



Tales from the Crypto

In a streaming market in which catalogue size and clicks are what matter, Mania Akbari has created a platform that gives room to quality and political commitment

WORDS BY BECCA VOELCKER

The films Mania Akbari wants to bring to public attention, she explains, concern humans and politics, society and politics, feminism and politics. She wants to offer audiences the opportunity to find old films, new films, all political. We are speaking online – she has finally got away to the seaside, and I'm lying low after my second vaccine. It's August 2021. We are discussing how film distribution and festivals have changed since the start of the pandemic. The film industry now is empty, she continues. It's all about entertainment and maximising clicks.

For the past five months, Akbari has been running a new distribution and production platform, based in London, called Cryptofiction – an intentionally elusive and suggestive title for a venture that eschews easily packaged films and champions those that challenge conceptions of people, place and politics. Programmes streamed already include retrospectives of the filmmakers Avi Mograbi, Mikhail Karikis and Andrea Luca Zimmerman.

Viewing Cryptofiction as an extension of her own directorial and artistic practices, Akbari is drawn to works that weave fiction and documentary, and sometimes involve elements of community participation (Zimmerman) or performance

(Karikis). "Cinema can be therapeutic," she says, citing her own experiences making films for personal catharsis and social activism. In her 2007 film *10+4* – a riff on Abbas Kiarostami's 2002 feature *Ten*, in which she played the protagonist – Akbari explores her trauma of battling breast cancer and undergoing a double mastectomy at the age of 30. In *A Moon for My Father*, made in collaboration with her partner, the sculptor Douglas White, in 2019, Akbari continues to explore the connection between her physical traumas and the collective political traumas of Iran, her birthplace. Cryptofiction's curatorial approach is similarly biopolitical – Akbari understands the body, personhood and society as being enmeshed. And in recent months, this meshwork has become increasingly strained. Covid shone light on power inequities, Akbari explains. If injustice was ever apparent, it is now, as we witness people losing their livelihoods, and lives, at very different rates, depending on vectors of oppression and privilege.

Cryptofiction shows films that are made politically, as well as being about political subjects. It supports non-commercial projects, very young and very old filmmakers, and those who might identify more closely with activism than cinema or fine art

contexts. Akbari is not interested in quantity – audiences should not expect the vast catalogues Mubi or the Criterion Channel, nor the endlessly scrolling suggestions of Netflix and Amazon Prime. Cryptofiction presents a capsule of films that work against a presiding ideology of clicks. Their makers strive for more than popular entertainment and monetised content.

One such filmmaker is Lynne Sachs. Cryptofiction is currently showing five of her films, made between 1994 and 2021. (Sachs's output includes over 40 films, and numerous performances, artworks and pieces for the internet.) The five films span essay, hybrid documentary and diaristic genres. Although short (the longest runs to an hour; the shortest is five minutes) the films deserve independent viewings because they are so dense, poetic, intelligent and visually beautiful. Most are shot on 8 or 16mm – Sachs knows just when to blur or slow or freeze frames, usually mid-movement so that colours streak like ink pulled across a silk screen. Like Bruce Conner,

ABOVE
One of the residents of an NYC shift-bed apartment in Lynne Sachs's *Your Day Is My Night* (2013)

BELOW
Lynne Sachs in her own *States of UnBelonging* (2005)



with whom she worked in San Francisco, Sachs makes films that dance between aesthetic beauty and searing politics. In a manner reminiscent of Conner's mesmerising mushroom clouds in *Crossroads* (1976), the Vietnamese countryside is as formally arresting as it is war-haunted in Sachs's *Which Way Is East* (1994). In this film, made in collaboration with her sister, the writer Dana Sachs, who was then teaching English in Vietnam, she chronicles the different senses of place experienced by people at home in Vietnam and by the Sachsés as they travel there and recall an American ideology from high-school history lessons and war films. The film uses a rushing train the sisters ride between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi as a catalyst for these comparisons. Recalling the essay films of Sachs's friend, the writer and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, the film's voiceover is a multi-part meditation on what it means – politically and personally – to visit a place, film its landscape and people and delve into its memories.

Sachs's 2013 documentary *Your Day Is My Night* lovingly portrays residents of a New York City Chinatown shift-bed apartment. They share stories of moving to the US and making ends meet. Sections of the film are dramatised scenarios based on older residents' memories. As with *Which Way Is East*, the film's materiality is sensuous, its colours rich, its movement is sometimes slowed to a dreamlike, gliding blur. While *Which Way Is East* explored the politically fraught dynamic between Vietnam and the US, *Your Day Is My Night* looks at China and the US as competing superpowers, ideologies and places to call home. In another of the films selected, *States of UnBelonging* (2005), Sachs looks at Israel and Palestine with a similar interest in different senses of place – and the catastrophic consequences of their colliding.

Akbari is now working on a project for Cryptofiction that will see 50 filmmakers, programmers, writers and artists each recommend five young filmmakers for selection and streaming. The idea is to grow a kind of tree, Akbari explains, with the branches forming new connections between audiences, filmmakers and films. Ben Rivers is working on a selection, as is Eyal Weizman from the research group Forensic Architecture, and the programmers Ewa Szablowska (from Poland's New Horizon Film Festival), Verena von Stackelberg (Wolf Kino and the Berlin Film Festival), Sarah Dawson (International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam) and Miguel Ribeiro (Doclisboa).

We don't need more artists and filmmakers, Akbari concludes, we need more activism. There is still so much prejudice in Britain – so much racism, transphobia, socioeconomic division. We need more fighters, she says, more filmmaker-activists, filmmaker-feminists. That's what Cryptofiction is for. It's more than a place for screening films, it's a political voice.

▶ For more, go to www.cryptofiction.com

Living history

All September, treasures of early Czech cinema are free to view on YouTube, and well worth digging for

WORDS BY PAMELA HUTCHINSON

In 1898, Jan Krízenecký and his colleague Josef Pokorný showed a collection of their own films at the Exhibition of Architecture and Engineering in Prague. These 'living photographs' of news events, everyday life and celebrations are considered the first Czech-made films, and crowds for the 'Česky Kinematograf' responded, we're told, with a mixture of amusement and bafflement at snippets of real life cropped out of context and represented on a screen. Viewed today, it's the smoothness and realism of this living history that astounds, as well as Krízenecký's elegant compositions. At a village fair, couples dance in circles on a green, while in the background, behind the gathering crowds, an acrobat bounces on a high wire and a carousel whirls, loaded with tiny children.

And you can view them today. The films have been preserved and their sleek photographic quality is enhanced by digital restoration work: Czech cinema of more than a century ago, gleaming like new. Krízenecký aficionados may have already purchased the films on the recent Blu-ray from the Czech National Film Archive, or Národní filmový archiv (NFA), but until the end of September they are also available to browsers on YouTube, as a part of a project to widen access to European film history.

Now in its second year, the Europe-wide screening programme 'A Season of Classic Films' aims to acquaint the public, especially younger audiences, with film history. And though the title uses the weighty word 'classic', many of the titles involved will be unfamiliar to most viewers.

The NFA is one of 22 institutions from across Europe to take part in the initiative, coordinated by the Association of European Cinémathèques and supported by Creative Europe. The free-admission screenings, which ran from December

to June, are now over, but many archives, including the NFA, chose to stream the films as well, to increase access during the pandemic.

The seven silent programmes offered by the NFA will be available to view online until the end of September. It's a diverse program, but there are some routes in. You could do far worse than start with Krízenecký's diverting actualities, capturing images of Czech life from 1898 to 1911. Another enticing entrance point would be an acclaimed early high point of Czech cinema, Karl Anton's lyrical debut *Gypsies* (1921), in which a Venetian gondolier searches for his girlfriend's kidnapper.

You may be tempted to try a couple of early film appearances by pouting future Hitchcock blonde Anny Ondra (then Anna Ondráková), in a melodramatic tale of an escaped prisoner directed by Karel Lamac, *White Paradise* (1924), or in the riotous slapstick comedy *The Lovers of an Old Criminal* (1927). The latter stars the noted actor Vlasta Burian (known to domestic audiences as the 'King of comedians') and was directed by the Czech film pioneer Svatopluk Innemann, who also made another, more obscure film in the strand, *Be Prepared!* (1923). This wholesome yarn offers an archival glimpse of not just the early Czech Scouting movement, but some spectacular scenery – including the stunning St John's Rapids on the Vltava river, now vanished thanks to flooding from the Stěchovice Reservoir.

The collection is completed with Lamac's 1929 film *The Sins of Love*, a romantic tragedy set in theatrical circles and *The Crucified* (Boris Orlický, 1921), a disturbing historical drama about anti-Semitism.

The films have all been restored and are streaming with English subtitles and assertively modern scores surely designed to invigorate the films for new audiences – though tender ears may find them rough going. For those enamoured, there's an option to watch the films along with images of the musicians performing, reconstructing a Czech cine-concert in the comfort of your own laptop. Most usefully, the Krízenecký shorts come with introductions from restorer Jeanne Pommeau, which should dispel any 21st-century bafflement.

▶ To watch the films, go to bit.ly/CzechArchive

THE BIG SHORTS
Be Prepared! (1923)



IMAGE: NÁRODNÍ FILMOVÝ ARCHIV, PRAHA