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Children of the Revolution: Director Narimane Mari on her Award-Winning *Bloody Beans*



by [Paul Dallas](#)
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The focus this year's edition of the Copenhagen International Documentary Festival (commonly known as CPH:DOX) was squarely on the political, with programs exploring the intersection of art and activism. Guest curators Ai Weiwei and The Yes Men programmed eclectic sidebars under the festival's theme "Everything is Under Control." A section devoted to Chinese documentaries emphasized the medium's vital role in surveying the state, and the festival added a new award explicitly addressing the recent crop of documentaries that operate between investigative journalism and activism.

Taking the festival's top prize was *Bloody Beans*, the first feature by French-Algerian filmmaker Narimane Mari, a playfully engaged reverie on revolt and revolution in Algiers. Taking place over one hot summer day in a poor neighborhood of the city, the film follows a group of children on a surreal journey that ultimately becomes a lyrical reenactment of the country's fight for independence. It begins on a beach where a group of boys are lounging in the sun, moves to a house where they rescue a woman from an abusive uncle, and culminates in a hypnotic nocturnal sequence at a Christian graveyard, where the children enact a shadow play and ultimately abduct a young French soldier.

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of Algeria's independence from French rule, and Mari's film evokes a

place where past and present, the imagined and the real, all coexist in a landscape changed with the threat of violence. It's allegorical narrative, at times recalling a postcolonial *Zéro de conduite* (1933), adheres to the logic of emotion rather than political rhetoric. Mari's remarkably fluid camera captures a relaxed intimacy with the children that gives their performances the feel of documented play. The pulsing electronic score by French duo Zombie Zombie pushes the film into trance territory, especially during the extended cemetery scene, which plays equally as a music video and an homage to silent film.

Mari's film shares tonal and conceptual correspondences with Spanish director Oliver Laxe's *You Are All Captains* (2010), a personal film, part ethnography and part fiction, that was as much about filmmaking as it was a collective portrait of a group of local children in Tangiers. Mari's film, however, feels homegrown, and rooted in the particularities of its landscape. If there's a message buried inside this decidedly oblique film, it's perhaps best summarized by surrealist poet Antonin Artaud, whom Mari quotes at the end: "It's better to be than to obey."

Filmmaker: Tell me about how *Bloody Beans* came about. What was the inspiration, and how did the production come together?

Mari: Last year was the 50th anniversary of the independence in Algeria, and I just had a question on my mind—what do we have to say about [it now]? The only [truth] that we have ... is that now it's a free country—that they [made] us free, and that they [won] a war for their freedom. [I was interested in showing] the emotion of freedom and the possibility of freedom. But I also wanted to go [beyond] the war and to transgress the reality. And to do that, children are the best and I want to play that with them. I want[ed] to [capture] the feelings of their liberty and that's why [the film defies] rules of narrative—I wanted to explore the consequences [through] the structure of the movie.

Filmmaker: It seems to be about the relationship between imagination and freedom. Tell me about the children. How did you cast them how did you find them?

Mari: My desire [was not to] cast because it's so difficult to cast children. I arrived in an area and [I thought,] I have to work with the children that come from the same area [so] there is no social difference. They may not know each other but they see each other when they buy their bread.

Filmmaker: What neighborhood is this?

Mari: It's Bologhine, it's Bab El Oued. It's a very poor area in Algiers. And I just go there and I really want to shoot there and I say, "who wants to come can come" [between the ages of 8-14]. And I have 40 children coming. And I say, "My God! What am I'm going to do?" And I don't want to make choice, so I say I have to work with them [all].

Filmmaker: There are about twenty children in the film. How did you narrow down the group?

Mari: I [rehearsed for] 2 months with them—just work[ed] with the voice not with the script or anything like that. I don't want them to read anything. I just want them to begin [to explore the] story together. But [the children had to be available to rehearse all day], and those who don't come once or twice I say, you don't want to [participate]. It was very democratic situation. We were in a theater and I find one play [for them to perform], and I let them choose who would play each part. We discovered together who were the good performers and I let them agree. It takes time in the beginning to think like this, but when it's ok it's a very good situation.

Filmmaker: So, the children understood that some would get the roles because they naturally emerged as better performers.

MARI: Exactly, or they [would suggest it's] more funny for him to do that.

Filmmaker: What's the significance of the "bloody" beans?

Mari: It's the name of a plate of food that's very common among the poorer classes. The red beans are called *loubia habra* in Arabic. It was eaten during the war. I used "bloody" [in the title] because [in an early draft of the film] a young soldier die[s] with the bread in his hand with the sauce, the red sauce [which is] also the blood of the war ... but it was [too] hard to do that and I really don't want to show blood.

Mari: In France, they call them *loubia hamra*—sometimes they speak Arabic also! [laughs] I talk with my producer and I say we have to use [the English title] and not “Haricot rouge” because I don’t like the French translation. *Bloody Beans*—there is a song with that.

Filmmaker: It’s more musical in English?

