Activist Tears

Tear Gun and The White Meadows are about as different as you can get – one is a handmade tangible object and the other is an amazing Iranian Film featuring deep symbolism and deft soundscapes. However, they both explore tears in and in response to power. Hopefully, by examining them side-by-side we can extract more meaning from them than if we simply took them in isolation.

To get the most out of this essay, I’d recommend watching YiFeis one-minute video about her project and the trailer for The White Meadows. Hell, watching *all* of TWM would be best, but if you don’t mind serious spoilers, I’ll do my best to catch you up as we go.

Let’s start with TWM.

[dramatic picture from TWM]

the white Meadows is a 2009 film made by the Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof. Featuring a cacophony of symbolism, the likely was a bit too strong with this one, running Mohammed six years in prison and a 20 year band from leaving the country, giving interviews or making movies. Even though the white Meadows has never been shown in a rotten its incessant exploration of state exploration is a characteristic it shares with other classic Iranian films. According to Prof. Beyzaie of Stanford University being banned is often seemed among directors as a badge of honor – not unlike in early career studies, if you’re not pushing boundaries what’s the point of doing anything at all? Fear not, the white Meadows does plenty of pushing hardly stopping to breathe in between islands of salt barons interrogating misogyny/objectification of women, superstition, social order… Etc. etc. the list goes on. In amongst all we followed the main character as he travels from misfortune to misfortune collecting people’s tears in a special glass bottle. We along with the people he visits never know why he’s collecting tears but it’s clear he’s not new always expected, never explained.

At the end, the main character uses the tears from hundreds if not more people to wash a patriarchal power figures feet before disposing of them into the ocean. To me, the meaning behind this is a clear and poignant commentary on classist authoritarian rule; “the poor can cry so that the rich can have clean feet” if you will.

In the white Meadows, the main character travels from salt rock to salt rock on a tight schedule. With each stop, we explore a new aspect of how authoritarian rule seeps into everyday life. Some examples are flighty and require work on the audience’s part, but others are extremely heavy-handed (think “pouring monkey urine in an artist’s eye because he painted the sea as read into the blue” level of heavy-handed). The main character visits six islands in total – five collecting tears and one delivering them – but the second island is my favorite.

On the second island, main character and a stowaway are present for a djinn banishing ceremony. The past 300 years “the ocean has just been getting more and more salty,” and the locals blame it on a djinn that fled to the bottom of the well. When the main character arrives, the locals are expecting him. And while he does end up collecting some tears, he breaks his otherwise monotone modus operandi to collect prayers and secrets in glass jars. This suggests that he’s more than a tier collector, possibly filling a role similar to a spiritual tax collector/administrator. [Footnote: he also is called to take someone to a prison rock later, further strengthening his role in maintaining authoritarian control]

the dynamics of the djinn banishing ritual are interesting (read: more territory and commentary), but the white Meadows is one hour and 38 minutes of symbolically rich alike read that never stops every scene feels iconic and unforgettable and then they’re gone.

In this way, tear gun is very different, and possibly the most direct way possible: it’s not a scene or an image nor a dialogue. It’s a physical object made of brass and plastic. You could touch it if you fade like to. But, here comes physicality isn’t the only thing that separates them. In fact, their interrogation of in crying and power may be their only direct similarity.

The tear gun was made by you fade during her master studies of arts in Amsterdam. Coming from Taiwan, she had been taught not to question authority, which in a climate clash with amps damn universities questioning culture resulted in her crying in front of a school administrator due to a tutor’s unreasonable expectations. “In that moment, all I could do was cry” but after, you face found a way to turn her sadness into power – directly, in the form of tear gun which is a gun that collects tears as the name implies shoots them.

This direct transformation of sadness (tears) into power (firepower) serves as a foil for the white Meadows which is often unwieldy abstract in its layered symbolism. Further in the white Meadows, sadness (tears) serve only to further repress the powerless and reinforce the position of the powerful. Again, said reinforcement is only symbolic (maybe performatic? Performative?) having your feet washed pales in comparison to actual gun when preparing for a fight.

But direct versus abstract methods of obtaining power of the only ways that tear gun in the white Meadows contrast. The tear gun is individualistically empowering (it is a gun powered by your own tears, literally self empowerment). The white Meadows is all about mass disenfranchisement, how tears and pain are used in cycles of authoritarian maneuvering.

Unfortunately, these differences aren’t limited to the art itself. For the amazing sheet that is the white Meadows, Mohammed has been banned from filmmaking giving and from interviews for 20 years on top of a six year prison sentence. For you fade, things were different – she got to fire her gun at the school administrator when she got her masters degree for her work.

When we cry, we often feel alone. But for better or worse, crying is a performative act, cyclically citing societal constructs to produce meaning in short we are never alone even in our own tears we produce Foucauldian biopower be it literally through gun or more in situ is the through politic.

On a deeper level both the white Meadows and tear gun dig into questions of humanity, of purpose. I’ve struggled to put you face motivation into words, why does turning your tears into bullets makes sense, what purpose does it serve? Is it defensive? Offenses? Reflexive? Proactive? And to be honest I don’t have a good answer for you – if you ask Ife I better answer would be self contradicting and amorphous. Thing is, while I struggle for words I am clear in understanding. Ye phase tear gun makes intuitive sense to me. Is it is not human to want out of the situation where one feels weak? And to top it off, I bet $100 that breaking down and crying during a business/academic presentation is a top 10 fear for most people. What tear gun really does is ask and offer an answer to one of societies most basic questions: what can one do from weakness? For you Ife the answer was clear: with weakness you fight even if tears are all you have.

But for the main character of the white Meadows, the question remains unanswered. Even with the additionally collected tears he trends lightly never stepping so far into purposeful action that he can’t – back to the security of in action. The primary and most devastating example of this playing out lies in the main character’s relationship with a stowaway found on his boat.

This stowaway (who was never given a name) is a young boy who serves on the main characters boat after the main character visits his island in hopes of finding his missing father. Even when we first meet him, the stowaway is a direct foil to the main character – with his own purposeful action met with defense of the status quo. The main character initially throws the stowaway open paren a.k.a. an opportunity for change, action) off of the boat to drown, his reason for allowing him to stay (living that is) is in the face of the threat of blackmail [open] the stowaway’s blackmail is yet another example of his abundant purposeful action the details of the blackmail point out that he had thought through his plan and had waited for the opportune time] upon the condition that the stowaway must pretend to be deaf and mute thus minimizing his impact on the main character status quo.

The stowaway remains faithful to his agreement with the main character until he attempts to save the life of a young woman sent to die at sea as part of a local ritual. In reaction to his attempted breach of the expected outcome, the locals sentence the stowaway to death by stoning as punishment. The main character tells the stowaway to wait a moment after the hail of rocks begins and then cry for help. The boy has dutifully remained silent as per the main characters request so when the locals hear the stowaway screams of pain during the stoning, it is easy for the main character to convince them “that God has forgiven him” and thus they should too.

This – the saving of the stowaway – is one of two isolated acts of the main characters to interfere with current perceived: both occur in climactic times of need, both attempts to save someone. These acts indicate that, unlike most people in the white Meadows, the main characters sees that the proceedings around him are wrong. And while he fails to act often, his small efforts to save a few do much in common polluting his character, raising him from the depths of purely despise bad guy TM. However, his actions aren’t enough. They aren’t enough for the artist he tries to save – he rotted away in prison. They weren’t enough for the stowaway – he eventually died from the stoning. Just as the stowaway died oh so close to finding his father (his father lived on the very next island that the main character visited), the main character is oh so close to powerful action that works. If only the main character had a tear gun of his own, maybe he’d start enacting some changes – he surely has more than enough ammunition as the state tear collector. Although, in true main character fashion he’s likely to just drop any tear gun like object in the ocean never to be seen again.

In the end, that’s the point The white Meadows is trying to get across – if people like the main character don’t take a stand, Iran will remain as it is – patriarchal, authoritarian, oppressive. Weakness, in all of its forms is a fuel, and it’s up to us all to figure out how to burn it effectively. If we intervene too late, our stowaway will still die. Purposeful action early and often will lead to change if you let it.