

# The Spectre(s) of *Non-Alignment(s)*

The significance of staging an exhibition around the Non-Aligned Movement in Singapore is underscored in Naeem Mohaiemen's three-channel film installation *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017), one of three works presented in *Non-Aligned*, an exhibition curated at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore by Ute Meta Bauer around the legacy of the union of nation-states born out of the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung, which sought to remake the world after colonization.

Composed largely of archival footage of and around the 1973 Non-Aligned Movement summit in Algiers and Mohaiemen's tracings of its echoes in the present, the film opens with a speech being delivered by Sinnathamby Rajaratnam at that 1973 NAM meeting. The author of Singapore's national pledge scathingly points out the gathering's reliance on the world powers at the time, later offering a warning about a horizon of new cold wars to follow the old one that has just ended, the rumblings of which he observed in the very room in which NAM was assembled—an observation that echoes sociologist Stuart Hall's description of a dissolving politics of the centre that “reveal[ed] the contradictions and social antagonisms... gathering beneath,” as expressed in John Akomfrah's *Unfinished Conversation* (2012), the second work in *Non-Aligned*, which tracks Hall's life and times.

Broadly seeking to navigate a decolonial path out of Western imperialism and Soviet communism, a Cold War binary that divided the world along American and Soviet lines (plus to a lesser extent China), the Non-Aligned Movement formed a key component of the so-called Third World project—what historian Arif Dirlik dubbed “the neoliberal avatar of what would become broadly defined as the Global South.”<sup>1</sup> The first NAM summit was held in 1961 in Belgrade, after the Declaration of Brijuni was signed in 1956 by three of NAM's founding leaders, Josip Tito of Yugoslavia, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, and Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt—an event that historian Vijay Prashad, who appears in Mohaiemen's film, has called “The Third World's Yalta.”

That year, the Hungarian Revolution and Suez Crisis erupted—both instances of colonial aggression, whether on the part of Britain, France and Israel or the Soviet Union, and anti-colonial resistance from the perspective of Egypt and Hungary. Both events marked for Stuart Hall “the beginning of [his] new left experience”. Hall notes in *Unfinished Conversation* that somewhere between the invasions of Hungary (the Soviet Union entered the country to suppress the popular uprising against it) and Egypt (prompted by Nasser's nationalizing of the Suez Canal), “the idea of a democratic, socialist anti-imperial politics was born.” For Hall, this politics included a future where hybridity would become the norm, as the legacies of colonialism would continue to shape generations across the world who, like him, could claim no single point of origin in the composition of their cultural and historical identities. (As Hall proposed, identity, like history, is an unfinished conversation.) Such was the politics of the Third World, in which an anti-imperialist transnational movement connected the peoples of the ex-colonies with the diasporas living in the colonial centres.

But as demonstrated in Otolith Group's *Nucleus of the Great Union* (2017), the third work in *Non-Aligned*, this transnationality was not singularly defined or by any means neatly unified. Unfolding as a series of collapsing and expanding windows and clicks on a desktop, one of the first frames in the video essay is archival footage, posted on YouTube, showing an interview with Kwame Nkrumah in 1957, the year Ghana gained independence. Ghana's first prime minister, Nkrumah was a key figure in the former Gold Coast's emancipation from British colonial occupation and a leading voice in the pan-African movement. Nkrumah spent ten formative years studying in the United States, where he encountered the writings of Marcus Garvey, "which he described as the most influential texts on his political thinking," and began "translating Garvey's black nationalism into a vision of pan-African federation."<sup>2</sup> In 1945, he organized the fifth Pan-African congress in London with the likes of Marxist historian C.L.R. James and Pan-Africanist journalist George Padmore, which "developed an account of decolonization in which self-determination was the first step towards African union and international federation" – thus shaping what political scientist Adom Getachew describes as "the first phase of anticolonial worldmaking in the age of decolonization."<sup>3</sup>