Mari: Yes... Perhaps because I don’t understand English so well [laughs]. But it’s musical.

Filmmaker: How much of the story did you script, and how much emerged through the rehearsals?

Mari: I [had it scripted beforehand]. The only part of the movie I created [through rehearsals] is the part of the cemetery. I [saw] the cemetery where I play[ed] when I was young. In my script, [the children stay in] the street. But when I see the cemetery, I cannot let this beautiful place out of my movie. The opposite culture of religion between the Christian French and the Muslim Arabic people was important. [To the children,] the French are [the] strangers. The cross and the angels—they make you scared because they are foreign. They are more afraid of the dead people in the cemetery than of the military. One of them says, “I know the military can shoot me, but the other one I don’t know.” But [the children also] try to understand and to make sense through their play. And I really want[ed] to do that. If they must choose between the military in the street and the ghost in the cemetery, they choose the military.

Filmmaker: The film begins on the beach, and then moves to a house where the children rescue a woman being terrorized. You played the woman?

Mari: Yes.

Filmmaker: Tell me about this scene. The man is wearing a pig’s mask, and it seems he’s play-acting a role and also genuinely threatening.

Mari: [The man is] a colonialist and he fights [with his] niece because she loves an Algerian. [The scene] is the story of my mother and my father. They love[ed] each other and my mother she’s French and my father is Algerian. My mother’s family they take her [away] because she loves an Algerian.

Filmmaker: Did she go back to France or did in Algeria?

Mari: No, she stay for a long time, [but] now because of the terrorists and because she’s a little older she go [back] to France. I just want to show that there is a love story [in the film], and [to explore the] consequences of a love story, and how the children perceive it. It’s complex because I say a lot of things at this moment. I say things for Algerian people, and I say things for French people.

Filmmaker: I had the impression the woman was from Spain, not France.

Mari: This is because I [didn’t] want [the character] to be French. How do you say *Pied-Noir*— you know this? It [means] “black foot.” It’s [the name used for European immigrants] who come to live [in Algeria]—Spanish, French it’s the same exactly. But it’s a little different because [the Spanish] are not at war, and they [were] occupied. For them, [Algeria] is a place that they don’t have to and they don’t care also about Algerian people at this time.

Filmmaker: What is the significance of the pig mask?

Mari: At first, I wanted him to be an ogre, and I found a guy [to play the role but he didn’t] want at the last time do it. Because [this man] beats a woman, he’s a pig. That’s why he wears the mask. You say that when you are [young], you say “pig.” Also, for Muslim children, pig is [very] bad. If you go to colonize [the world], you are a pig. I’m sorry about that because I love pig but he’s not a real pig you see? [The children] say to him: “Dégage!” It means “go out.” And this is the word the people say in the Arab Spring [when] they say go out with the dictator.

Filmmaker: The film feels allegorical for a number of reasons, perhaps the main one being that the children are

fighting for their freedom from the outside.

Mari: The time is not cut between [Algeria's independence] and now only because I think we never move really from history. I think that Algeria is still not a peaceful country. There is a lot of trouble like terrorism. When a people [is] coloniz[ed], [they] always have this sensation on [the] body [that] the world is [at] war.

I just want to show [the] situation [with] the French people [during the war], and [the condition of civil war] like in Syria now. When the enemies are in two different countries, it's more clear. It's horrible but it's clear. [During the war] the French [military] fight the French people who are in the OAS [a dissident paramilitary organization]. It was a horrible organization at this time they say no, we stay there, we don't move. The French they come with the plane and they shoot them but there is French people, Arabic people there and they don't care about who they shoot. It's crazy.

Filmmaker: Did you feel that the children understand the war and the politics?

Mari: I'm not sure that the children have all the reality. They are not clear and there is also two parts. There is the story, the history, like the French war that they win but also the terrorism period. The first part they look at it like they are heroes, but it is not the reality. And the second part lasts much longer.

Filmmaker: Tell me about the film's production.

Mari: We shot for only nine days. And [I do] one take [per scene]. I don't repeat. And we shot chronologically. It's simple for the children and simple for me.

Filmmaker: That's a very short shoot. Was that because you rehearsed for so long?

Mari: Yes, exactly. Then we understand what we have to do but we do it very naturally. If you [ask the children to] repeat [a scene]...you're lost. For me, the best is to never stop the camera and say "cut," but to turn around turn back and [work in circles]. Sometimes I play with that when it's really difficult with emotion.

Filmmaker: Are you shooting with multiple cameras?

Mari: No, I take only one but I was a little afraid because I say, "Oh my God they are too [many children]!" I take risk because the d.p., he's not a professional. He's a photographer. I really love him because of that. I prefer my images to be more fragile and to maybe not [have a lot of coverage] but to be very clear with the narration.

Filmmaker: These are long takes.

