

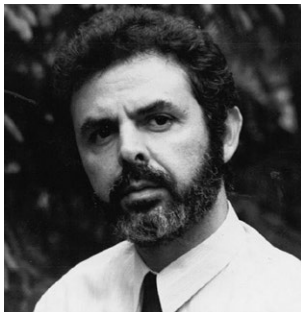
Film Retrospective

سهراب شهيد ثالث

**SOHRAB  
SHAHID SALESS:  
EXILES**

4 November 2017 -  
19 January 2018

# SOHRAB SHAHID SALESS – VISIONARY OF THE EVERYDAY



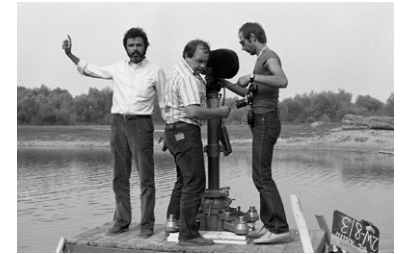
The work of Iranian filmmaker Sohrab Shahid Saless (1944 – 1998) belongs to no single place or canon, it is a continent of its own – a ‘central massif’ of cinema, as one critic notes. His slow-paced films tell simple stories almost without words, in meditative but searing images that register the smallest of details. His close attention to the routines and repetitions of everyday life is mirrored in the rhythmic flow of his films and in the clockwork-precision play of sound and silence. Shahid Saless observes the world with an unflinching eye. His films are alert to cruelty and injustice but they never judge. They are devoid of sentimentality but deeply humanist, stubbornly concrete yet universally resonant, austere but poetic – they make us see anew.

A visionary and truly transnational artist, Shahid Saless remained a solitary figure throughout his life. Still his films have left an indelible mark – among his contemporary cinematic descendants are the likes of Abbas Kiarostami and Romuald Karmakar. After studying film in Vienna and Paris, Shahid Saless returned to his native Iran to direct a series of ethnographic shorts commissioned

by the Ministry of Culture, paving the way for his first two feature films, now considered milestones of the Iranian New Wave, which centred on the marginal lives of the downtrodden and disenfranchised.

In 1974, facing increasing government pressure and censorship, Shahid Saless left for West Germany where his Iranian films had garnered prizes (among them a Silver Bear for *Still Life*) and critical acclaim. He was to stay there for twenty years – a ‘long vacation’ as he liked to call it, with a nod to the German-Jewish émigré film critic Lotte Eisner – during which he created five films for the cinema and eight for German public television, an unparalleled body of work defying easy categorisation. Though contemporary with the New German Cinema, Shahid Saless’ German films refract social and political life in the Federal Republic through his unique aesthetic sensibility as well as his experience of exile. Without permanent residency status, locked into a continual struggle with film funding agencies and TV programme editors, this self-described ‘guest worker’ of German cinema made films that speak forcefully to the traumas of homelessness and displacement.

When asked about his inimitable style of filmmaking, Shahid Saless liked to quote his favourite writer, Anton Chekhov: ‘People do not go to the North Pole and fall off icebergs; they go to offices, quarrel with their wives and eat cabbage soup.’ The surface simplicity of Shahid Saless’ cinema, however, contains multiple layers. It takes on new meanings as it moves across forms and cultures, from pre-revolutionary Iran to post-war West Germany and the late ČSSR (the filming location of two of his later works);



Shahid Saless on the set of ‘The Willow Tree’, West Germany / ČSSR 1984, © Bert Schmidt

from ethnography to contemporary drama to historical fiction; from literature to cinema to broadcast television.

In 1994, Sohrab Shahid Saless gave up on the increasingly impossible task of securing funds and support for his work in Germany and left for the US where he died, two years before the turn of the millennium, alone in a rental flat in Chicago. His films are more urgent today than ever. They must be seen.

*Sohrab Shahid Saless: Exiles* is curated by Dr. Azadeh Fatehrad and Nikolaus Perneczky in partnership with the Goethe-Institut London and in collaboration with the Munich Film Museum. With support from the Visual and Material Culture Research Centre, Kingston University (London), Iran Heritage Foundation (London) and Arts Council England. We would like to thank our partner venues Close-Up and the ICA.