*Nucleus of the Great Union* tracks the Black Atlantic thread of Nkrumah's legacy from the outset, as the window playing his interview is joined by other frames, including a letter from Nkrumah welcoming African American novelist Richard Wright to the Gold Coast, a newspaper clipping announcing Wright's arrival in 1953, marking his first time on the continent, and a google image search of book covers for *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, which Wright published in 1954 on his experiences of the political campaigns for independence in West Africa. What follows is an unfolding of the roughly 1,500-image archive of photographs that Wright took throughout his travels, which he intended to show with his book yet was blocked from doing so by his publisher. Amid the frames, some accompanied by captions drawn from Wright's notes and correspondence with Nkrumah, are windows tracking Otolith Group's attempts at gaining access to the negatives and paper prints from Wright's archive, which is housed in the Special Collections at the Beinecke Library in Yale University in the United States. Voiceover narration is provided by historian Saidiya Hartman, who reads excerpts from the book tracking her own experience of Africa as a Black American, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2006), which relates to Wright's feelings of estrangement and alienation from the continent.

As scholar Kevin Kelly Gaines notes, Wright's writings on Ghana garnered much criticism, plus a late endorsement – after an initial rejection of the book – by an eventually-exiled Nkrumah. Rather than play into "expectations of romantic solidarity" in "the diasporic discourse of 'return' to the ancestral homeland," Wright produced an "unsentimental account of the poverty and alienation of Gold Coast Africans" that was critical of the traditional cultures he witnessed, which he apparently saw as being tied up with colonialist manipulation and control.<sup>4</sup> In Hartman's case, she is heard in *Nucleus of the Great Union* talking about "appearing a foolish woman" – who "acted as if slaves existed only in the past" and "dispossession were her inheritance alone" – to "boys [who] imagined the wealth and riches they would possess if they lived in the States" and "wished their ancestors had been slaves."

Apparently, George Padmore defended Wright's writings on Ghana to a critical W.E.B. Du Bois, "pointing out that whatever its flaws, Wright had captured 'the challenge of the barefoot masses against the black aristocracy and middle class'."<sup>5</sup> Put another way, to quote Gaines again while invoking Fanon's analysis of colonialism's conditioning of its colonized elites, Wright connected "the profound alienation, both material and spiritual, of the diaspora condition with



the devastating psychological impact of colonialism on Gold Coast Africans,” and regarded “rural poverty, illiteracy, and otherworldly religion as emblematic of... a repressive social order maintained by racist brutality.”<sup>6</sup> In this frame, Gaines posits, Wright “doubtless saw himself as the beneficiary of a black experience of Western modernity whose secular, rational character would give rise to universalist antiracist struggles.”<sup>7</sup>

One year after publishing *Black Power*, Wright would attend the 1955 Bandung Conference and write a book about the experience titled *The Colour Curtain* (1956), in which he similarly grapples with that double bind of constructing an anti-colonial, anti-imperial movement through the very system that the post-colonial nations sought to resist and indeed overcome. In a chapter titled ‘Race and Religion at Bandung’ — what Wright called “two of the most powerful and irrational forces in the world”<sup>8</sup> — he quotes a number of speeches by state representatives, concluding with Filipino diplomat and public intellectual Carlos P. Romulo, whose observations Wright calls “straight and honest.”<sup>9</sup> Romulo proclaims the age of European empire over and cautions against continuing the racist doctrine of the Western colonizers. He then, quoting Wright, “squared up to facts” by acknowledging that aside from the white world’s fostering of racism, it has also fostered art, literature, “and, above all, political thought and an astounding advancement of scientific knowledge.”<sup>10</sup>

All of which aligned with Wright’s understanding of the African diaspora’s contradictory roots in the traumatic confrontation with modernity as a result of kidnap, dispersion and exile in the West, which “in turn,” writes Gaines, became “the catalyst and means for the expression of an emancipatory modernity through black radicalism.”<sup>11</sup> Not to mention Hall’s point, per *Unfinished Conversation*, that the social and political crises rocking Britain from the 1960s to 1980s was “not a crisis of race” but rather a crisis that was punctuated and periodized by it. That is, a crisis with roots in the capitalist conditions of class, empire, history and modernity, not to mention a (racist) imperialist exceptionalism (and supremacy) whereby any understanding of colonialism’s imposed ramifications was — and is — either dismissed, forgotten, or unseen by the colonial classes (and peoples).

That contradiction could also be located in the United Nations, which Romulo described at Bandung as a young institution that operates “more [as] a mirror of the world than an effective instrument for changing it,” since it is “subject to all the pressures and difficulties of national rivalries and power conflicts, large and small.”<sup>12</sup> At the time of the UN’s establishment, writes Getachew, “the deep continuity between the imperial world order and the United Nations was embodied in the presence of Jan Smuts” at a UN conference in San Francisco in 1945.<sup>13</sup> The fact “that the

same man who had developed the mandates system and envisioned extending apartheid from South Africa to Kenya was now appealing for a preamble that affirmed human rights," writes Getachew, "struck W.E.B. Du Bois as deeply ironic."<sup>14</sup>

It was from this complex, enmeshed web of incongruities that a revolutionary period of decolonization arose, with the 1960s proving a high point in the struggle. By the start of that decade, writes Getachew, "anticolonial nationalists had successfully captured the UN and transformed the General Assembly into a platform for the international politics of decolonization."<sup>15</sup> This sea-change became evident in the unanimous passing of UN Resolution 1514 (XV) in 1960—which proclaimed "the necessity of bringing colonialism in all its forms and manifestations to a speedy and unconditional end" and declared that "all people have a right to self-determination"—bar nine conspicuous abstentions from Australia, Belgium, the Dominican Republic, France, Portugal, Spain, the Union of South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States<sup>16</sup>—followed by a resolution recognizing the right of the Algerian people to self-determination and independence. The establishment of the Special Committee on Decolonization followed in 1962, the year that six million Algerians voted in favour of 'Algérie algérienne' in a referendum to approve the Evian Accords.

Then in 1964, the G77 was formed in the interests of developing countries, and the first United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) was held in Geneva to respond to "growing concerns about the place of developing countries in international trade."<sup>17</sup> The intention was to address increasing imbalances in the post-war economic order designed to "provide a framework of monetary and financial stability" and "foster global economic growth and the growth of international trade"—as characterized by the Bretton Woods Agreement, which reflected the economic upper-hand the United States had gained as a result of World War II.<sup>18</sup> Signed in 1944 at a global conference organized by the US Treasury, Bretton Woods was characterized by the establishment of a stable global exchange rate that pegged currencies to the US dollar and in turn the US dollar to gold, and saw the establishment of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

It was amid these strides that the Non-Aligned Movement was established, and for a time the UN was the mechanism through which much of the decolonial struggle was at once legitimized and advanced. In 1963, for instance, the UN Security Council's membership saw the expansion of its permanent five-member council, composed of the victors of World War II, to increase the number of non-permanent members from six to ten—as pointed out in 2018, the only enlargement that has occurred to the body since.<sup>19</sup>

But amid the victories were ruptures. In 1961, Patrice Lumumba, first prime minister of the newly-independent Republic of Congo, was assassinated; in 2001, a parliamentary inquiry found that Belgian "officials, ministers and even Belgium's King Baudouin either plotted to kill Lumumba or were aware that others were doing so."<sup>20</sup> Then in 1966, Kwame Nkrumah was deposed in a coup described in one US Government memo as "a fortuitous windfall" given Nkrumah's "strongly pro-Communist leanings" and the new military regime's "almost pathetically pro-Western stance."<sup>21</sup> As Getachew writes, "Although the coup was backed by the United States, it was not without popular support among Ghanaians reeling from economic crisis and political suppression."<sup>22</sup> Writing on Ghana in 1966, William B. Harvey describes an economy "shattered by a disastrous drop in the international price of cocoa, by the waste of resources on non-productive prestige projects, and by increasing corruption among governmental officials."<sup>23</sup>

