

HAWAI'I COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES & THE HAWAII INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL PRESENT...

BRIDGING — FILM FOR THOUGHT — CULTURES



AIM HIGH IN CREATION!

MACONDO

SELF MADE

WE ARE THE GIANT

BRIDGING CULTURES

FILM FOR THOUGHT

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BRIDGING CULTURES | FINDING LIVES INSIDE STORIES

BOB BUSS Executive Director, Hawai'i Council for the Humanities

*Mental and physical reactions come and go
Like clouds in the empty sky.
Greed, anger, and folly appear and disappear
Like bubbles on the surface of the sea.
Yongjia Xuanjue, Song of Enlightenment*

How do we find the leisure and means to reflect deeply and act wisely, both in our private lives and as members of society, in the twenty-first century? While the surrounding politics are hardly simple or straightforward, the stories in *Film for Thought 2014* give us pause to feel and think about some of the places and people in our troubled contemporary world.

The threads of human lives inevitably come together to create a tapestry, whether we think of it as fate, God's will, or karma. The stories in these four films let us contemplate what would at first seem very alien worlds. Contrast them with the current events we have spent countless hours watching on television and reading in newspapers. Here, we observe a Chechen family rather than the crisis in Russian Chechnya, see the lives of activists rather than another Arab Spring protest, watch a "revolutionary comedy" from the Hermit Kingdom of North Korea, and hear a story of two women trapped in their Israeli and Palestinian worlds but forced to see the other side.

At their core, the humanities are about exploring human experience. Sometimes that means taking a step back to consider histories and cultures very different from our own. And sometimes we take a step forward in faith that the stories have something in common with our own.

A Buddhist teacher once said, it's just too easy to give up, to confine ourselves to living in the prison of *The Story of Me*. So let's take in a good movie instead.

FILM FOR THOUGHT | AN INTRODUCTION

CRAIG HOWES Director, Center for Biographical Research and Professor of English
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

The four films that make up this year's Film for Thought series take a wide variety of approaches to the incomprehensible. In each case, the director has selected a subject that seems intractable, and then finds a way to show how people manage to survive, and even engage with the most frustrating aspects of the environment they inhabit.

The two fictional films both take place in specific, highly-troubled places. In *Mocondo*, wherever the young Chechen boy looks, he clearly gets the message that there will never be a place for him in Austria. But as the film unfolds, so too does a muted sense of belonging within his immigrant community, despite the aimlessness, corruption, and despair he acutely recognizes in the projects. Such people, often with each other, make do, and their presence in Austria is a fact that will not conveniently evaporate.

In *Self Made*, the indignities and lurking violence of the Palestine-Israeli situation are vividly represented. The walls, the checkpoints, the radical economic disparities are all present. But by juxtaposing, then actually switching the two featured women's lives, what emerges is the undeniable, and sometimes outrageous, inter-dependency of these populations jammed together in a deeply divided landscape. Palestinian hands put the screws into the plastic bags of the hardware accompanying the upscale but cheap IKEA-like furniture that fills the Jewish artist's house. And the many encounters between Israelis and Palestinians at the daily checkpoints are tense and boring, with everyone involved trying to get back that evening to their families, lovers, or homes, despite the constant threat of conflict.

The two documentaries couldn't be more different in tone, but both focus on profoundly authoritarian governments that ignore dissent until they brutally repress it. What's particularly striking and intriguing about *Aim High in Creation!* is the premise that the uncaring steamroller government is Australia's, and to fight it, the filmmaker decides to take lessons from leading artists in the country that produces the most effective political films—North Korea. Irony really isn't the appropriate term here. The perspective gets twisted in so many different ways that audiences don't know whether to laugh, cry, yell, or walk out. I believe the best response is simply to let the film register—it sticks tenaciously to the memory.

As for *We Are The Giant*, it's hard to imagine how a film could be more appalling and inspiring at once. The conditions faced by the featured individuals are the stuff of despair. Their public lives are defined by slaughters, systematic state incarceration and torture, exile, violent and enraged responses by those victimized, and smaller and smaller spaces for any alternative—and that space often turns out to be a jail cell. But the conviction, the articulateness, the passion, and the restraint shown by those who dream of something different for their countries ultimately convince us that a world in which such dreams could disappear is impossible.

