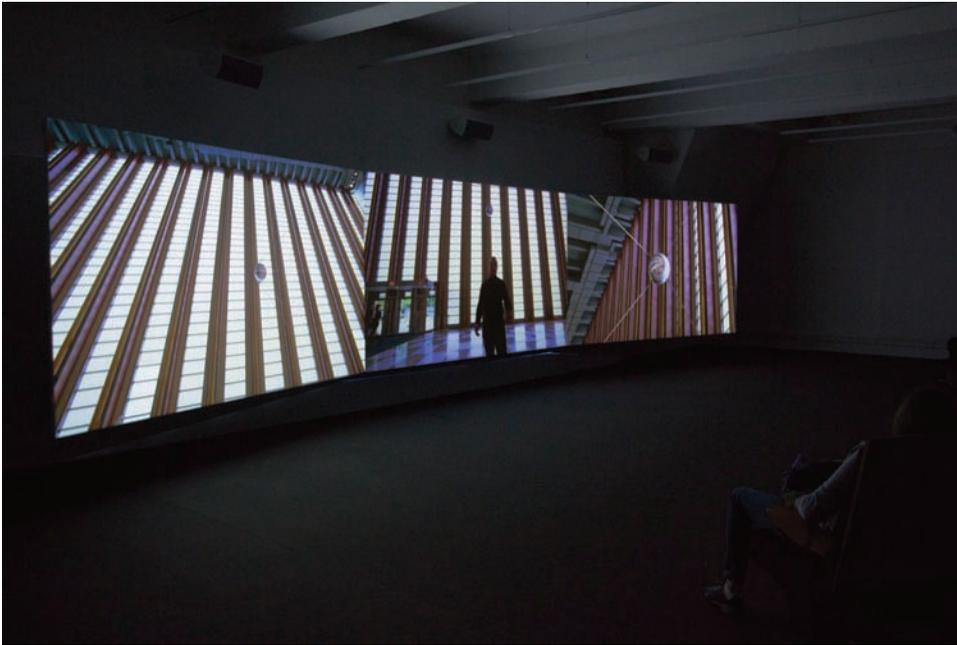


IMAGE 3. Installation view of *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) by Naeem Mohaiemen; courtesy the artist.

organization still exists in reduced form), the film concludes with a segment shot in a trade fair. The many Chinese faces roaming the fair make China visible for the first time, almost incidentally. Who in 1973 would have predicted the triumph of global capital being delivered via the world-shaking growth of China, then still a wounded giant preoccupied with its domestic convulsions, to the point of its being largely sidelined in the NAM?

Security personnel at the trade fair force Mohaiemen's crew to cut the recording. This being the most polished of his films notwithstanding, the unexpected suspension is a reminder that this precariously held history is in the hands of upstart auteurs like Mohaiemen. Moreover, the fair's no-camera rule serves as a metaphoric expression of all the losses addressed in this film, not the least of them being that today no zones outside the logic of capital exist. Visibility hardly matters since capital has crept into a nearly indistinguishable congruence with every detail of lived reality. That the minders impose a blindness nonetheless, presumably in order to protect business privacy—a far cry from the political threat of emergent worldwide solidarity five decades ago—suggests that the tolerated restrictions of everyday life have stripped expectations to a threshold at which there can be no disappointments. The film ends without suggesting a specific political path, but I take as its lasting evocation the idea that the power of disillusionment will *someday* attain its long-awaited exhaustion. ■

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