

## Absent images

BY ZOÉ COSSON

On the barren Afghan film scene, director Salim Shaheen has been tirelessly working behind and in front of the camera, as if possessed by an insatiable hunger to produce ever more, ever faster: to date, he has 111 films to his name. This iconic film-lover was the subject for Sonia Kronlund's *Nothingwood*, a documentary that was released in 2017 and shines a light on a country starved of film and images.

The documentary-maker's first foray on Afghan soil dates back to 2000, at a time when filming living beings was illegal, leaving directors forced to capture nothing more than running rivers and impassive mountains. Kronlund discovered a civil war-torn country entirely lacking in means of production and real-life images, existing in the shadow cast by omnipresent censorship. Yet the young Taliban members patrolling Kabul insisted that Sonia Kronlund take their photo, smiling and posing for the camera with their Kalashnikovs and four-wheel drives. As the film-maker herself says, "their need for images was stronger still than the self-inflicted ban they were tasked with enforcing".

Thirteen years later, Sonia Kronlund set off to scout locations for *Nothingwood*. The film's title is a reference to the name that Salim Shaheen gave to the country's single, low-budget production company: "This isn't Hollywood, it's not Bollywood, it's Nothingwood". The documentary goes backstage, showing sets lit with ramshackle DIY projectors, a teenage boom operator equipped with a minute microphone wobbling on the end of a piece of string, a hodgepodge crew where it's hard to tell the difference between professional extras and crowds of passers-by.

Captured in film by the up-close-and-personal mobile camera work of Lubomir Bakchev (photography director for French film-maker Abdellatif Kechiche), *Nothingwood* replicates the contagious energy of Afghan film sets, as well as challenging stereotypes of the country with a series of off-camera vignettes: Movie buff Taliban members, laughing faces, and dram-loving policemen and unveiled women who risk their lives to sing on their rooftops.

Complete with trailers, Afghan television archive material and *making-of* extracts shot by the director's sons and amateurs on set, the documentary offers up a multi-faceted testimony to the iconic film-maker, without ever falling into the trap of blind devotion. Although Salim Shaheen himself recounts his life story as if it were a Hollywood saga, the film focuses on the complexity of the man behind the legend, his ambiguous aspects and his shortcomings, such as when we see photographs on display in his office's courtyard, in which the beaming

director poses with his hand on the shoulder of the terrifying Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Pashtun warlord and leader of the *Hezb-e Islami*, one of the world's most extremist Islamist fundamentalist groups. Other photos show him wooing the former president of the republic, killed in a suicide attack, and rubbing shoulders with a line-up of other controversial figures.

In short, *Nothingwood* emerges as much more than a film about the Afghan people's lack of images and desperate need for film, and much more than the burlesque film of Salim Shaheen, the indisputable master of Z movies. In Afghanistan, the power of images is taken extremely seriously, by both their censors and defenders, as exemplified by the persistence of the director and his volunteer actors, all of whom are ready to risk their lives if it means standing a chance of showcasing their vision of the society they inhabit. To die or to film? That is the question. And the director, as well as the many people involved in the making of his films, have made their choice.