I hope you will be engaged and moved by one or more of these four remarkable films, and by the thoughtful essays you will find in this guide.

AIM HIGH 2014 IN CREATION!



TUESDAY NOVEMBER 4

6:00 PM DOL

WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 5

3:30 PM DOL

DIRECTOR	Anna Broinowski
SCREEN WRITER	Anna Broinowski
PRODUCERS	Lizzette Atkins, Anna Broinowski
CINEMATOGRAPHER	Nicola Daley, Geoffrey Simpson
CAST	Kathryn Beck, Anna Broinowski, Peter O'Brien, Susan Prior, Matt Zeremes

SYNOPSIS

AIM HIGH IN CREATION! is a revolutionary comedy about the cinematic genius of North Korea's late Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il, with a ground breaking experiment at its heart: a propaganda film, made according to the rules of his 1987 Manifesto The Cinema and Directing.

Determined to stop a new gas mine near her Sydney home, director Anna Broinowski goes to North Korea to learn from the masters of propaganda cinema. In a worldwide first, Pyongyang's top directors, composers, and movie stars take her to script rehearsals, Taekwondo stunt fights, group dances, drunken picnics, and a film shoot on a real-life captured US spy ship – to teach her Kim Jong Il's techniques.

Back in Sydney, Anna's fearless cast follow the North Koreans' instructions to produce a didactic socialist melodrama, full of song and kick-ass fights, in which "heroic workers" rise up to defeat the "evil, gas-fracking miners."

HAWAII PREMIERE

Australia 2014 • English, Korean with English Subtitles **96M**

THOUGHTS

GARY PAK

Professor of English

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA

That the director should aim high in his creative work means that he should set a high objective which would solve new and important problems in re-educating people and developing society in a unique way. . . . Film . . . is influenced by the director's experience and intentions, but they should be based strictly on life itself.

Kim Jong-il, *The Cinema and Directing*

"Is film more important than life?"

François Truffaut

Thirteen minutes into Australian director Anna Broinowski's *Aim High in Creation!* (2014), ostensibly about the process of creating a propaganda feature à la North Korean style that would address her concerns about the horrors of oil fracking in her Sydney suburb, she asks North Korean director, Pak Jong-ju, who directed over seventy films and allegedly was the late Kim Jong-il's favorite filmmaker, if he was aware of global climate change. The director looks at her in sober wonderment, and says to her and his cadre of actors, directors, and other members of the film elite who are listening in on their meeting, "Do you think we live on the moon? Haven't you seen the catchphrase, 'Serving our People'?"

Broinowski would be the first to admit that she knows nothing about North Korea, its people, or its culture. Why then would she seek help from a country that George W. Bush vilified as one of the so-called Axis of Evil? It's not as if she was a novice. After all, in 2007, Broinowski had directed the award-winning documentary, *Forbidden Lie\$*, that demonstrated her considerable skills as an investigative filmmaker.

Perhaps *Aim High* may have been more of a premise—the *raison d'être* or a charming deception for her to enter North Korea and make a film about her adventure that would attract commercial consideration. Perhaps her film was not trying to prevent the ecological ruin of her suburb—or whoever's suburb—but rather, to gain a stake in the wonderful industry of filmmaking, i.e., to make a name as an ingenious director. Perhaps then *Aim High* is about how a filmmaker prioritizes the art form over the subject itself, as Truffaut puts it in the form of a question—which he does not answer—in his *Jour Pour Nuit* [Day for Night].

Still, one cannot deny the bravado (and craftiness) of Broinowski in managing to gain the ultimate confidence from the North Korean government that allowed

her near free access to its clandestine studios, as shown in *Aim High*. That she was able to roam on the sets, and meet the elite of this highly restrictive film industry, are accomplishments that most documentarians can only dream about.

Whether her expedition into the heartland of the North Korean film industry to learn the carnivalesque ropes of propaganda film, as laid out in the treatise *The Cinema and Directing*, by Kim Jong-il, whom Broinowski refers to as “a cinematic genius,” results in a film that would actually help with her social cause at home, should therefore probably not be the focus. Instead, film, she seems to be saying in the staging of her fiction, is life itself.

