

**Not Another Exilic Movie:  
Alienation and the Everyday in Sohrab  
Shahid Saless's *Reifezeit* and *Tagebuch eines  
Liebenden*  
TRANSIT vol. 12, no. 1**

Kumars Salehi

Where does one place Sohrab Shahid Saless? Does one place him on a map? A timeline? A political spectrum? How does one place him, if he can be placed at all? When Shahid Saless has been acknowledged at all, he has generally been placed between nations, as an exilic filmmaker reduced to the interstices of Iran and Germany, whose films are to be interpreted according to autobiographical details. I claim that the most productive reading of two of Shahid Saless's first films in exile—*Reifezeit* (“Coming of Age,” 1975)<sup>1</sup> and *Tagebuch eines Liebenden* (“Diary of a Lover,” 1976)—derives not from his national or cultural background, but from his consistent political engagement and affinity for social critique. In conversation with other landmarks of his oeuvre, the nexus of the two films works to produce a portrait of their main character as symptomatic of the trauma at the intersection of gendered socialization and capitalist labor divisions in West Germany and beyond. If, in the context of his life and oeuvre, Shahid Saless's diptych reflects an exile's outsider perspective in his host country, it is not primarily through an engagement with the status of “other” conferred upon him by his displacement from the new locus of cultural meaning. The position of otherness that emerges from his formal and thematic preoccupations is that of the riven subject of alienation: the films confront the viewer with the otherness of people within themselves, the powerlessness and even sickness in the individual that is the structural byproduct of the contradictory demands of economic and social life. The picture of the filmmaker that emerges in our analysis as the portrait not just of a “socially conscious” artist, but of a committed leftist whose modernist rendering of politics through aesthetics reflects a sophisticated and substantively Marxist analysis of the relationship between human beings and an oppressive modernity of their own creation.

It must be stated at the outset that if Shahid Saless is hard to place, it is in part because he is hard to find: there are, as far as I can tell, no releases of his films in any format in Anglophone countries, and a search of the University of California libraries for German editions of his films similarly bears no fruit. Thus, it is understandable that

---

<sup>1</sup> While the title of the film has been translated more literally as “Time of Maturity” and appears under that title in various quotations, in my own analysis I have opted for the more idiomatic (and, in my view, more thematically apropos) translation “Coming of Age.”

Shahid Saless scholarship in English is skeletal. Even in Germany, however—the country where he made the bulk of his filmography—his work is largely accessible only through museum exhibitions like the month-long Shahid Saless retrospective that took place at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin starting May 31, 2016. “One could call Sohrab Shahid Saless a global citizen [*Weltbürger*] of cinema,” the DHM’s description of the film series opens, “The Iranian, born in 1944, studied in Vienna and Paris in the 1960s; shot a series of short films and two internationally celebrated feature films in his homeland; immigrated in 1975 to West Germany, where he made 13 films; and spent the last years of his life in the United States.”<sup>2</sup> As the webpage goes on to explain, the retrospective was shown in conjunction with, or as an accompaniment to, the exhibit *Immer bunter. Einwanderungsland Deutschland* (“Ever more colorful. Germany, immigrant nation”). The DHM’s write-up is indicative of the usual focus on geopolitical and ethnic categories—cultural identity, immigration, and transnationality—in the framing of Shahid Saless as a person and an artist. He was an Iranian, was educated in Europe, and made his greatest contribution (such as it has been recognized) to cinema and culture at large in Germany. In exhibiting Shahid Saless’s oeuvre in unprecedented breadth, the DHM is claiming responsibility for preserving, unearthing, or perhaps even establishing for the first time, his legacy. At the same time, Shahid Saless has significance for Germany in hindsight as an immigrant, a non-German whose very presence and activity in the Federal Republic testifies to the preexistence of Germany as an ‘immigrant nation.’

A year after Shahid Saless’s death in 1998, a film series put on by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), *Iranian Cinema: Tribute to Sohrab Shahid-Saless*, highlighted the director’s founding role in Iran’s New Film Group, an independent cooperative seeking to operate outside the restrictions of government censorship. Shahid Saless’s only two feature films produced in Iran, *A Simple Event* (1973) and *Still Life* (1974), were among the selections, which also included films by the other 15 founders. The series’ angle, down to the matter-of-fact title, plays up the extent to which Shahid Saless’s early films implicate him as a seminal figure in the history of the cooperative and, in turn, the entire Iranian art cinema tradition since then: as the BAMPFA promotional materials directly state, “*A Simple Event* had signalled the direction The New Film Group would take.”<sup>3</sup> The overwhelming tendency evident in the West’s reception of Shahid Saless’s work is to vacillate between these poles of a seminal Irannianness and an incomplete Germanness: the most recent retrospective, put on by the Goethe Institut London in conjunction with the Munich Film Museum from November, 2017 to January, 2018, was titled *Sohrab Shahid Saless: Exiles*, and did not include *A Simple Event*.<sup>4</sup> The limitations of a reading of Shahid Saless’s work in terms of an undecidable national character will come into sharp relief in the analysis of the diptych of *Coming of Age* and *Diary of a Lover*. The thematic and formal continuity I uncover here will also become evident in the affinities between his feature-length debut, *A Simple*

<sup>2</sup> “Sohrab Shahid Saless,” *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 1 May 2016. Translations from German are my own unless otherwise specified.