Mari: Yeah, for the first [scene on the beach] it's hard because I make it in one [shot]. I prefer to play [the whole] scene, and this way the d.p. can dance with [the children]. Sometime he say to me "Tell them to go out, because he cannot go with my camera!" I say, "No you have to go. They don't care about you, really."

Filmmaker: He had to improvise.

Mari: He [had to] understand how they move. If [he] broke this, [he would disrupt] the dance. We all trust that's what's happening. They are very observant together. It's a game between them, between me, between the subject and it's funny.

Filmmaker: What kind of camera were you using?

Mari: The Panasonic AF. It's very beautiful, very small. It's not a technical camera. I can use it also.

Filmmaker: And did you were recording a lot of location?

Mari: Yes. It was horrible for the [sound] guy because he's running around, and it's not very portable. It's difficult.

Filmmaker: Tell me about working with Zombie Zombie. A third of the soundtrack is only their music.

...I really love them from because it's a story, a unique story, I have a story and they have a story, it's two ways to [approach] the subject of the situation. [At first] I don't want music. I say, "I want noise, different noises." When I discovered [Zombie Zombie] I say, "Oh my God they are playing like animals sometimes!" I heard animals, I heard wind, I heard car, I heard a lot of things in their music. It's not an intellectual music for me and I need that for my movie. I need that it's more savage. I show[ed] them the [footage] and they say yes because [they found the images] exciting. They [did not know the] story. No idea of the subject of the movie; they just [knew] the story of this war, which is not their story.

Filmmaker: How did the collaboration work?

Mari: I progress on the edit. I just it to them when I think I'm finish and I say look I found this in the beginning and sometimes I [make]change and they say no. [Laughs] When the children are on the beach [at] night, this is where I need the life and the death at the same time [in] the music, on the song. I say [to Zombie Zombie], "It's like [the children] have armor" with the [soundtrack]. We play like this but I give them [very little instruction]. They play exactly like they want, but they never make, "Oh yes this is beautiful if you put this here."

Filmmaker: Tell me about the shadow scene in the cemetery. It's almost like silent cinema.

Mari: I think all the movie is like this. [Laughs] It's where we try to cut with the reality, to transgress this horrible reality. The children are celebrating their win. I try to show the power of [the imagination] of children. With nothing, [they] play and [they] transform [everything]. And this is what I want [to show in the] movie.

Filmmaker: The children seem to transcend their own bodies.

Mari: You can be what you want and you can play with the shadows—there is no danger. You're not going to kill somebody; you can play to kill but you never kill. A game of possibility, but you don't need to be on the true to understand that you have power or you see it's really opposite with what some people think that we have to be on the reality to be a powerful situation of human and it's not true. I just want to say that it's not true.

Filmmaker: Is this idea connected to the quote by poet Antonin Artaud?

Mari: Artaud he's a crazy guy, he's a crazy friend. I think that he travels with his mind [beyond] where we can go. For me, the silver fish [in the poem] are these children because I really found them in the sea. And he say at the end, "Is it better to be than to obey." This is the real message and I think, "My God this is exactly the sense of all my movie!" If you obey because you always have to obey, you cannot transgress the reality. I think that you cannot feel the freedom, the possibility. The children never obey the reality of the war.

They ask the [captured] soldier, "Why do you kill Algerians?" and he say, "I don't have choice." And it's true. Some young soldiers don't have choice. One of the children say, "We always have choice!" [but] it's not true in certain situations. I'm sorry for [the soldier]. He dies because he obey. [Laughs] We die too but don't obey. I really love this poem. That's why I translate it in the end.

Look, there is 50 years of time and we don't have the truth and it's only the perception and sensation. [Most] documentaries talk to the mind with facts, but I think [there are other ways] that you can touch more people. I think more you can open it's good.

Filmmaker: Have you shown the film there in Algeria at all yet?

Mari: No, not at all [but] I'm going to do it in December. I want to show it in a lot of areas. I think that it's going to be difficult because, like I said, right now [Algeria's stories are] more [about being a] martyr and [are] very serious. In my movie, we do many things that [might be troubling]. Some people say it's going to be okay [because] they are children and when they are children you can do all. Two weeks ago in Algeria, I see a short movie two weeks about a love story [set during the] terrorism. The people in the cinema [were only concerned with the facts] of the terrorism. They asked, "Why you don't show this? Why you don't show that?" It's because they need their own story. And me I just say, "Fuck the story, just live outside the story." I think my movie will give confusion.

Filmmaker: Will *Blood Beams* be released in Europe?

Mari: I hope so. I try to now because the Algerian Ministry of Culture really helped me—they give me money to make the movie. And after, I say to them that I [still] need [money to make a] 35mm print for the movie. They say they can help me with distribution.

Filmmaker: The cinemas in Algeria only have 35mm projectors?

Mari: Yes. For me it's so expensive to make a print.

Filmmaker: And you're already at work on a new film?

Mari: Yes, it's a story [set] in 1860 in the Algerian desert at twilight. There are slaves. It's about colonialism, too. But more crazy, I think, than what I've done before.

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