Taking the film’s title from Kim Jong-il’s handbook, Broinowski seems to shape her film not as a tool of social action, but more as an example of the western capitalist dialectic of “film makes fame,” and vice-versa. “[R]e-educating people and developing society in a unique way” [Kim Jong-il] becomes “filming a unique story helps to develop a director’s career” [Broinowski].

In an interview given shortly after the release of the film, Broinowski said, “The North Koreans we encountered were hands down some of the warmest and friendliest people I’ve ever met. It was news to me that you could have fun with North Koreans. The minute I landed I looked around expecting to see brainwashed automations, and in fact Pyongyang is bizarrely beautiful.”

Perhaps, then, we need to look at this film’s objective effect rather than the filmmaker’s subjective intention. Coming from Australia, a nation that during the Korean War strafed and virtually flattened North Korea, Broinowski may have created a film that in addition to giving the outsider a lucid insight into North Korean cinema, presents an honest and everyday people who have been terribly misunderstood and demonized by the world’s powers-that-be.

MACONDO



SATURDAY NOVEMBER 1

6:30 PM DOL

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 9

1:00 PM KKM

DIRECTOR	Sudabeh Mortezaei
SCREENWRITER	Sudabeh Mortezaei
PRODUCER	Oliver Neumann
CINEMATOGRAPHER	Klemens Hufnagl
CAST	Aslan Elbiev, Kheda Gazieva, Ramasan Minkailov

SYNOPSIS

The Macondo of the title is the name of a small community of refugees and asylum seekers from Chechnya that exists on the outskirts of Vienna. It's here that Ramasan, his mother, and two younger sisters live, in a small flat whose living room is dominated by a kind of shrine to Ramasan's father, who died in the war a "hero," as Ramasan stubbornly insists. The boy, at eleven, is the "man" of the house, taking care of his sisters while his mother works, attending a local school and, as is the way of children of that age, taking naturally to German as his second language to the point that he often goes along as an interpreter to meetings between his mother and the authorities determining the family's status.

With uncertainty as to their future hovering, Ramasan tentatively befriends Isa, a world-weary new arrival who claims to have known his father in the war. But as soon as he suspects Isa is taking a romantic interest in his mother, Ramasan turns on him, choosing instead to spend time with some local Austrian boys who, without a family's asylum to jeopardize, tempt Ramasan into illegality. At the heart of MACONDO is the compelling story of one boy finding his way to becoming a man, and making the kind of moral decisions that will dictate the kind of man he will be.

—Indiewire

HAWAII PREMIERE

Austria 2014 • Chechen, German with English Subtitles **90M**

THOUGHTS

CHRISTINA GERHARDT

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UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MĀNOA

In *Macondo*, a coming of age story, Ramasan (Ramasan Minkailov), an eleven year old refugee from Chechnya, hovers at the edge between childhood and adolescence, living in the housing complex for refugees and asylum seekers that gives the film its title. Located in a gritty industrial neighborhood on the outskirts of Vienna, this social housing—where about two thousand refugees from over twenty countries, now predominantly from Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, have been living since the 1950s—was named after the fictitious town in Gabriel García Márquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by earlier waves of refugees who arrived during the 1970s.

Ramasan’s father died in the recent Chechen war. Together with his mother, Aminat (Kheda Gazieva), and his sisters, Ramasan seeks to find his way anew. His mother works, trying to make ends meet. And Ramasan and his two younger sisters (Rosa Minkailova and Iman Nasuhanowa) attend school. Ramasan takes quickly to the German language, serving as an interpreter for his mother at meetings with officials about their application for asylum, and translating government and school documents. He is at once her confidant, as she still grieves the loss of her husband, and her support. And while his younger sisters light-heartedly play and are mischievous as children would be, Ramasan reins them in as an adult would.