With special thanks to: Tara Aghdashloo, Vahid Alaghband, Aras Khatami, Aga Baranowska, Stephen Barber, Matthew Andrew Barrington, Stefanie Bodien, Vivien Kristin Buchhorn, Steven Colburn, Oliver Dickens, Stefan Dröbler, Lukas Foerster, Jörg Frieß, Ehsan Khoshbakht, Fran Lloyd, Dario Marchiori, Nico Marzano, Regina De Martelaere, Cristina Nord, Francette Pacteau, Ghazi Rabihavi, Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, Damien Sanville, Bert Schmidt, Claudia Siefen, Klaus Volkmer, Tonie De Waele.

‘Each country must have a cinema that corresponds to its culture, that is bound up with the socio-political problems of that country. But let's not forget that cinematic language is an international language.’

# PROGRAMME DETAILS

Sat 4 Nov 4pm, ICA

## Prelude Screening: Far From Home (Dar ġorbat aka In der Fremde)

Shot in a mere 13 days, with a cast of lay actors recruited from the streets of Kreuzberg, this trenchant exposé of the life of a Turkish guest worker in 1970s Berlin is an urgent, uncompromising piece of filmmaking that feels as hopeless and desperate today as it did then. Shahid Saless' regular DOP Ramin Reza Molai captures the isolation of Husseyn in long, deep-focus takes that reach down endless streets. The only refuge is a sparse flat that Husseyn shares with other guest workers, where they gather to eat, sing, play backgammon – or simply exist.

Introduced by the curators Azadeh Fatehrad and Nikolaus Perneckzy.

Iran / West Germany 1975, 91 min, 16mm, Turkish & German with English subtitles. Directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Written by Sohrab Shahid Saless and Helga Houzer. Cinematography by Ramin Reza Molai. With Parviz Sayyad, Anasal Cihan, Muhammet Temizkan, Hüsamettin Kaya, Ursula Kessler, Ute Bokelmann.



Far From Home  
(Dar ġorbat aka In der Fremde)  
Courtesy of Hamid Naficy Iranian Movie Posters  
Collection, Northwestern University Archives

'The problem that always preoccupies me, whether I film in Germany or Iran, is precisely the antagonism between man and society. [...] One can make the viewer conscious of the indignity and inhumanity of his life. As Chekhov says, 'Oh audience, this life is unworthy of you!' I think that the sickness must be shown.'

Thu 9 Nov 7pm, Goethe-Institut

## Programme Launch: Black and White (Siah-o sefid)

An utterly atypical entry into Shahid Saless' sombre oeuvre, this irreverent stop-motion animated short is chock full of inventive twists and surprises.

Iran 1972, 4 min, digital version (no dialogue). Directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Commissioned by Kanoon: The Center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults.

## A Simple Event (Yek ettefāq-e sāda)

Shahid Saless' stunning debut feature tells the slow-burning story of a young boy living in the town of Bandar Shah (now Bandar Torkaman) by the Caspian Sea. His monotonous existence, spent between school, errands for his fisherman father, and tending to his ailing mother, is changed by a simple but devastating event. Initially conceived as a documentary, Shahid Saless diverted the budget of this government commission towards his own ends. Paying no heed to the coastal town's sights and attractions, he instead turns his insistent gaze on the seemingly uneventful lives of its poorest inhabitants.

Introduced by the curators Azadeh Fatehrad and Nikolaus Perneckzy. Followed by a reception.



A Simple Event (Yek ettefāq-e sāda)

Iran 1974, 81 min, 35 mm, Farsi with English subtitles. Written and directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Cinematography by Naghi Massumi. With Mohammad Zamani, Ane Mohammad Tarikhi, Habibollah Safarian, Hedayatollah Nawid.

