

Songs That Never End, a film by Yehuda Sharim

reviewed by George Lipsitz

Songs That Never End is a fascinating, compelling, and mesmerizing film. It focuses on seemingly small events inside small spaces to pose big questions about how people struggle with the hand that history has dealt them in a time of devastation, dispossession, and displacement. Filmed in *cinema verité* style, yet brilliantly shot, framed, and paced by director, camera operator, and interviewer Yehuda Sharim, *Songs That Never End* revolves around the everyday life experiences, events, injuries, and aspirations of an Iranian immigrant family living in a small apartment in Houston. Across nearly two hours of cinema, it sutures together a series of short scenes that convey chaos and unpredictability in the lives of these refugees who never find refuge, these exiles for whom exile never ends.

For the protagonists in this film, mobility across the globe as exiles from Iran has led them from one space of immobility and confinement to another: to refugee camps and temporary dwellings in Turkey and to their current residence inside a cramped and crowded Houston apartment. Sharim dramatizes the family's contained and constrained existence through tightly framed shots inside the family's dwelling spaces and in their car. To convey the uneasiness, unpredictability, and unmanageable qualities of their lives, he eschews a progressive linear narrative to instead tell the family's stories episodically as they emerge organically inside testimonies that protagonists deliver directly to the film maker, to his camera, and as a result, to viewers. We are forced to piece together fragments of experience, just as the family struggles to piece together information and take actions that will help them preserve dignity and develop hope under daunting conditions. In a small apartment inhabited by two adults and four children (two of them infants), conversations are constantly interrupted or drowned out by the noise of television programs, recorded music, and voices from other rooms. Viewers must struggle to make sense out of what they see and hear, just as the family struggles to make sense out of having to speak a new language, negotiate a new culture, process all that they have lost because of exile, and find ways to secure material reward and personal recognition inside a relentlessly impersonal, unfeeling, and unforgivingly competitive materialistic society.

The film conveys its key narratives largely through testimony by four main characters: the father, Abbas, who was an engineer in Iran but must work sixteen hour days at lower skilled jobs in the U.S. just to make ends meet; the mother, Samira, who suffers from depression and a debilitating illness and watches Farsi language films and television programs that remind her of her former life; a teen-age son, Ali, who sees only sorrow and pain in his Iranian heritage and hopes to leave the planet earth for a happier life in outer space, yet also seeks to master his command of the English language to become a star on YouTube; and an adolescent daughter, Hana, whose performative zeal and trenchant observations make her the key interlocutor of the film. Yet Sharim is too thoughtful an artist, and too skilled a film maker, to allow his subjects to stay securely inside limited character zones. Despite his exhaustion and demoralization, Abbas shows himself to be the author of touching and beautiful poems written about and for Samira. Samira's weariness and desire for respite from the cacophony of family

life become more understandable when the medical causes and consequences of her condition are revealed. Ali initially appears to be ungrateful, anti-social, and self-absorbed, yet in scene after scene he shoulders responsibilities for taking care of his younger siblings. The precocious Hana delivers a brilliant and insightful critique of materialism and its distortions of human values, yet she does not comprehend that when her parents will no longer purchase for her the commodities she desires as they did in Iran, it is because they no longer have the money, not that they no longer love her.

Sharim's eye for detail leads the film to present a series of memorable images replete with evocations of cultural conflict, contrast, and coalescence. Samira wears a t-shirt that features Minnie Mouse. Hana wears one that proclaims "after this there's pizza." The children are charged with shining shoes that somehow never become quite clean. Farsi melodramas compete for audibility with songs by Justin Timberlake. Hana playfully wears a blonde wig that brings home the contrasts between who she is and the value system of the society in which she lives. Hana runs back and forth in the parking lot of the apartment complex where she lives as if to simulate the dialectic of mobility and immobility that hovers over the family. The film ends with lingering looks at the damage done from flooding in Houston neighborhoods caused by a hurricane. These scenes represent metaphorically the damage done on a large scale to people and the planet by global catastrophes that compel people to deal with loss and start over in the ways that the family featured in this film has been forced to do.

Songs That Never End deploys conventional film tropes in brilliantly unconventional ways. It is a tale of a family in jeopardy and a drama in which social difference functions as a source of both danger and refuge. These are familiar scenes in documentary cinema and fiction films. Yet this film has no linear progression from its opening to its conclusion. It has no obvious beginning, middle, or end. It offers no redemptive triumph or final tragedy to resolve the questions it opens up. This refusal of narrative or ideological closure works deftly to evoke the structures of feeling appropriate to a group of refugees who never find refuge, to exiles for whom exile never ends. It offers a story but eschews a plot, because as James Baldwin once observed, a plot conceals but a story reveals.

Despite its brilliant array of intercuts, changes in camera angles and distances, and visually appealing scenes, *Songs That Never End* demands much from viewers. It presents real time demonstrations of boredom, exhaustion, and miscommunication. A cacophony of sounds inside a small apartment often makes it difficult to discern any one voice clearly. Characters reveal themselves slowly through representations replete with contradictions. It is a film about struggle that compels viewers to inhabit the affect of struggle, rather than to pleurably observe in others from a safe distance. It neither romanticizes nor dehumanizes its subjects, but instead presents them in all their complexity as products of a world in which major social systems are breaking down. The implied and inscribed maximally competent viewer of this film will display neither pity nor sympathy toward its protagonists, but will instead wonder how we can honorably and honestly accompany them.

Songs That Never Ends deploys a strategically brilliant low key approach to some of the most volatile and high stakes issues of our time. In a world that produces millions of migrants, exiles, and refugees but them demonizes them relentlessly, the people of the world in many ways are both closer together and farther apart than ever before. We live, as Vijay Prashad so eloquently observes, "in an age of the

abnormal, an age of monsters, an age of the strongmen, the devastation of humanity, the ache of decent people” (Prashad 2018). Under such circumstances, film makers and the people who watch their films face a limited array of options. Do we stand up, step up, and speak out against the calculated cruelty directed against the shunned, silenced, segregated, and suppressed peoples of the world? Do we try to scramble away to places of private refuge by limiting our attention to concerns about our own individual bodies, psyches, fears, and phobias? Do we face up to the things that are killing us slowly and others more rapidly? Or do we accept meekly our assigned roles as passive observers and consumers of political and cultural spectacles that revolve around competition, cruelty, and contempt?

In the midst of the seemingly unresolvable crises facing the environment, the economy, electoral politics, and the education system, films and other forms of expressive culture constitute contested terrain. On the right, talk radio broadcasts, social media memes, television reality shows, action films, and speeches by the president of the United States stoke belligerence and brutality among what must surely be the most surly, sadistic, and self-pitying group of haves that the world has ever known. On the left, stories, songs, cinema, and television shows treat depression, despair, demoralization, injuries, infirmities, and illnesses as personal and private misfortunes that can be countered largely through programs of self-help and self-care that promise to make people fit to succeed within the value structure of this society -- to secure unbridled access to wealth, fame, and romantic love. We are living at a time similar to the one identified by Walter Benjamin in his 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” which was written at a moment in history when a rising tide of fascism was threatening to engulf the world. Benjamin recognized that the military and political spectacles of the state both reflected and shaped the technical and ideological performances of the culture industries. He wrote that the self-alienation of humans had reached a point where people could experience their own destruction as “a pleasure of the first order” (Benjamin 1968, 242). Today that destruction is performed through cultural commodities with advanced production values that promote violent competition and stoke sadistic rage. Under these conditions, film makers and film viewers face daunting challenges. *Songs That Never End* presents an exemplary response to them. It is a film that deserves to be distributed widely, viewed repeatedly, and contemplated critically as an essential element for building a new and better world.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. 1968. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books, 217-251.

Prashad, Vijay. 2018. “With Samir Amin By Our Side,” *Monthly Review Online*. November 3.