The fictional feature debut by documentary director Subadeh Mortezaei, who was born in Germany to Iranian parents and spent years between Iran and Vienna, conveys the story deftly, with compassion and suspense. Ramasan teeters not only between a playful, carefree childhood and a juvenile delinquent adolescence, but also between finding his footing in a new setting, despite the trauma he and his family have survived, and being led astray to petty crime, mostly out of boredom and competitive adolescent machismo.

Tension builds in the film as Isa (Aslan Elbiev), a Chechen who also served in the war and apparently knew Ramasan’s father, arrives, bearing a photo of the family that Ramasan’s father carried with him, and giving the boy his father’s watch as a gift. Ramasan’s questions about how his father died lead into murky terrain. And the mutual attraction between Isa and Ramasan’s mother only complicates the boy’s warring emotions—loyalty to his deceased father and his grieving mother, but

also his obvious need for a father (figure). An oedipal strain runs strongly through the narrative, and coming to terms with it forms part of the film's focus. Indeed, here, as in its engagement with boyish machismo, the film very much focuses not just on refugees between worlds, but also on masculinity, and adolescent masculinity in particular.

Filmed in a cinema verité style, *Macondo* bears traces of Mortezaei's work as a documentary director. Her previous films include *In the Bazaar of the Genders* (2010), which focuses on temporary marriage, also called lust marriage, which can last from sixty minutes to ninety-nine years, which is allowed for Shia Muslims, and which is practiced in Iran. The film is as much about this institution of marriage as it is about gender politics. Her debut documentary *Children of the Prophet* (2006) examined Shia mourning rituals for the Prophet Muhammed's son.

The *cinéma verité* style suits Mortezaei's work with nonprofessional actors. Although Mortezaei wrote a screenplay, which won an award at the Festival del Cinema Europeo, she did not share it with the actors, preferring that they improvise the dialogue of each scene. There is no soundtrack. Sound is sparse and on-screen. The opening sequence, with its use of handheld camera at the sight level of Ramasan and his sisters, sets the stage. Children of refugees from Africa, eastern Europe, and the Middle East mingle and play in the concrete courtyard enclosure of the housing unit.

This Austrian drama, which premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival, takes a new look at the situation of refugees in Europe, a topic that has again been put on the center of the world stage recently by ongoing demonstrations in Berlin, Germany; by a warning from Valerie Amos, the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, of an uptick in refugees in Europe as a result of the ongoing war in Syria; and by a report unleashed by Amnesty International about the increasing numbers of refugees dying in an attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Africa to Europe.

SELF MADE



SATURDAY NOVEMBER 8

6:30 PM DOL

DIRECTOR	Shira Geffen
SCREENWRITER	Shira Geffen
PRODUCERS	Moshe Edery, Leon Edery, David Mandil
CINEMATOGRAPHER	Ziv Berkovich
CAST	Sarah Adler, Samira Saraya, Na'ama Shoham

SYNOPSIS

Michal is a renowned Jerusalem artist. One morning, her bed breaks, she falls off and consequently loses her memory. She orders a new bed and discovers that a screw is missing. She complains to the furniture factory, leading to the dismissal of Nadine, a young Palestinian woman, who works packing screws in plastic bags.

This event is a point of no return for both women until their fates cross again at a border checkpoint. A soldier's mistake sends Michal to Nadine's refugee camp and Nadine to Michal's home in Jerusalem. The swap leads them to discover their hidden desires, inaccessible in their previous lives.

HAWAII PREMIERE

Israel 2014 • Arabic, Hebrew with English Subtitles **89M**

THOUGHTS

L. AYU SARASWATI

Associate Professor, Women's Studies

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MĀNOA

Self Made (the original title is *Boreg*, meaning *Screws*) is Shira Geffen's second film—her first movie, *Jellyfish* (2007), won the Camera d'Or award and was nominated for ten Israeli Film Academy awards. Brimming with rich colors and metaphors, *Self Made* is a visual treat and an amusement park for the mind. The film surely challenges the normative conventions of the violent ways in which the Israel-Palestine conflict has been represented in media, and may help shift our understanding of people's everyday lives and the possible peace process in the region. This postmodern film also succeeds in playing with the concept of reality by way of its cyclical temporality (the time sequence of the film is a maze in itself) and its unrealistic swapping of the two women protagonists' lives in the film.