Sat 11 Nov 5.30pm, Goethe-Institut

## Still Life (Tabi'at-e bijān)

Shahid Saless returns to the coastal town of Bandar Shah, this time portraying the lives of an elderly man, who guards a railroad crossing, and his wife. They are stopped in their tracks when a letter arrives informing them of his impending retirement. *Still Life* is a powerful meditation on a life lived at the margins of a fast-modernising Iran, on the stilled time of old age and its disruption by modernity – and a broadside against the Shah's grandiose rhetoric of economic development.

Followed by a conversation between critic and curator Ehsan Khoshbakht and Azadeh Fatehrad, and a reception.

Iran 1974, 93 min, 35 mm, Farsi with English subtitles. Written and directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Cinematography by Hushang Bahari. With Zador Bonyadi, Zahra Yazdani, Habibollah Safarian.



Still Life (Tabi'at-e bijān)

Sat 18 Nov 4pm, Close-Up

## Utopia

This magisterial chamber play is the dark heart of Shahid Saless' German period. Set in an empty, closed-curtain bordello in West Berlin, *Utopia* posits prostitution as the truth of the then nascent service economy.



‘Whoever directs a film is equivalent to a carpenter who constructs a table with precision. Each one must take up his proper task. Cinema must be an authentic, historical document.’



‘One can know the names and symptoms of many illnesses without necessarily knowing how to cure them. The responsibility of the artist who has some kind of social conscience is to put his finger on the wounds of the body of society.’

‘Chekhov spoke of universal problems. He speaks of those who want to do something and have been kicked out. [...] In the Ivanov play or in The Seagull, there is someone who, as a sign of objection, puts a bullet through his head. This isn't pessimism but simply the refusal to live a lousy life.’

Image credit: © Bert Schmidt

The quotations by Sohrab Shahid Saless have been taken from ‘This isn't Pessimism: Interview with Sohrab Shahid Saless.’ In: Discourse, 21.1, Winter 1999, pp. 175-80.

Print sources: Austrian Film Museum, Brussels Cinematek, Iranian National Archive, IRIB, KANOON, Munich Film Museum, WDR, ZDF





Utopia

Ruled by their brutal pimp, the women are trapped inside a claustrophobic tomb of eternally recurring humiliations – a thinly veiled microcosm of German society, just after chancellor Kohl had announced his neoliberal agenda of ‘spiritual-moral renewal’. A visceral metaphor for the political climate of the early 1980s.

Followed by a conversation between curator and critic Dario Marchiori and Nikolaus Perneczky, and a reception.

West Germany 1982, 198 min, 35 mm, German with English subtitles. Print: Austrian Film Museum. Directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Written by Sohrab Shahid Saless and Manfred Grunert. Cinematography by Ramin Reza Molai. With Manfred Zapatka, Imke Barnstedt, Gundula Petrovska, Gabriele Fischer, Johanna Sophia, Birgit Anders.

**Mon 20 Nov 7pm, Goethe-Institut**

### Time of Maturity aka Coming of Age (Reifezeit)

*Time of Maturity* patiently details the domestic co-existence of a mother and her son in a desolate urban environment, inviting us to share in the boy’s perception

of their daily rituals and routines. There is little in the way of plot development; the action is circular, bordering on stasis. And yet the film’s inexorable rhythm draws us ever closer into this confined, unforgiving world, towards the son’s slowly dawning understanding of his mother’s nightly comings and goings – his coming of age.

West Germany 1976, 111 min, digital version, German with English subtitles. Directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Written by Sohrab Shahid Saless and Helga Houzer. Cinematography by Ramin Reza Molai. With Mike Hennig, Eva Mannhardt, Eva Lissa, Charles H. Vogt, Heinz Lieven.



Time of Maturity aka Coming of Age (Reifezeit)

‘Nevertheless, there are those who claim to be creators. What do they create? Watches and calculators? True artists! They would do better to shape men. The person whose sole daily responsibility is to tighten screws on a calculator ends up becoming a machine himself; he is consumed and dehumanised.’

**Wed 22 Nov 7.30pm, Close-Up**

### Order (Ordnung)

Seemingly out of nowhere, an unemployed engineer suddenly rejects what others – his wife, friends, and presumably he himself before he lost his job – would consider a life well-lived: orderly, industrious, well-adjusted. A modern-day *Bartleby*, he gets out of bed one morning and decides that he ‘would prefer not to’. Quite possibly Shahid Saless’ most personal film, but certainly his angriest, *Order* issues a haunting battle cry against the asphyxiating reality of middle class values. A harrowing film with lingering impact.

