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"Politics Is Theatre": On Narimane Mari's *Bloody Beans* (*Loubia Hamra*) (2014)

by *Alistair Cartwright*   *May 29, 2014*

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"It's not blood, it's red" – Jean-Luc Godard

A few weeks ago Abdelaziz Bouteflika was re-elected for a fourth time as president of Algeria with 81.5% of the vote. Most of the opposition boycotted the proceedings, widely regarded as a stickup by the Algerian "deep state" – the unelected veterans of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale). The official line was that Bouteflika ended the 1990s civil war against the Islamists. With violence and instability still threatening in the wake of the Arab Spring, thank God he was back.

Writing on the occasion, Robert Fisk put it like this: "In Algeria, politics is theatre, blood is real." Add this to Jean-Luc Godard's comment on film violence and you get close to the paradox of Narimane Mari's first feature, *Bloody Beans* (*Loubia Hamra*).

"It's not blood, it's red." What Godard meant, I think, is that in an age of

spectacularised violence, cinema has a role to play in giving us back the true, sensible violence of bodies and plastic facts. A radical cinema must try to re-sensitise our experience of images of violence and, more generally, reconnect the image to a world of sensation and sensibility.

In Godard's case, this process of re-sensitisation involved splitting the image along two axes: fact and fiction, the actual and the virtual. For example, in *Les Carabiniers* (1963), the hapless soldiers are clearly only playing at war, and yet their violence strikes us all the more for its comic ineptitude. The brutality of the boy-soldier, whose proportions give him the awkwardness of a Chico Marx or Stan Laurel – as he pokes under a woman's skirt with the barrel of his rifle, or blindfolds a partisan crying "frères, frères!" – stays with us more than a thousand Hollywood explosions. The film is like a "mockumentary" in which the participants get carried away; all of a sudden their actions slip into the realm of the real. Fact and fiction split apart, but then rejoin each other to create a new reality effect. Which is more real, the cloth on the partisan's face, lifted slightly by her breaths or, intercut with this, the little grey stains of bombs falling from planes on the archive footage? They are, as philosopher Gilles Deleuze put it, distinct and yet indiscernible. This is different from Brechtian alienation, where the whole point is to hold the two components at a distance: to make the audience aware of the *fact* that they are watching a *fiction*. It is also different from postmodern skepticism, in which fact and fiction are collapsed into one (see Jean Baudrillard on media spectacle and the first Gulf War, for example).

Bloody Beans (Trailer @ CPH:DOX 2013)

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The street kids in Narimane Mari's *Bloody Beans* are also only "playing" at war. The film is a sort of historical re-enactment partly inspired by the 50th anniversary of Algeria's War of Independence (1954-62). There is zero pretense to period setting, and Mari embraces the anachronism of getting her young amateurs to pretend that Algeria is still under occupation, acting out the narrative on popular beaches and contemporary streets. Fed up with their diet of beans, beans, and yet more "bloody beans," the kids decide to rob a French barracks for food. Along the way they rescue a woman from her abusive husband, debate the role of girls in the group, encounter a quasi-fascist French captain, and finally end up kidnapping a young private, who they take back to the beach along with their spoils.

This threadbare story contains the whole war in embryonic form. It gives the kids just enough material to run with, to play with. The film begins with one of the kids belly-flopping in the tide water. It's an exemplary gesture: half slap, half splash; half delight, half pain. *Wake up, pay attention, but don't look so serious*, it seems to say. The next thing we know, the kids are rolling around on the beach, letting off great farts worthy of an old man in a Fellini movie. So the plan is hatched. Later, the kids will transform themselves into a pack of feral cats using tape and cardboard, and then dance a
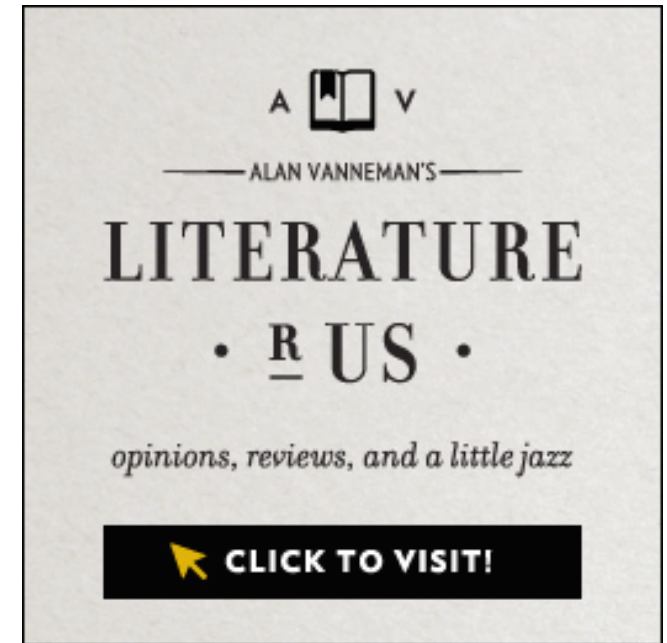
victory dance with balloons and lighting gels for a headdress.