The film begins when the first woman protagonist, Michal Kayam, a famous feminist Israeli artist, falls off her now broken bed, resulting first in her forgetting details about herself, and then in ordering a new bed from Etaca (a self-assembly, pseudo-IKEA furniture store). As she tries to put her bed together, she realizes she is missing a screw. She calls Etaca, and threatens to discredit Etaca during her next TV interview for their unprofessional customer service and carelessness in leaving out a screw. This of course happens after the German TV crew arrives earlier to interview her, and reminds her of who she is: one of the fifty most influential women in Israel.

This mini conflict marks the point where the audience is introduced to the second woman protagonist, Nadine Nasrallah—a Palestinian woman, a hip-hop lover, and the Etaca worker responsible for putting screws in plastic bags. When her supervisor angrily blames her for the missing screw (although later Michal finds it in her house), and questions her work permit, a few screws accidentally drop from Nadine's pocket, and she is immediately fired. Indeed, the screws often cause her problems—from being dismissed at work, to being stopped and interrogated at a checkpoint, an event that eventually leads to the swapping of the two characters, and their temporarily living each other's lives.

In the film, the screws are undeniably what hold the film's storyline together. Not only the literary and literal tool for making the meeting and swapping of these two protagonists happen, the screws are also Nadine's guide for finding her way home—she scatters them on her way to work and picks them up on her way back. Metaphorically, then, screws can be understood as representing the trivial things

and insignificant people who, when missing or refusing to conform to the norm, cause breakdowns in the infrastructure, the system that maintains the world's status quo. One can even argue that Nadine herself is the screw, as she "remember[s] what people forget" and "collect[s] what people lost."

Another major component of the film is "the inside and outside" metaphor. This metaphor recurs throughout: when the chef reveals his secret for cooking delicious crabs (playing music to melt their insides), when Nadine's lover tells her that she is "dancing on the outside but dead inside," and when Michal remarks that we must "go inside in order to get something out." The film is indeed obsessed with the idea of exposing/melting the inside to reach the outside.

The switching of the protagonists' lives is another manifestation of this obsession. It is when Michal forgets who she is and lives her life as Nadine, and vice versa, that she can access the parts of her inside (her memories, dreams, and desires) that have not been accessible to her otherwise (or that she has no desire to access before) and in turn spark a crisis in her identity (the outside). Although the film's view of the inside as distinct from the outside can be critiqued easily (is there ever an inside that is completely separated from the outside to begin with?), it allows us to question the predicament of one's identity and its relationship to memory. What happens to one's identity when memory (in the case of Michal) is lost or mixed-up with someone else's? Can memory/identity/reality ever be completely one's own?

Going back full circle like the film to the beginning of this essay, I re-post my earlier questions, but with a twist. How does the ending help us comprehend the everydayness of people's lives in Israel/Palestine and their investments in establishing peace there? And, to borrow the film's metaphor, how does this insight/inside further our understanding of what can happen on the outside? What missing "screws," if we were to trace them, would lead us to peace?

WE ARE THE GIANT



SUNDAY NOVEMBER 2

3:00 PM DOL

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 4

2:00 PM DOL

SATURDAY NOVEMBER 8

5:45 PM KKM

DIRECTOR Greg Barker
PRODUCERS Greg Barker, John Battsek, Julie Goldman
CINEMATOGRAPHER Muhammad Hamdy, Frank-Peter Lehmann

SYNOPSIS

Since late 2010, more than a dozen nations have experienced popular uprisings that have collectively been called the Arab Spring. Protests, buoyed by predominantly young participants and social-media organizing, have exposed repression and led to regime changes. What does it mean to take part in a collective action that has the potential to unseat dictators and bring previously undreamt-of freedoms to a people?

Director Greg Barker (MANHUNT) explores this question through a series of insightful activist portraits: Osama describes how his 21-year-old, Virginia-raised son, Muhannad, fought against Gaddafi's forces in Benghazi. Ghassan and Motaz remain committed to peaceful resistance even as Syria descends into ever-more-hopeless violence. Sisters Maryam and Zainab become pivotal opposition figures while their father suffers in a Bahrain prison. These stories, underscored by echoes from past resistance leaders—ranging from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela to Aung San Suu Kyi—illustrate what drives revolutionaries and reveal the sacrifices they must make to pursue their causes.