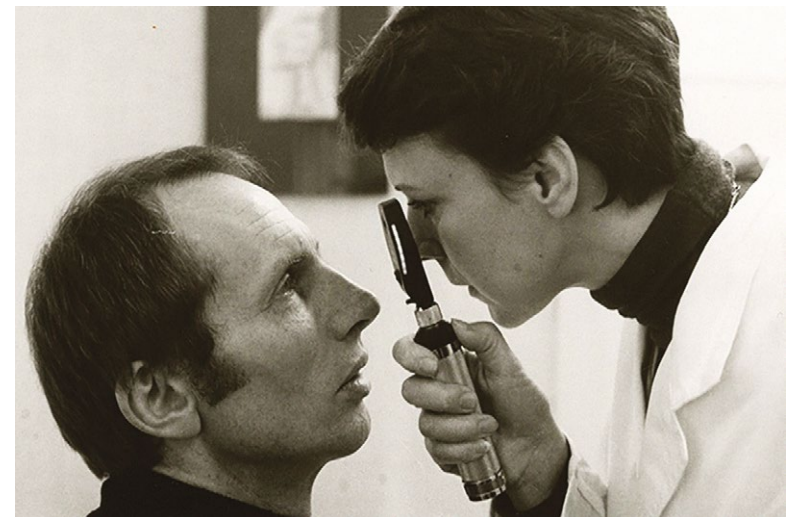
West Germany 1980, 96 min, 16 mm, German with English subtitles. Directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Written by Sohrab Shahid Saless, Dieter Reifarh and Bert Schmidt. Cinematography by Ramin Reza Molai.

With Heinz Lieven, Dorothea Moritz, Ingrid Domann, Peter Schütze, Dagmar Hessenland, Dieter Schaad.

**Fri 1 Dec 7pm, Goethe-Institut**

### The Willow Tree (Der Weidenbaum)

Under Shahid Saless’ contemplative gaze this short story by Anton Chekhov, which tells a tale of crime and (frustrated) redemption, is recast as a transcendent study of old age. The senile servant Archip, long abandoned by his former masters, witnesses a violent act. He decides to report the deed and so makes his way to the city courthouse... *The Willow Tree* transposes the moral stakes of Chekhov’s original entirely into the physical realm: It’s all about the weight and fragility of Archip’s aged body



Order (Ordnung), © Bert Schmidt



The Willow Tree (Der Weidenbaum)

plodding through the sublime countryside – and the inertia of big city bureaucrats who couldn't care less.

West Germany / ČSSR 1984, 97 min, digital version, German with English subtitles. Written and directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless, based on a story by Anton Chekhov. Cinematography by Ramin Reza Molai, Stanislav Dorsic. With Josef Stehlik, Peter Stanik, Milan Drotar, Marian Sotnik, Michal Suchanek, Stefan Adamec.

**Sat 9 Dec 4pm, Close-Up**

## Hans – A Young Man in Germany (Hans – Ein Junge in Deutschland)

Adapted from Hans Frick's 1977 autobiographical novel *The Blue Hour*, *Hans* chronicles the last throes of the Third Reich as experienced by a young man marked as 'Halbjuden' by Nazi race laws. Shahid Saless' characteristically unflinching eye dissects everyday life in Nazi Germany, showing a broad range of 'ordinary' behaviours – downright denunciations, small gestures of solidarity, inner emigration – without exculpating anyone. The end of the war is imminent, but when the Gestapo ring at his door, Hans must escape to the countryside...

Followed by a conversation between curator and critic Vivien Kristin Buchhorn and Nikolaus Perneckzy, and a reception.

West Germany / France / ČSSR 1985, 148 min, digital version, German with English subtitles. Directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Written by Sohrab Shahid Saless and Hans Frick. Cinematography by Ramin Reza Molai. With Martin Pasko, Imke Barnstedt, Yane Bittlová, Ulrich von Bock, Jirina Barásova, Hans Zander.