In my interview with her, director Mari compares this ceaseless invention to cinema's own way of composing reality: the kids' use of tape and scissors is a kind of "mise-en-scène." Like them, her camera has an extraordinary capacity for play. Alternating long-shots and close-ups without regard for classical framing, the style might remind us of documentary (casual, hand-held, etc.). But in fact it goes far beyond these alternative conventions. The camera is *with* the kids – with their laughter, fear, rage, and joy.

Director Narimane Mari

The group of 20-odd children present an interesting challenge for a filmmaker. Too numerous to stand as individual characters, they are too few to constitute a proper crowd. They are what the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire called "a crowd that doesn't know how to crowd"; in other words, the postcolonial multitude in a process of formation. It is a fundamentally hybrid subject. Having shaken off the colonist, it declares a kind of year zero in history, and a ground zero on the land: from today, we are a free people, today our country is born again. But, of course, the nation is born into a world system rife with inequalities, in large part determined by the old imperial powers. Moreover, the people itself is hybrid. Its victory cannot be denied; the dates of independence have been chiselled on the rock face of history and cannot, should not, be erased. But the people cannot return to a pre-colonial moment. This recognition is not a matter of adding a note of grace to critique – a neutral, purely technical, hence civilizational, hence transcendent appreciation of the gifts of the West: railroads, canals, factories, bureaucracies, etc. All these are documents of barbarity, and no

amount of utility can change that. Rather, the hybrid subject is precisely that: a subject, not an object. The subject's makeup has been fundamentally altered by the experience of colonialism. Sown with internal divisions and traumatised by brutality, yes, but also fired by resistance; a resistance that ionises the dust of everyday life, such that to survive, to live, is to resist, and vice versa.

"This strange crowd which does not mingle …"

"This strange crowd which does not mingle, this crowd that can so easily disengage itself, make off, slip away … this crowd so perfectly alone beneath the sun" is given visual form by Narimane Mari. At times, her camera is so overwhelmed by movement and imaginative possibility that it seems drunk. But this is not a subjective camera, in the sense of embodying the gaze of an individual psyche. Rather, it is an objective camera in the sense of being guided by a collective spirit. The kids tug at each other, scream, kiss, disband, coalesce – and the camera follows. A circle of faces passes in giddy procession, as if the camera were being spun around in a dance. Smiles and frowns loom into view like a lover moving closer for a kiss; someone bursts into laughter, another bursts into song. The mobile camera wrests plastic facts from the world, glimpses of fear and snatches of delight. These facts could be: a belly flop, a smile, a laugh, a song.

As with Godard, there is a certain literalism that comes as a corollary of plasticity, a certain factuality that accompanies the playing of games. Hence the man who beats his wife wears a pig mask, and the French captain's obscenities, hurled at the young private caught sleeping on duty, echo on the soundtrack in a series of hisses, gurgles, snarls, and barks – as well they might do for these children who have momentarily transformed themselves into cats. Again "it's not blood, it's red."

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"Reawakened dormant forces of rebellion and desire"

At one level, the election of the street kids as the main protagonist is a poetic-realist strategy designed to shift attention to the margins of society and at the same time reawaken dormant forces of rebellion and desire. The adult world is turned upside down, and the film's perspective is resolutely bottom-up. Mari cites Jean Vigo's *Zero for Conduct* as her biggest influence. *Bloody Beans* has the same freshness and rawness as Vigo's 1933 film, which follows a group of boarding school boys who rebel against their tyrannical director.