<sup>3</sup> “Iranian Cinema: Tribute to Sohrab Shahid-Saless,” *Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive*, 12 November 1999.

<sup>4</sup> “Event Series: Sohrab Shahid Saless: Exiles,” *Goethe Institut Vereinigtes Königreich*, 2017.

*Event*, and *Utopia* (1983), his West German magnum opus and a film of otherwise vastly different setting and construction.

*A Simple Event* has no discernible plot: it follows a young Iranian boy, Mohammad, through the repetitive drudgery of daily life in his village, where his performance in school is severely hindered by his job transporting his father's illegally caught fish from the river's edge to the family store. Sometimes he is forced to ditch his cargo to avoid being caught, for which he is then beaten by his father. We see multiple times that Mohammad doesn't speak when called upon, and the nerve-wracking tedium of this routine is driven home effectively when he is forced to stay after school to do remedial work while his teacher watches, wordlessly finishing his lunch, then picking his teeth, and then having a cigarette. The silence, rendered palpable by the absence of nondiegetic sound, is punctuated only by the quick glances back and forth between restless student and listless teacher. Mohammad has no friends, and his mother's death changes nothing about his routine or even his attitude. Always being given orders and being dismissed, he runs everywhere, with long takes, including frequent pans and tracking shots, following his silhouette against humble facades of nondescript buildings. The simple, straightforward visual compositions, infrequent cutting, and absence of music or character development gives the film an almost documentary quality. As in Shahid Saless's subsequent work, the film evokes a sort of Brechtian detachment, a wounded numbness, through which a critique of patriarchal and capitalist structures of domination is revealed in the protagonist's patterns of behavior.

Released a decade after *A Simple Event*, *Utopia* tells the story of five sex workers and their brutal and manipulative pimp, who undermines their potential solidarity by playing them off of each other. Coerced by economic necessity (two of the women are divorced and unable to survive on alimony), one woman after the other experiences humiliation and violation at the hands of the pimp, Heinz, who rapes and beats them, all the while denying them the possibility of financial independence by withholding pay until the bordello is profitable. The madam Renate plays the part of dutiful enforcer for Heinz, but as the momentary violations in these oppressive conditions compound, each woman is left feeling powerless and betrayed by the others. For example, when one of the women, Susi, expresses doubts about her ability to continue long-term, two others, Rosi and Monika, attempt to assuage her dissatisfaction by assuring her that she has nowhere else to go. When Susi is then beaten by Heinz for trying to leave, Rosi and Monika do not attempt to intervene, telling her, "Freshen up, wash your face. No one dies from that." "You're all cowards!" Susi cries. "You're animals for slaughter [*Schlachtvieh*]!"

In both *A Simple Event* and *Utopia*, the austere, matter-of-fact presentation of daily indignities evokes with a remarkable aesthetic fullness the paralyzing self-alienation of the subject: Shahid Saless's characters are riven by the violence they experience at their particular locations within structures of economic coercion and social inequality. Heinz is presented not as a diabolical or even remotely charismatic villain, but as a banal, pathetic conduit for violence. We see his dysfunction, his inefficiency, his incompetence; we see him confused, frustrated, staring into space, howling on the floor of his room clutching at his neck, which Renate explains is due to chronic pain from a knife wound. In *Utopia*, as throughout his career, Saless manifests the abstract oppression of the existing order concretely by making the viewer feel the tedium and tension of the quotidian.

It is only after Monika attempts suicide that the women band together, kill their pimp and break the cycle of violence and exploitation to which the spectator has borne witness over and over again. Yet even this final mutiny feels like drudgery: Heinz's death is long and wordless. The women wait for what seems like an eternity for him to pass out from two quick, silent stabs to the gut before finishing the job by bludgeoning him with kitchen furniture. *Utopia* ends on a note less of optimism than sheer relief: "We are free," one of them says. The last scene shows late Heinz's former employees, still in the same line of work, but now in business for themselves—confirming that the film is concerned less with moralizing against sex work than with highlighting, in a Marxist vein, the social and economic power relations undergirding the self-alienating trauma Shahid Saless's characters endure. This conception of trauma is consistent with Marx's formulation: "[P]rostitution is just a specific expression of the general prostitution of the worker, and because prostitution is a relationship that encompasses not only the prostitute [*die Prostituirte*, literally 'the prostituted'], but also he who prostitutes [*der Prostituirende*], whose baseness [*Niedertracht*] is even greater — thus the capitalist, etc. also falls into this category" (Marx 267). Undoubtedly, Marx's implication that the sex worker is still in some sense "base" carries an uncomfortable stigma. Shahid Saless, as I will explore further in *Coming of Age* and *Diary of a Lover*, opens himself up to a similar critique in his deterministic presentation of the social ills of sex work. It is on this point as much as any other that it is important to read Shahid Saless as a leftist filmmaker of the 1970s, whose systemic critique of all life under a capitalist division of labor registers the foundational role of gendered oppression in that division in both conscious and unconscious ways.

