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Stranger than Fiction

18 OCTOBER 2018 | LORENA MUÑOZ-ALONSO



On 3 November 1996, a car accident near the small town of Susurluk in Northwest Turkey exposed the close links between the Turkish government, organised crime, and the armed forces. The car had four occupants: an MP from the DYP party, a former ultra-rightist militant and contract killer on Interpol's red list, a senior police official, and a beauty queen. Only the MP survived the crash. The event, credited with unveiling the "deep state" operating in Turkey at the height of the Kurdish–Turkish conflict, is the inspiration behind *The Scar*, the ambitious new project by artist duo Noor Afshan Mirza & Brad Butler, that is on view at Delfina Foundation until December 1.

This London premiere is a homecoming of sorts, since the seeds of *The Scar* were planted during a residency that the duo undertook at the Foundation in 2015. The project takes the form of an immersive installation composed of three films (or chapters) complemented by an atmospheric sound piece and a series of sculptures, including the head of a wild boar weighed down by a large cluster of hanging balls (plenty of symbolism to unpack here). Despite the factual material that inspired the work, Mirza & Butler, who live between London and Istanbul, have eschewed a documentary approach in favour of a fictional exploration of the events and its imagined aftermath.

In the first chapter, titled *The State of State*, we get acquainted with the four protagonists of the event: the Chief of Police Kaptan, the politician Aga, the state assassin Reis and his lover, the beautiful Yenge. As they sit and drive in an old Mercedes Benz, the four characters engage in an enactment of gender archetypes: Kaptan and Reis display an excess of brute masculinity, revelling in violence and authority. The politician, on the other hand, plays at soft power, seeking relevance through articulacy, but his speeches turn out to be full of populist clichés and his political stance comes across as floppy at best. Yenge, meanwhile, looks away, trying to make herself inconspicuous among the men. Quite early on, one suspects there's more to Yenge than docile submission—her gaze is too astute and critical, and in one hallucinatory interlude, we see her driving away alone, smiling, free—but it's not until the second film, called *The Mouth of the Shark*, that her own interior monologue takes centre stage. Here, Yenge seems to be on the cusp of emancipation, or at least in the very early stages of rebellion. She reflects on how her own mother succumbed to domestic violence and how she's ended up in a similar situation, where anger, possessiveness, and violence prevail too.

Sometimes, Yenge steps out of her interiority to ask the men to open the car's windows for fresh air. She says it is "stuffy" inside, but one gets the sense that she is choking on the fumes of toxic masculinity surrounding her. This second chapter, in which a sense of acceleration stands out, takes us to the cusp of the accident, which we never get to see. This ellipsis fosters a tragic sense of eternal recurrence: the catastrophe happens just as the woman awakens from passivity, preventing her self-determination, while the politician, the only survivor, is able to continue with his misdemeanours. Is there a way out from the status quo?

Yes, Mirza & Butler decisively say. The last chapter, a three-channel film titled *The Gossip*, offers a post-patriarchal scenario embodied by a group of women from all over the world, who discuss means to gain political agency and fulfil their feminist agenda as they gather in front of a fire in the forest. Despite its speculative nature, when I asked Mirza about it she refused to call this chapter "science-fiction", finding the genre too distancing from the reality they present. "We are not so far from it. If we changed a small number of things that are within our reach we could get to this paradigm," she told me, and I could sense that she truly meant it. *The Scar*, as it happens, is a film with a happy ending of sorts.

"All you need you to make a movie is a girl and gun", said Jean-Luc Godard (apocryphally, at least) while promoting his 1964 film *Bande à part*. There's indeed a girl and gun in *The Scar*, but Mirza & Butler have stretched the conventions of cinema way beyond that classic device. Their hallucinatory approach uses the tropes of Magical Realism, film noir and feminism to tear apart deep-seated political and gender narratives. It's a rather apt stance to prod at our most urgent political woes, I think.... After all, didn't someone say that truth is stranger than fiction?

(Images credit: *The Scar* by Noor Afshan Mirza and Brad Butler. Installation view at Delfina Foundation, 2018. Credit Tim Bowditch. Courtesy Delfina Foundation)

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