Like *Zero for Conduct,* it's tempting to conclude that *Bloody Beans* is a *sui generis* work of cinematic poetry. Both films are guided by the clairvoyance of childhood. But in the context of Algeria, this image of youth has a special significance. Following

independence, Algeria experienced a population explosion that was extreme even among rapidly modernising countries. From 1965 to 1985, the population doubled. Today, 46% of the population is under the age of 25. During the 1980s, free market "reforms" led to a surge in youth unemployment, reaching levels of 25%. Millions of young people saw their dreams of freedom and prosperity evaporate. Doing their best to avoid the overcrowded homes of their parents, they gathered on street corners and in cafés. They were nicknamed *hittistes*, wall-leaners.

The problem has not gone away. As the population continues to grow, more young people emerge to fill the ranks of the disenfranchised. Just to maintain unemployment at its current level, it would be necessary to create 400,000 jobs a year.

Algerian youth "holding the wall up" – the *hittistes*

The *hittistes* remain a source of anxiety for the government, and for good reason. They were the ones who launched the revolt of 1988, sometimes known as the first Arab Spring. A raft of democratic concessions were won out of that struggle, including independent trade unions and a (relatively) free press. But in a turn of events scarily similar to the situation in Egypt today, when it became clear that democratisation had

opened the path toward an overhaul of the "deep state" itself, the army stepped in, terminating the 1991 elections with Algeria's second coup in as many generations. Supporters of the Islamic Salvation Front, which had emerged with a massive majority, were forced underground and took up arms. By the end of the 1990s they were defeated by a campaign of repression and sectarian provocation. Whole villages were massacred in terrorist attacks that many suspected to be the work of state militias. And in the cities a familiar pattern of guerrilla fighting emerged once again. The children of the revolution were fighting the same war that their parents had fought against the French, this time against a state embedded in Algerian society itself.

The kids in *Bloody Beans* are not merely a conduit to the irrational; rather, they are the bad dream of the elite (whether the French *colons* or the post-1965 regime). *Bloody Beans* therefore refers to three moments in the history of Algeria: the War of Independence, the 1988 revolt, and the present. The kids play three roles at the same time – that of their grandparents, their parents, and themselves. The film is a complex loop. Multiplied, distended, and superimposed, it forms a spiral. As Mari says, the film is "as unstable and unbalanced as its subject," representing "a country which has lived on a moving pedestal for a very long time." This looping of history is a way of working through collective memory: "To evolve is to explain and make visible the facts. To accept them in order to envisage new pathways, or even, simply, to advance having put down certain heavy pieces of baggage so that others can rummage through them."

Hence the third role of the kids: not merely a vessel of the irrational; not even, simply, the untimely element of history; but equally, the pedagogic subject. That which "explains," "makes visible" and "rummages through."

The best comparison I can think of is Peter Watkins'
six-hour epic, *La Commune*. Watkins shot the film in
an abandoned factory on the outskirts of Paris using
an amateur cast of working-class residents, including
many migrants from North Africa. The deliberate
anachronism of a TV crew following the events
means that the film plays out on two levels: 1871 and
2000, the communards and the residents of the 21st-
century *banlieues*. During the course of the film the
actors undergo a process of radicalisation. Their
inbuilt lethargy, and likewise ours, is broken down.
By the final scene, when the communards are lined
up for the firing squad, our horror is not just visceral
but flows from a desire to *save* these people, these brothers and sisters of ours. Of
course they are shot and the film comes to an end. What we are left with is not
catharsis but the conviction that if we don't act, "not even the dead will be safe."[1] The
spark of hope in the past must be kept alive, and if it isn't our breath which sustains it,
then whose, then what?

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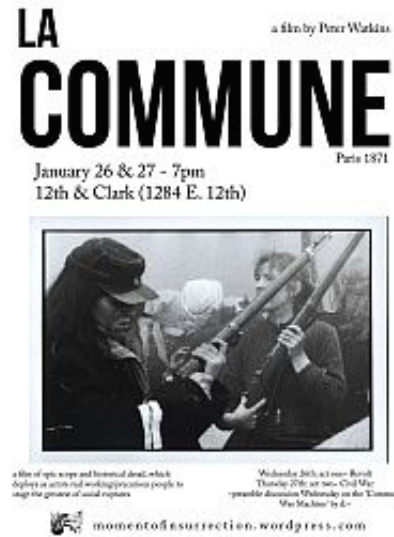
These are questions about time and history, about how one moment maps onto
another, or how the same moment splits in two, like a fork in the road, or else reaches
across the expanse of history to rejoin its cousins in the past. The splitting and
rejoining of fact and fiction is really a splitting and rejoining of time. The kids embody
this. They live between two modes of being. On the one hand, idleness, boredom,
frustration – idle play and the fundamental experience of just *waiting*. On the other
hand, sudden and decisive action.