Ten years and a continent apart, *A Simple Event* and *Utopia* both reveal a marked concern for the way material and ideological conditions cultivate otherness within us. However, the most prominent scholarly treatment of Shahid Saless, Hamid Naficy's *An Accented Cinema*, does not emphasize the political commitments already apparent in the director's Persian-language features and discusses him instead as an exemplar of "German accented cinema" and "exilic" filmmaking. For Naficy, a body of cinema falls under the titular category of "accented" not on the basis of a quality inherent in a particular text, but because of the liminal national and cultural (including, as the metaphoric name suggests, linguistic) identifications of its author. *An Accented Cinema* divides these filmmakers into three rough categories: "exilic," "diasporic," and "ethnic" or "postcolonial," corresponding to the filmmakers' personal histories, the nature of their national and cultural affiliations, and their place in larger historical movements. For the purposes of this paper, I will only deal with the category of "external exiles," which Naficy defines in the following way:

[I]ndividuals or groups who voluntarily or involuntarily have left their country of origin and who maintain an ambivalent relationship with their previous and current places and cultures. Although they do not return to their homelands, they maintain an intense desire to do so—a desire that is projected in potent return narratives in their films.... The exiles' primary relationship, in short, is with their countries and cultures of origin and with the sight, sound, taste, and feel of an originary experience, of an elsewhere at all times. (Naficy 12)

Thus, according to Naficy, exile is a necessarily individual as opposed to a collective condition, although groups of people may be subject to it. In addition, exile marks its subjects with a fixation on the “homeland,” a yearning for a lost past that is no more and perhaps never was.

These are the terms in which Naficy discusses Shahid Saless, but Shahid Saless himself, as Naficy recounts, strongly disavowed the designation, and indeed any framing of his work that emphasized either the national or the transnational. “I do not belong to the Iranian diaspora cinema,” he remarked. “I must admit with extreme sadness that I have no nostalgic longing for Iran. When each morning I set foot outside my house, whether it was in Germany, France, Venice, or the Soviet Union—the places where I have lived and made films—I would feel at home, because I had no difficulties. I am essentially not a patriot” (200). There is, of course, no reason why we must necessarily take Shahid Saless at his word. Shahid Saless did, in fact, struggle to fund his work in West Germany. As he himself claims in an interview conducted in 1983, he never received “a penny” (Shahid Saless et al., “Itinerary” 174). from the government of the FRG, which, during his period of activity, provided substantial financial support for most other West German filmmakers. It was this state funding that made possible much of the modernist cinema now known as the New German Cinema, including the work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, and Wim Wenders. German film historian Lotte Eisner recounts that Herzog, a friend of Shahid Saless’s, “viewed Saless as a German filmmaker, because he works here [*bei uns arbeitet*], and if he should have difficulties, we would all be obligated to help him” (Zahedi, 61). The prepositional phrase “*bei uns*” in German connotes a guest-host relationship that is in fact indicative of a reality contrary to the wish Herzog expresses: that working in West Germany did not make Shahid Saless a German filmmaker in the eyes of the West German film industry, the West German government or West German society as a whole; that when the time came there was not enough financial help for him.

Naficy classifies Shahid Saless as an “exilic figure” precisely on the basis of his difficulties acquiring institutional backing for his projects, in both Iran and West Germany: “Shahid Saless’s profound homelessness and exile—despite his denial—comes through in his elegiacally dystopic films. [...] What more than anything else turned him into an exilic figure, causing his successive departures from previous homelands, was not national unbelonging but obstacles in his filmmaking path” (Naficy, 206). Here Naficy refers not only to the West German context, but also to the original catalyst for Shahid Saless’s departure from Iran. Indeed, while he claims that he “left the country [Iran] voluntarily” and received “encouragement by the regimes of both the Shah and Khomeini” (200) to return, Shahid Saless was, in effect, professionally exiled by the Shah’s government—it not only shut down the production of Saless’s third, unfinished feature film, *Quarantine* (Möller, 12), but eventually went so far as to publicly denounce him as a communist agent of the Soviet Union (Shahid Saless et al., “Itinerary” 164). Naficy hedges on the reason for classifying Shahid Saless as an exilic filmmaker, emphasizing, rather than ‘national unbelonging,’ his difficulties getting support for his work anywhere. Naficy is surely right to point to this as an exilic condition, or at least a condition of “accented” or non-dominant cultural actors. However, the utility of the category of “exilic” to describe his films is called into question in light of other potential ways of categorizing them. For example, the kernel of truth within Shahid Saless’s

suppression by the monarchy's censorship apparatus is that his films really were leftist films, concerned with the misery and struggles of ordinary people.