Hans – A Young Man in Germany  
(Hans – Ein Junge in Deutschland)

**Sat 13 Jan 7pm, Goethe-Institut**

## Diary of a Lover (Tagebuch eines Liebenden)

When Shahid Saless first looked upon his new host country, what he saw were lonely individuals locked into private worlds. *Diary of a Lover* makes visible, palpable even, this immense suffering, leaving the viewer gasping for air. The walls are closing in on the butcher Michael (the now grown-up protagonist of *Time of Maturity*). He is one among many who, isolated in their

'The viewer must reflect and decide for himself upon leaving. I don't want to intercede in other people's feelings.'

identical-looking flats, lead lives of quiet desperation. Michael's girlfriend seems to have disappeared after an argument. The gnawing question at the heart of this dark paean to alienation: Will she return?

West Germany 1977, 91 min, digital version, German with English subtitles. Written and directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Cinematography by Mansur Yazdi. With Klaus Salge, Eva Manhardt, Edith Hildebrandt, Ingeborg Ziemendorff, Robert Dietl, Ursula Alexa, Dorothea Moritz.

**Wed 17 Jan 7pm, Goethe-Institut**

## Changeling (Wechselbalg)

In this minutely observed portrait of an ordinary family – father, mother and their adopted daughter in a picket-fenced row house – Shahid Saless revisits the world of childhood and adolescence. Uniquely, *Changeling* examines this formative experience through the eyes of an anxious mother, who herself was a daughter once: With minimal gestures – a telling look, a thoughtless word, a slight hesitation – her troubled inner world is laid bare. With an outsider's clarity of vision, but without judgement, Shahid Saless sees through the middle class ideal of the German home. Behind the lace curtain: a prison of their own making.

West Germany 1987, 135 min, digital version, German with English subtitles. Directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Written by Jürgen Breest, adapted from his novel. Cinematography by Michael Faust. With Friederike Brühem, Henning Gissel, Katharina Baccarelli, Erika Wackernagel, Helga Jeske.

**Fri 19 Jan 7pm, Goethe-Institut**

## The Long Vacation of Lotte H. Eisner (Die langen Ferien der Lotte H. Eisner)

This intimate portrait of Lotte Eisner conjures a counter-history of German

cinema, based on a kinship of flight and displacement. Eisner, a German-Jewish film critic best known for *The Haunted Screen*, her study of Weimar-era expressionist cinema, was born in Berlin but escaped to France in 1933. Thus began her 'long vacation', as she wryly puts it to Shahid Saless, some fifty years on in her Paris apartment: the moving encounter between two great exiles of cinema.

West Germany 1979, 60 min, digital version, German with English subtitles. Directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless. Cinematography by Ramin Reza Molai.

**Fri 19 Jan 9.30am – 6pm, Goethe-Institut**

## Conference: Sohrab Shahid Saless – Exile, Displacement and the Stateless Moving Image

Keynote speaker: Prof. Hamid Naficy (Northwestern)

This one-day conference brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to explore the work of Iranian filmmaker Sohrab Shahid Saless as a conduit for a wider engagement with exiled and displaced moving image practitioners: their ethics, aesthetics, modes of production as well as their precarious lives and often uncertain legacy today.

For inquiries about the conference please contact: shahidsalessretrospective2017@gmail.com

The conference is organised by Dr. Azadeh Fatehrad and Nikolaus Perneckzy in partnership with the Goethe-Institut London and with support from the Visual and Material Culture Research Centre, Kingston University (London), Iran Heritage Foundation (London), Arts Council England and CHASE (Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England).

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ICA

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Far From Home

Thu 9 Nov 7pm  
Goethe-Institut

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Black and White + A Simple Event  
Introduction + Reception

Sat 11 Nov 5.30pm  
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Still Life  
Conversation + Reception

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Close-Up

Utopia  
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Time of Maturity

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Close-Up  
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Conference:  
Sohrab Shahid Saless -  
Exile, Displacement and  
the Stateless Moving Image

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#### ICA

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