There is a slippage between the two: a moment of frustration gets converted into
action, or, the other way round, action becomes play, becomes "aimless." For example,
the decision to rob the barracks begins as a joke. It is an extension of the kids' fooling
around on the beach, carrying the same tone as their various boasts and insults. And

after the deed itself, the kids start to dance and shadow-box each other, as if the thought of danger was forgotten.

With the kidnapped soldier

The film ends with precisely one of these moments poised between idleness and decision. The kids are back on the beach with the kidnapped soldier. It is very late and the sky is turning pink with the first ray of dawn. They sit on the sand fiddling with their armour – balloons, lighting gels, cardboard vests, and lances. At one moment they appear to be interrogating the young soldier, a minute later inciting him to play. What is this moment of purposeful idleness, this twilight hour, relaxed but alert, sleepless but dreaming? Mari calls it "a moment of fraternisation, where we give time to time … as in the euphoria that lingers the day after a great celebration." The kids wait on the beach all through the night, but we are not sure what they are waiting for. It is as if they hope to trick the day into never arriving, to outlast the moon and keep the embers of the night alive a little longer.

Here the beach becomes the degree zero of the kids' activity/being. It is a place where anything and nothing can happen. Whereas a tourist's beach contains a thousand

regimented signs carried over from the workplace – towels laid down like cubicles in an office, a lifeguard's seat raised up like a foreman's booth, etc. – here the beach is empty. It is an extension of the street rather than the workplace. An extension in the sense of an edge, a limit. The beach in *Bloody Beans* is a "non-place" akin to a disused warehouse, parking lot, or airfield. In the context of Algeria, the beach also has a symbolic function, in that it is, quite literally, the edge of the land. It contains all the dreams of escape cherished by disenfranchised youth, including dreams of the metropole; dreams of a white ship that would carry us away from this god-forsaken country.

"The beach contains all the dreams of escape cherished by disenfranchised youth."

But instead of a ship promising deliverance, it is a jet roaring overhead that arrives as the *deus ex machina* at the end of *Bloody Beans*. It could be one of the jets used to bomb villages during the War of Independence (collective punishment for the guerrilla war). When we hear that noise, we get a feeling similar to watching Peter Watkins' 21st-century communards lined up in front of the firing squad. Our stomach falls through the floor, and we wish more than anything that we could stoke the embers of the night and make the dawn burn a little longer.

This would be a wonderful ending. The HD camera renders the sunrise practically

sublime (as in, there is more beauty here than we can possibly absorb). But Mari doesn't end the film there. She adds a coda that returns to the moment of suspension. The film cuts to a series of close-ups of the kids floating in the sea. Daytime now and the sun has regained its intensity. As their faces bob close to the surface, they recite a poem by Antonin Artaud: "The little silver fish / Rose up from ocean depths / To reply as I had wished." And the question posed to them: "Is it better to be than to obey?" Part nursery rhyme, part metaphysical tract, part existential lament, Artaud's poem would seem to offer only bleak answers. If Being is the infinite – "that which disintegrates / like the body of the sea" – then what happens to those who choose to be rather than to obey? Must they destroy themselves, or be destroyed? "God is the only one who does not obey," all the others "suffer neither living nor dead." What happens to the kids, do they sink to the bottom of the ocean like the fish? Perhaps, but there is always the possibility that a survivor will hear the refrain of the poem and go and wake the rest from their coma.

So it is with the last frame of *Bloody Beans*: staring into the bright blue sea, watching the kids squinting up at the bright blue sky, we wonder, are we in heaven, and if so, how did we get here?

Note: This review is based partly on an interview with the director.

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." [↵]

— *Alistair Cartwright*

Alistair Cartwright's articles have appeared in *New Left Project*, *3AM* magazine and the "nocturnal" *Nyx*. He writes reviews and features for *Counterfire* and edits *Different Skies*, a new online publication for experimental prose and creative non-fiction. He works for Stop the War Coalition, where he is a campaign organiser and commissioning editor.