Christopher Gow offers a compelling rebuttal in his study of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places In-between*. "Saless's films are far too rich and complex to be viewed exclusively as exilic works, merely because they are directed by an Iranian émigré" (Gow 149), Gow argues, due in large part to the shared authorial signatures between Shahid Saless's first two films in Iran and his subsequent releases in West Germany. It is also clear from even a cursory look at his filmography that while the "exilic" works manifest "the director's own sense of despair and isolation in German society, [...] Saless's German films do not depict a particularly Iranian experience of displacement." Gow writes that even the two films that deal with "specifically cultural" displacement or placelessness "take not Iranian but *Turkish* experiences of displacement as their subject matter." Gow goes so far as to suggest that Naficy's inclusion of Shahid Saless in the Iranian diaspora cinema "seems somewhat ethically dubious" in light of the director's insistence to the contrary (150). This seems an excessive charge if, as I suggest, Shahid Saless is viewed as a politically savvy artist whose public statements surrounding radical films should be taken as polemical and not at face value. However much credence one affords the filmmaker's personal statements, it is very much the case that he fiercely rejected attempts to contextualize his artistic production in terms of national and transnational identity. In one interview, after expounding on his deep love and respect for Anton Chekhov, he is apparently put off when the interviewer abruptly changes the subject, asking if his films "reflect characteristics of Iranian culture," to which Saless replies, "My culture is Chekhov" (Shahid Saless et al., "Itinerary" 169). Gow argues that Shahid Saless should be read, like his idol Chekhov, as a "socially conscious" artist whose oeuvre represents a committed engagement with "the everyday," the subtle, recurring activities that reveal our inner lives and constitute our patterns of being.

Gow's chapter on Shahid Saless is broad ranging, including an overview of his career and analysis of several films. His most detailed reading is of the aforementioned *Coming of Age*, Shahid Saless's second film produced in the FRG. The thrust of Gow's argument, which remains largely formalist in its concerns, is that the film's narrative discourse is based on repetition of "the everyday," an austere sort of realism that creates the opportunity for what Shahid Saless calls "shock therapy" (166). This style soberly shows deviations from the norm that, in their very matter-of-factness, act as indices for deep, violent ruptures in human consciousness. It is perhaps Gow's ethically motivated fidelity to Shahid Saless's stated opinion that keeps him from drawing out the political implications (beyond the comparison with "socially conscious" Chekhov) of the stylistic patterns he identifies in *Coming of Age*. In contrast, I have suggested here that both it and *Diary of a Lover* present the minutiae and mundanity of the 'everyday' not as uncanny curios or existential driftwood, but as moments in a structural totality; the films contain a remarkably coherent theoretical indictment of capitalism and patriarchy.

Shahid Saless begins the story of the subject's alienation in *Coming of Age* through the eyes of Michael Bauer, an eight-year-old boy who comes to realize the stigma surrounding his mother's occupation as sex worker and her place in society. Michael's mother, who is not named in the credits but whom we may venture to call Ms. Bauer, is not afforded the solidarity that the sex workers of *Utopia* eventually achieve.

We see her almost exclusively from the limited perspective of a child, a narrative point of view all the more restricted due to the largely opaque nature of both Michael's interior monologue and the broader context of social life around him. He goes to school. He stares quietly at the dinner table while his mother vacantly performs household tasks, prepares for and recovers from her taxing workdays, and struggles to suppress all emotion for fear of falling to pieces. Michael, for his part, feels the tedium and deprivation of poverty acutely: every day after school, he sees another boy riding a bicycle in a circle, and develops a fixation on purchasing his own. He regularly buys groceries for Frau Beier, the elderly blind woman who lives in his apartment building, for a commission of 50 cents, but he also steals food and money from his classmates (including some chocolate from a female classmate named Monika) so he can add his lunch allowance to his savings. With his mother, he visits his grandfather, who berates her in front of Michael, questions him about her and all but spells out for him what his mother does for a living. In the final sequence, he returns home from school to find his mother performing oral sex on a client, which causes him to leave quietly and wait at the bottom of the stairs for the stranger to leave.

It is unclear throughout *Coming of Age* how aware Michael is of his mother's line of work, which she makes some effort to keep a secret from him. Nonetheless, he has at least a growing inkling, and while it isn't until the end of the film that he actually sees his mother with a client, he sees clearly and feels deeply the immense psychological and social impact that it has on his mother. The narrative's repetition of dissociations and humiliations, of fears unspoken and pressures absorbed, shows how his mother's social and economic context has imprinted itself on Michael: sometimes gradually and almost imperceptibly, other times in shocking flashes of revelation, like seeing his mother perform fellatio or hearing his grandfather calling her "a whore." In the former case, Michael's entrance into the apartment after school is an "everyday" occurrence that becomes ingrained in the viewer's consciousness over the course of the film, only to become the site of a "shock" at the end of the film when the entrance leads to an unexpected and disturbing encounter. In terms of the narrative structure, what appears to be an arbitrary series of similar actions over a course of days imparts a viscerally unnerving sense that the characters are not in control. Visually, doorways, windows and the right angles of drab apartment interiors enclose people within space with an almost claustrophobic regimentation, and it is only through a door, window, or mirror that the truth is glimpsed: we first see Ms. Bauer's face in a mirror, and it is in the doorway that she is struck by her pimp as Michael watches in the corner. The static shots and close-ups find isolated people and objects, locked in patterns of active dysfunction, while the few long shots are typically taken from a high angle, in which, for example, a schoolyard of faceless, anonymous peers with whom Michael never speaks can be seen bustling one second and then, at the sound of the bell, suddenly scattering and vanishing. From a classroom window several floors up, Michael witnesses the sinister rhythm of human movement according to the logic of modern society, yet again suggesting that Shahid Saless's is a systemic view and not a mere poetics of the quotidian. Accordingly, the only soundtrack of note is the constant ticking of the clock in the Bauer residence, which highlights the inexorable repetition of Ms. Bauer's daily, reproductive labor in raising a child alone and in poverty, and the roar of traffic and the sirens, a constant reminder of the penetration of the industrial metropolis into the inner sanctum of modern life.

These stylistic conventions and their social implications are not only operative in but come to an unsettling apogee in Shahid Saless's follow-up, *Diary of a Lover*. Michael, now a 30-year-old who works as a butcher at a grocery store, waits for his girlfriend Monika to return home. He complains of headaches, then shows up late for work and blames it on a stomachache. He witnesses his coworker being abused by a customer and refuses to come to her defense or comfort her; later, he asks her out on a date. He all but ignores his mother when she visits him, timid, concerned, inquisitive but wary that her son is not entirely well. He shaves. He paints his apartment. He calls Monika's workplace to ask where she is, but they, too, have not seen her since last he did. Later in the week, Monika's coworker comes to his apartment looking for her. So do the police. At the end of the film, just like the previous film, *Diary* soberly gives us a "shock" when the police return while Michael is out only to discover Monika's strangled corpse under the bed. Whether this Monika is the same Monika whose chocolate Michael stole as an eight-year-old or not, the narrative continuity between the two films, as well as the importance of reading them in conversation with each other, is stated explicitly by Shahid Saless himself. "For the child in *Time of Maturity*, the house is the setting in which he has created a world peopled with bicycle dreams," he says in an interview. "This first disillusionment is what builds the man or destroys him. In *Diary of a Lover* the character, who is a continuation of the one from *Time of Maturity* in his utter confusion, finds these four walls of the house to be the perimeter of his world. He's a prisoner escaped from society" (Shahid Saless et al., "This Isn't Pessimism" 179). Following these comments and Gow's critique of Naficy's exilic reading, I argue that Shahid Saless, with these two films, demonstrates the systemic view with which he tells his stories. These films are not exemplary of the author's émigré experience—neither an autobiographical drive nor a commitment to a sort of rudimentary identity politics is convincing as a motivation for the deeply political, psychological, and social argument that emerges from the nexus of *Coming of Age* and *Diary of a Lover*.

Shahid Saless's insistence that the boy in the first film is the man in the second opens up a vast sphere of political critique organized around the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy. If any axis of identification could reasonably be seen as a determining factor in the authorship of these films, then it is not Shahid Saless's experience of being an émigré or Middle Eastern in the West, but rather, his experience of being a man: problematic though this representational strategy may be, both films adopt the point of view of Michael in order to depict the development of his social identity—specifically, his gender identity. That Michael's psychological and social existence is defined largely in terms of his relationship to women is supported by the observation that every recurring character with whom Michael interacts—with the arguable exception of the police investigators at the end of *Diary*, who recur but do not interact with Michael onscreen more than once—is a woman. Through Michael's perspective (although not exclusively limited to his understanding), the audience can trace the process through which the exploitation and oppression of his mother creates an environment of deprivation and alienation that, over time, socializes Michael. Only the socialization we see in *Coming of Age* appears to manifest as its opposite, as dysfunction. And yet, the failure of socialization to create a healthy adult (instead giving rise to violent mental illness) appears, in the transition between the two films, as a structural consequence of a social order that functions in large part based on the objectification and denial of autonomy to

women. “In *Time of Maturity*, it’s the society that is called into question, on the plane of the process of men’s training. It’s the same as manufacturing bottles in a factory,” Shahid Saless explains in an interview, explicitly situating patriarchal conditioning in relation to capitalist economic production. Not unproblematically, he characterizes the mother’s profession as the determining factor in Michael’s development: “His mother is a prostitute who sells her body on a daily basis. No relationship exists between this mother and her child. When the child grows up, he becomes like the character in *Diary of a Lover*: a schizophrenic” (176). Although *Coming of Age* obviously lacks the redemptive political implication of *Utopia*’s narrative structure, which allows the protagonists to reclaim some measure of agency by killing their pimp and embarking on an enterprise of worker ownership, there is a consonant acknowledgement of the causal role of patriarchal violence and economic coercion in the traumatic impact of his mother’s alienation on Michael’s own: before the final sequence, Michael watches his mother get brutalized by a man we know is her pimp, watches her break down sobbing in the middle of her normal makeup routine, watches his grandfather humiliate her and tell her she is dead to him because of what she does. In this environment, his mother’s work does indeed render her unable to have a functional relationship with her son, and he, seeing his mother dehumanized over and over, stops identifying with her.

By the time he is the character in *Diary of a Lover*, he has fully distanced himself from his mother, here embodying the extreme of what Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, describes as the negative identification constitutive of patriarchal male development. Published in 1978—two years after the release of *Diary of a Lover*—Chodorow’s essay offers a psychoanalytically inflected sociology of gender divisions in capitalism that, most saliently for the purpose of this paper, situates the “manufacturing of the bottle” of masculinity within capitalist ideology without downplaying the priority of patriarchal oppression as a system interlocking with but distinct from the current economic system. Chodorow describes the process whereby cultures that assign women passive and secondary roles deride the characteristics they ascribe to femininity: “For children of both genders, mothers represent regression and lack of autonomy. A boy associates these issues with his gender identification as well” (Chodorow, 181). The nuclear family in capitalism, Chodorow argues, is structured around the absence of the father from the domestic sphere and the corresponding presence of the mother. Thus a masculine gender identity is an inherently negative identification, in the sense that it is defined in opposition to the mother: “Dependence on his mother, attachment to her, and identification with her represent that which is not masculine; a boy must reject dependence and deny attachment and identification. Masculine gender role training becomes much more rigid than feminine” (181). Notably, Chodorow invokes the same concept—‘training’—that Shahid Saless does in describing the process of socialization that Michael goes through as part of his *Reifezeit*, his *Coming of Age*. How, then, do we reconcile the fact that Chodorow (as well as Shahid Saless in his comments), is describing a general process of gender socialization, while the film shows an apparently anomalous case of mental illness?

The answer may be that not every product is able to perform its function to the desired extent, a possibility of any production process; Shahid Saless’s bottle of human subjectivity is fragile and easily misshapen. The mechanism, whatever the outcome in

terms of the individual's socially defined "success," has the same ideological consequences—regardless of the psychological health of the subject:

An increasingly father-absent, mother-involved family produces in men a personality that both corresponds to masculinity and male dominance as these are currently constituted in the sex-gender system, and fits appropriately with participation in capitalist relations of production. Men continue to enforce the sexual division of spheres as a defense against powerlessness in the labor market. Male denial of dependence and of attachment to women helps to guarantee both masculinity and performance in the world of work. The relative unavailability of the father and overavailability of the mother create negative definitions of masculinity and men's fear and resentment of women.... (190)

Michael, in *Diary*, is neither an efficient and reliable worker nor particularly masculine. Thus, the male worker's disavowal of the female subject position only "helps to guarantee," but does not in itself guarantee, the successful production of a male subjectivity at the intersection of capitalist and patriarchal structures. Instead, what we find in *Diary* is that this process has produced, in the form of Michael, not an exemplar of male dominance, but an anguished, unviable excess. The sequence of films links his dissociative mental illness (which Shahid Saless labels schizophrenia) to childhood emotional deprivation and trauma and depicts his nominal failure at both capitalist labor and patriarchal domination. And yet his dysfunction (and, as is revealed at the end, his violence) is only a pathetic exaggeration of the intended outcome of the manufacturing process that we first see in *Coming of Age*. Chodorow's seminal text shares in the reductive determinism that is overwhelmingly a feature and not a bug of the structuralist thinking we have already seen reflected in Shahid Saless's project: there are numerous hints throughout *Diary* that trace this dissociation back to an originary disassociation with his mother that is itself rooted in the trauma of her own economic and social powerlessness. That tracing the first causes of Michael's alienation requires an almost infinite regress to the coercive work conditions and gendered social exclusion his mother struggled with is all but spelled out in the scene towards the end of the film in which the mother, racked with concern for her son and haggard from years of being ignored by him, comes to his apartment for the last time. He reluctantly invites her to stay over for dinner—which entails her preparing meat—and his voice-over makes the film's most direct connection to *Coming of Age*: "As a child, my mother was always alien to me," he says as his mother sits across the small dinner table from him. "Now that we were eating together, it became clear to me that it would have made no difference to me if Frau Galinsky [his building superintendent] had been sitting there."