— Sundance

HAWAII PREMIERE

United Kingdom, United States 2014 • English, Arabic with English Subtitles **90M**

THOUGHTS

JONATHAN K. OSORIO

Professor of Hawaiian Studies, Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MĀNOA

The first thing that struck me watching this documentary is the certainty with which the six principal individuals understand their role and their commitment to their people's struggles with oligarchy and tyranny in their own countries. That certainty is jarring when one considers that their commitment to a peaceful process has to mediate or confront the violence that has now saturated the movement in Syria, and infiltrates every other struggle as well.

This film deals less with the specific issues that have given rise to the Arab Spring in Libya, Syria, and Bahrain, and much more with how Osama and Muḥannad Ben-Sadik, Motaz Murad, Ghassan Yassin, and Maryam and Zainab Al Khawaja have been forced to confront the violence from both their oppressive governments and from their own comrades. To watch and hear how each of them has made personal moral and practical accommodations to that violence is to be reminded of the strength of their dedication, and of how much of what will transpire in their countries will depend on what happens to them.

Every story in this film draws us into an aloha, an admiration for these political activists, and not only because their opposition is peaceful. Both Osama Ben-Sadik and his son took part in the violent overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, and Osama is not merely unapologetic. He insists that Muḥannad's own violent death was inspirational because he had wanted nothing but to help his country, and was so clear about why he needed to take up arms against the regime. But with equal clarity and dedication, the other principals in this film have steadfastly denied themselves the option of violence.

Of course I drew parallels with Hawai'i and with the United States, just as the filmmaker does, through short clips reminding us of how differently political change has taken place in Russia, India, Burma, and in the Civil Rights era of the United States. I thought specifically about Hawai'i, and how Kānaka Maoli and many other activists have conducted peaceful, determined, and occasionally very effective protests for over forty years. Only in very rare instances have those protests resulted in the sacrifice or imprisonment of our leaders and members. Whether our peaceful movements are sustainable because of the personality and ideologies of our cause, or because the US can afford to be more benign in dealing with us, are possibly both true and interconnected.

But this much I am sure of. Most Americans and Hawaiians are not comfortable contemplating violent confrontation with our own government. In fact, Americans

seem uncomfortable even with making the kinds of political analyses and choices that could affect their society and their future. A recent Harvard Institute of Politics poll found that only 23% of voters age 18 to 29 are certain that they will actually vote in November, apparently gripped by a cynicism over political gridlock and unequal distributions of wealth. (<http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Spring-2014-HarvardIOP-Survey>) The likelihood that less than a quarter of eligible Americans in the age ranges of Muhannad Ben-Sadik, Motaz Murad, Ghassan Yassin, and Maryam and Zainab Al Khawaja will vote in the 2014 elections, not because they are satisfied, but because they have no faith in their own government, demonstrates why America has no credible leadership, and therefore no business running the world.

And that is what I finally took from this documentary. It was hope and faith in their own visions and capacities that fueled the young people of the Arab Spring, and where their revolutions take them can hardly be facilitated, or even understood, by Americans. These are serious and dedicated men and women, now deceased or made old before their time. They fight their own governments with courageous words and defiant spirits, and they challenge their own comrades to abjure the gun and the virtuous rage of retaliation, even as those comrades, and they themselves, are shot, imprisoned, and tortured. They fight, among other things, for the right to vote—such irony!—but emotionally, they deal with the ethics of waging peace in places spattered with the blood of their kinsmen.

Americans should resist measuring their own preoccupations with Obama Care, inflation, or energy independence against the kinds of calculations and ideals that drive the young people we find in this film. And while activists in Hawai'i can draw some sustenance from their example and their reflections, we must be careful not to equate our struggle with theirs. We have fought injustice and desecration of our āina. These splendid young men and women have had to fight both injustice and their own descent into brutality. Giants indeed.

[illegible]

Special Thanks

BOB BUSS & HAWAII COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES

