

Toronto International Film Festival 2018: Part 4

Damien Chazelle's *First Man*: Reduced in space—and opera singer Maria Callas, the Afghanistan war, small-town America

By Joanne Laurier
8 October 2018

This is the fourth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 6-16). The first article was posted September 28, the second on October 1 and the third on October 4.

First Man

Damien Chazelle's *First Man*—which opens in the US October 12—focuses on US astronaut Neil Armstrong (1930-2012) and his role in Apollo 11, the first manned mission to the moon.

The movie concentrates on the period from 1961 to the historic moon landing and walk on July 20, 1969. Based on the 2005 biography by James R. Hansen, *First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong*, Chazelle (*Whiplash* and *La La Land*) sets out to explore Armstrong's personal and professional life.

"This is a story about how hard it was, how much of a risk it was, how dangerous it was to all of those men," says *First Man* executive producer Adam Merims. "Neil started out in the Korean War as a pilot and then became a test pilot for the Air Force, then ultimately for NASA. At that time test pilots would die with alarming frequency, so many people in the early part of the story in his life were killed; yet Neil stayed true to his path and achieved what was previously considered unachievable."

Project Gemini is the training ground for the Apollo moon missions. In 1966, Armstrong (Ryan Gosling) becomes the first American civilian to fly in space, commanding the two-man Gemini 8 mission. During the voyage, the spacecraft begins to tumble out of control, and Armstrong skillfully overcomes the emergency.

Meanwhile, his wife Janet (Claire Foy), tries to maintain, for the sake of their two sons, some semblance of normalcy. Early on in the movie, Neil and Janet tragically lose a two-year-old daughter, Karen.

"It would be unreasonable to assume that it will have no effect," Neil says somberly, during his application for the Gemini program, when asked what impact his daughter's passing will have on his ability to carry out his duties. He is nonetheless selected and the Armstrong family moves from California to Houston, where their neighbors are the ill-fated astronaut Ed White (Jason Clarke) and his wife Pat (Olivia Hamilton). (White died, along with Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom and Roger Chaffee during a launch test in January 1967.)

When Project Apollo starts up, Armstrong is assigned to command one of its six flights.

The crew of Apollo 11, whose mission was the first lunar landing, includes Armstrong, Command Module Pilot Michael Collins (Lukas Haas) and Lunar Module Pilot Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin (Corey Stoll, playing a slightly cynical version of the astronaut).

Chazelle has taken great pains to recreate various aspects of the Apollo mission—from the reality of the control center to the details of the blast-off, and ultimately the space odyssey itself. In this, he relies on the talents of screenwriter Josh Singer, cinematographer Linus Sangren and composer Justin Hurwitz. Those actors playing directors of the space program include Kyle Chandler and Ciaran Hinds.

According to the movie's production notes, the "mission objective for Apollo 11 was to complete a national goal set by President John F. Kennedy on May 25, 1961: perform a crewed lunar landing and return to Earth. From launch to Earth landing it took 8 days, 3 hours, 18 min, and 35 seconds for these three Apollo 11 pilots to make history."

"I think we're going to the moon because it's in the nature of the human being to face challenges. It's by the nature of his deep inner soul," Armstrong says at a preflight news conference, "We're required to do these things just as salmon swim upstream."

An estimated 530 million people watch Armstrong's televised image and hear his voice describe his moon walk as he takes "one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

In 1999, in an article devoted to the moon landing, the WSWs observed that 30 years earlier, "For the first time in humanity's million-year rise from a purely animal existence, people left the Earth, traveled to another body in the solar system, and returned safely."

First Man, although concerned with a world-historic, world-changing event, has a limited goal and framework: the immediately lived and visceral experience of Armstrong's family life and his space travel adventures. Chazelle exerts much energy to reproduce the "feel" of traveling through space in a small capsule—tantamount to being inside a high-speed mixer. While there is an initial thrill and excitement in these sequences, the effect wears thin for lack of more substantial drama. As well, the scenes of Armstrong's family life generally proceed with little spark or nuance.

In the movie, the era of the 1960s merely washes over the viewer without leaving much of an imprint. There is a certain nostalgia. In Chazelle's view, perhaps this particular time was something of a Golden Age. But that is never fully worked through, one way or the other.

It was a period of tremendous upheaval and social contradictions, assassinations and mass protests, which the filmmakers attempt to reduce to and identify with Armstrong's personal contradictions. The astronaut's inner conflicts, dramatized through the medium of his daughter Karen's death, are not incidental or uninteresting, but they fail to shed a great deal of light on or explain the complex processes that made the space flight possible.

If Chazelle set out, even semi-unconsciously or intuitively, to make a film about the Apollo 11 mission because the event suggested that America in 1969 still stood for something progressive or valuable, as opposed to its present condition, this doesn't come through clearly. Nor does any other strong or compelling theme.

The subsequent collapse of the space program was connected to the overall economic and social decline of the US, the growth in social polarization, the buildup of the military and the monopolization of wealth by the billionaires.

In that same 1999 article, the WSWS commented, "The Moon landings were the product, not of individual brilliance or genius, but of a gigantic, sustained and highly organized collective effort. The astronauts, in the words of one chronicler of the space program, 'formed the apex of a social pyramid comprising the scientific, technical, and industrial power of a whole society.'

"It took 5,000 men and women to launch a lunar landing mission from the Kennedy Space Center, Florida. Thousands more were involved in tracking the spaceship to the Moon and back. Around the world, at Canberra, Australia; Goldstone, California; and Madrid, Spain, the 85-foot and 210-foot diameter antennas of the Deep Space Network kept radio and television communications open between the Earth and the Moon.

"The creation of an apparatus to fly men to the Moon and back required the organized effort of a major fraction of society. At the peak of the Apollo program, in 1966-1967, a contractor and civil service work force numbering 420,000 persons was employed in it. This included 90,000 scientists and engineers, 20,000 industrial firms, and 100 universities' (Richard S. Lewis, *From Vinland to Mars*, p. 212)."

The period of manned space exploration, inaugurated by Apollo 11, ended a little more than three years later. The Cold War gave the space program its political impetus, but once the Moon landings were accomplished, the US government turned its attention elsewhere.

In 2011, the WSWS wrote: "The end of the manned space program, along with the ongoing war by the US ruling class on scientific knowledge, testifies to the long-term decline of American capitalism, and exhaustion of the profit system as a whole, on a world scale."

Chazelle is not obliged to share this perspective, needless to say, but he might have been more intellectually and artistically ambitious and not settled for what has now become the norm: the luxuriant, conscientious presentation of mere surface appearance and immediate impressions.

Maria by Callas

From France, Tom Volf's *Maria by Callas* is an engrossing documentary about the legendary Greek-American opera soprano. An intimate portrait of Maria Callas (1923-1977) is presented through archival material, television interviews, home movies, family photographs and unpublished memoirs. Opera star Joyce DiDonato reads Callas' words, when recordings of Callas are unavailable.

Volf's research is meticulous. He tracked down a global array of people with expertise on Callas, filming interviews with 30 of the singer's friends in nearly a dozen countries who "opened up their cupboards and pulled out 8mm films, audio tape reels, letters, and photos. He quickly realized that a large part of this memorabilia was previously unseen and had never been shown in public before," according to the movie's production notes.

Says Volf: "I understood very quickly that she was not only a phenomenon in her lifetime, she was still a phenomenon in 2013, nearly four decades after her death."

One of the film's highlights is Callas' 1970 interview with commentator and television host David Frost. The 17-minute interview is interspersed throughout the documentary, which toggles between her career and personal life. A key theme of *Maria by Callas* is Maria's

comment to Frost, "There are two people in me actually, Maria and Callas ... If someone really tries to listen to me, he will find all of myself there." Volf is adept at presenting, as he says, "how the two communicate and sometimes struggle, and sometimes sacrifice one to the other."

One segment shows dedicated young people waiting, and sleeping, on line in New York City for a chance to hear Callas sing. Also mentioned is her notorious (she was ill) 1958 "Rome Cancellation," as well as her publicized conflict with the Metropolitan Opera's general manager (1950-1972) Rudolf Bing. There is, as well, in-depth footage of her complicated relationship with Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis. Longtime friend Nadia Stancioff (author of *Maria Callas Remembered*) and Georges Prêtre, one of her favorite conductors, also form part of the film's fabric.

Notably, Callas worked with Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini on his film, *Medea* (1969), her only film role, and developed a close friendship with the influential director and writer.

The film brings out the immense pressures exerted on Callas by the demands, on the one hand, of an art form that requires constant artistic obsession and near perfection and, on the other, of her status, in the words of a commentator, as "one of the world's first international celebrities, especially after she began her affair with shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis in 1959. The paparazzi couldn't get enough of her." The combined pressures may well have helped lead to her early death from a heart attack at the age of 53, while living in considerable isolation.

Undoubtedly, one of the film's most breathtaking moments is Callas' 1958 performance in concert of "Casta Diva" (Chaste Goddess), the famed aria from Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma*. Sung at the Théâtre National de l'Opéra in Paris, it is, according to the movie's production notes, "presented for the very first time in color and shows a Callas at the pinnacle of her career. We will see her *Norma* seven years later in the film, when she has to abandon the stage in Paris in 1965. It's the last time she ever sang it and her last but one performance ever on an operatic stage. One could say her career started with *Norma* (back in 1947) and ended with it."

Also featured are sublime performances of arias from Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata*—"Addio del passato" (Farewell to the Past, 1958); Georges Bizet's *Carmen*—"L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" (Love is a Rebellious Bird, 1962); and Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*—"Vissi d'arte, Vissi d'amore" (I Lived for Art, I Lived for Love, 1963).

Angels are Made of Light

American documentarian James Longley (*Iraq in Fragments*) weaves *Angels are Made of Light* around a group of students and teachers at Kabul, Afghanistan's Daqiqi Balkhi School. Over a three-year period, Longley traced the lives of brothers Sohrab, Rostam and Yaldash, who are caught between their dreams and aspirations and the American-led occupation of the country.

Another young boy, Nabiullah, struggling to keep his father's food stand afloat, imagines life in his country with neither the Americans nor the Taliban. The school's elderly cleaning woman recalls her years under the Soviet-backed government in the 1980s.

In the movie's background, an election is underway to replace American-puppet Hamid Karzai, whose presidency lasted until 2014.

Grainy video footage shows a 20th century Afghanistan that is not ripped to shreds by American bombs.

Longley's approach is non-committal and passive. However, this is not the overriding sentiment of the people whom he films. "How long must we live in despair and poverty?" asks the mother of the three brothers. Other comments include: "Our government and the rich people think that the world belongs to them;" "The president has already been chosen by the Americans;" "Whoever takes power won't benefit us;" "Because of the Americans, there is nothing but war."

Jirga

Australian director Benjamin Gilmour directed *Jirga* about an Australian former soldier who undertakes a perilous journey back to a remote village in Afghanistan to make amends to the family of a man he killed. *Jirga* was originally to be filmed in Pakistan, but when the Pakistani secret service read the script, it blocked production and financial backing was withdrawn.

The Toronto festival notes explain that “Political censorship resulted in lost funding, which led to Gilmour and Smith [lead actor Sam Smith] deciding to scrape the film together themselves with little money in a highly charged environment, casting real-life former Taliban members and filming in the mountains of Jalalabad.”

At the movie’s question-and-answer session, director Gilmour said that “to have peace” in war-torn countries like Afghanistan, the soldiers of imperialist armies, must “look into the eyes of their victims and give a genuine apology.” Despite interesting shots of Afghanistan, *Jirga* is a hopeless, moralistic tale that avoids discussing the nature of the American (and Australian) invasion and occupation of Afghanistan—now in its 17th bloody year.

Monrovia, Indiana

Monrovia, Indiana, octogenarian Frederick Wiseman’s 42nd non-fiction feature, is, according to the festival’s description, a “study of small-town Midwesterners who tilted the 2016 US election.” In other words, a look at the residents of a town that is a supposed microcosm of Trump support. This, however, contradicts the declaration the director made at the festival’s question-and answer-period, during which he asserted his intention was simply to make a documentary about a small American town.

In the film, a prominent sign reads: “Welcome to Indiana, home to a million concealed carry permits; enjoy your stay.” With images of corn fields, pig farms, a run-down town center, church sermons and ceremonies, local council meetings and a Masonic lodge event, Wiseman may covertly be making a statement about what he sees as backwardness and ignorance—the same presumption as the festival programmers exhibit.

Maintaining a chilly distance from his subjects, Wiseman avoids uncovering a more complex reality, thereby rendering impossible any genuine insight into or accurate political assessment about this community of around 1,000 people, the vast majority of whom are no doubt suffering under the Trump administration.

To be continued

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>