The dinner scene reminds us how much time has passed between the events of the two films. It's significant that both titles carry strong temporal implications—the German *Reifezeit* referring literally to the "time of maturation," and the *Tagebuch* to daily writing. Beginning with "Monday, June 21<sup>st</sup>," the various titles in handwritten font announce the date at various points in *Diary*. These dates (as well as, of course, the name of the film) unambiguously cast the frequent voice-over narration as a series of diary entries. The inexorable, violent march of commodified time is thus a central formal motif in both films, as is evident from the start as the first shot of each (besides the almost identically

hand-written title cards): an exterior shot of a drab apartment building and the uneasy sound of the ticking clock. As we cut to Michael's mother preparing for work in *Coming of Age*, we see Michael sleeping. It is a rare moment with her alone, shot through with ephemerality, a foreboding inevitability that her absence in a single-parent household will leave Michael alone. In *Diary*, the camera zooms in on the facade of Michael's similarly drab apartment building, and as we cut inside the ticking gives way to an alarm and a series of shots featuring inanimate objects such as fruit amid the clutter on the kitchen table. It is a banal still life we encounter before we first lay eyes on the film's human subject Michael preparing for work. As a child, he fetched Frau Beier's bratwurst for a modest commission, dreaming of a bicycle—that dream has given way to a zombified apathy as he woefully trudges to work, fearing the wrath of his boss if he arrives late yet again. The film's formal concern with a static Ms. Bauer is shown through a doorway as she prepares a sandwich for Michael. We see her put the sandwich down offscreen, but moments later we hear a jingling noise and the camera cuts to a close-up of a few coins she has just left beside the sandwich. Even as a boy, he can sense that time is money and feel the effects of his mother's labor time on her, even in the moments when they are together.

The first film depicts the intersection of gendered experience and economics through the repetition of two main plot points: Michael's grocery store runs for Frau Beier, which of course includes meat, and his mother's sex work, which is mainly depicted through her preparation of herself as a commodified body—as metaphorical meat for the grinder of male desire. The scenes with Frau Beier are charged with the tension of suspicion with which she regards Michael, men, and all people: her blindness and age make her particularly vulnerable, and she exercises caution with Michael, marking him out as a potential threat by putting a bell around his neck. Each version of the grocery delivery scene, with its rearticulation of the elderly woman's suspicions and subsequent precautions, occurs in almost complete silence. In the first instance, Michael leans back against the wall, and the ring of the bell around his neck makes Frau Beier jerk up and call out in a panic, asking what he is looking for and ordering him not to move. We only see close-ups and the small corner of Frau Beier's apartment by the door—the claustrophobic tension of the scenes can be attributed in part to the fact that we do not even get to see the parts of the apartment forbidden to Michael. The next day, he goes to her apartment unannounced, rings the doorbell and then hides to hear her frightened voice before quietly sneaking away. His act of aggression against Frau Beier is echoed in the next repetition of male aggression against his mother, namely when her pimp hits her: Again it is framed by the objectifying, isolating contours of a mirror that we are allowed to see Ms. Bauer's suffering as she touches a bruise on her face and cries while Michael pretends to be asleep. It is the same routine as before, only more wounded this time, the ticking of the clock reminding us these are just the excesses of the inexorable logic of capitalism.

In *Diary*, Michael is a butcher; his function in the economy of West Germany (again, the city is unspecified) is to prepare meat for the grinder. The traumatized, violently unstable butcher thus serves as the paradigmatic subject of patriarchal ideology, who acts out the brutality of his objectification of women unconsciously. The internal monologue made explicit in *Diary* by Michael's voice-over encourages the impression that his thoughts are, as far as the character himself is concerned, entirely earnest:

possible motivations for manipulation and fudging are less plausible, since the thoughts “written” in the diary are ostensibly not meant for anyone but Michael himself. At one point, Michael calls Monika’s workplace and asks for her. In the voice-over, he explains that a coworker told him they had not seen her since yesterday and that he had asked in response whether she could have left to visit her parents. This suggestion is, of course, rendered absurd in light of the revelation that he himself killed Monika, but it’s also difficult to see why he would have made it if he were aware that Monika is the piece of meat he slaughtered himself, rotting underneath his bed. This leaves only unconscious self-deception to explain the narrator’s unreliability, which, once established, throws the symbolic meaning of his confusing statements no less than that of his occupation into sharp relief. In *Utopia*, one of the sex workers calls the others “*Schlachtvieh*,” animals for slaughter, when they refuse to band together against their shared oppressor. Their muted subjectivity finds its grisly counterpart in *Diary of a Lover*, not only in the repressed, dysfunctional Michael but also in Monika, technically present yet decidedly absent, silenced by Michael’s pathological violence. The last shot of the film is a slow zoom-in towards Michael writing on a bed in a small room. He is dressed in all white and there is a window with bars, clearly establishing the setting as a mental institution. “I’ve been here since yesterday,” he narrates as he writes. “They brought me here. Today my mother came to visit. My mother says that this is a recreation home [*Erholungsheim*]. I asked the doctor to let me have paper and a pencil. I want to keep writing my diary. I hope my mother finds the meat in the fridge. Otherwise it’ll go bad. I forgot to tell her.” During the final voice-over, the frame continues to zoom in on Michael. At the end of this last entry, the film fades to white and the end credits, again handwritten, begin to roll. In his last words of the film, Michael refers to his mother and “the meat in the fridge.” Given Shahid Saless’s narrative strategy of presenting the viewer with recurring structural affinities to represent an alienation in the intersections of society, it ultimately misses the point to ask if Michael’s “meat in the fridge” is a conscious reference to Monika. As we have seen, Michael’s femicide is a sort of matricide by proxy conditioned by his own failed socialization into capitalist labor and into patriarchal masculinity. By then providing us only to a stream of consciousness utterly opaque to itself, Shahid Saless leaves us with a feeling of sickness that transcends the specificity of Michael or whatever illness afflicts him.

Together, Shahid Saless’s diptych and oeuvre at large point towards a legacy far more substantially radical than representations of unbelonging: It is not displacement from an originary state of belonging that haunts the story of Michael, but the experience of alienation as a mutilated subjectivity. It is, moreover, crucial to appreciate Shahid Saless not as a sentimental chronicler of the quotidian, but a politically sophisticated critic utilizing aural and visual regimentation of space and time in his account of the interactions between the systemic and the individual in the everyday. On the level of the plot, narrative repetition not only represents but manifests the manufacturing process of deprived and unfree people: Michael’s downward trajectory is a failure of his development as a man and as a worker, but it is his failure, and not just his misogynistic resentment and violence, that is a byproduct of capitalist labor and patriarchal gender divisions. Daily traumas and humiliations, while seemingly individual and momentary, are also structural and recurring, endemic not just to Iran or Germany, but to every

society in which the social fabric is held together by systems of production and reproduction that are as corrosive as they are coercive.

## Works Cited

- Chodorow, Nancy. "The Sexual Sociology of Adult Life." *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978. 173–190.
- "Event Series: Sohrab Shahid Saless: Exiles." *Goethe Institut Vereinigtes Königreich*. 2017.
- Gow, Christopher. *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places In-between: Reframing Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*. I.B. Tauris, 2011.
- "Iranian Cinema: Tribute to Sohrab Shahid-Saless." *Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive*. 12 November 1999.
- Marx, Karl. *Werke, Artikel, Entwürfe März 1843 bis August 1844*. Vol. 3, *Gesamtausgabe 1*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1982.
- Möller, Olaf. "Sohrab Shahid Saless." *Film Comment* 40.4 (2004): 12–13.
- Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Shahid Saless, Sohrab. *Reifezeit*. Provobis, 1975.
- . *Yek Etefagh-e Sadeh*. Central Film Office of the Iranian Ministry of Culture, 1974.
- . *Tagebuch eines Liebenden*. Provobis, 1977.
- . *Utopia*. Multimedia Gesellschaft für audiovisuelle Information mbH, 1983.
- Shahid Saless, Sohrab, Mamad Haghghat, and Bertrand Augst. "Itinerary, 1944-1983: Interviews with Sohrab Shahid Saless." Translated by Timothy S. Murphy. *Discourse* 21.1 (1999): 162–174.
- Shahid Saless, Sohrab, Mamad Haghghat, and Rahgozar. "This Isn't Pessimism: Interview with Sohrab Shahid Saless." Translated by Timothy S. Murphy. *Discourse* 21.1 (1999): 175-180.
- "Sohrab Shahid Saless." *Deutsches Historisches Museum*. 1 May 2016.
- Zahedi, Farschid Ali, ed. *Sohrab Shahid Saless: Bericht über ein abgekürztes Leben*. Oldenburg: Gegendruck, 1999.