Of course, the situation in Ghana was not unique. In 1976, NAM scholar A.W. Singham described the 1960s as a time when developing countries were being encouraged to borrow, whether from private banks or international institutions like the IMF, in order to pay for “essential imports” and developmental projects.<sup>24</sup> (The UN officially termed it the “Development Decade,” writes historian Giuliano Garavini, which aligned with US foreign policy of “win[ning] over international communism through common aid policies and by stimulating growth in poorer countries.”<sup>25</sup>) The conditions of this borrowing accelerated in the 1970s, when the US abandoned the convertibility of its currency to gold in 1971 and effectively untethered the international exchange rate system, with the resulting fluctuations heavily impacting the debt load—not to mention the interest rates therein—of developing countries.<sup>26</sup>

Soon enough, writes Getachew, “To be a small postcolonial country in a big world of uneven trade relations would soon entail being caught in indebtedness,” with an increasing reliance on aid and debt “exacerb[ing] dependence on powerful states and institutions.”<sup>27</sup> All of which illustrated that neo-colonialism—a term coined by Kwame Nkrumah to describe “the main instrument of imperialism,” whereby foreign capital is used to control and exploit those less powerful<sup>28</sup>—“was embedded in the very structure of the global economy.”<sup>29</sup> After all, to quote political scientist Latha Varadarajan, “Imperialism has never been strictly about colonial acquisition”—that is about occupying and controlling territory—but “the quest for secure markets, resources, and profits.”<sup>30</sup> Plus, as Dirlik and others have pointed out, “obstacles to autonomous development do not lie outside alone, as there are groups and classes in most societies of the South who are already parts of a transnational economy and its social formations, and have a stake in its perpetuation and expansion.”<sup>31</sup>

That economic embeddedness was made explicit at the fourth Non-Aligned Movement summit in Algiers in 1973, which is why Mohaiemen’s film performs a critical, temporal anchoring in *Non-Aligned*. Stitched into edits of archival footage from the proceedings in *Two Meetings and a Funeral* is film of Zambia’s President Kenneth Kaunda speaking at the event. Having just presided over his country’s transition from a multi- to single-party state, he acknowledges the military coup against the first democratically elected socialist president in Latin America, Salvador Allende, taking place as the NAM meeting unfolded.

By now, enough documentation has been released to show how Allende’s fate was tied to the wrath that his administration’s reforms—to “end the monopoly structure of the Chilean economy, break Chilean dependence on imperialism, and begin the construction of socialism”<sup>32</sup>—incurred from a United States hellbent on protecting its massive investment (reportedly US\$1billion) in the country, resulting in what Allende described to the UN in 1972 as an invisible blockade, whereby the US denied Chile new credits through the World Bank, the Export-Import Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, and “hinder[ed] the re-negotiation of Chile’s foreign debt.”<sup>33</sup> As Kyle Steenland wrote in 1973, “These pressures, added to the drop in the world price of copper (from 64 to 49 cents a pound, costing Chile \$400 million in two years)—a situation that also impacted Zambia, at the time among the largest producers and exporters of copper<sup>34</sup>—and “led to an extreme scarcity of dollars for imports, a lack of parts to keep the machines going (most parts in Chile, as they did in Cuba, come from the US), and general economic privation.”<sup>35</sup>

It is within this context—what scholar Taimoon Stewart describes as the making of a debt crisis that resulted in “developing countries... becoming crippled by the heavy debt burden and trade deficit” amid a global economic slowdown that worsened in the early 1980s<sup>36</sup>—that the 1973 NAM meeting unfolded. At the top of the agenda was the call for a New International Economic

Order (NIEO), which sought to restructure the prevailing international economic order. Beyond seeking fairer terms of trade, debt and aid, was the demand for “redistribution on the basis that postcolonial states had in fact produced much of the wealth the West enjoyed.”<sup>37</sup> This approach to the economy, through which “anticolonial nationalists represented the postcolonial world as workers of the world,” writes Getachew, “fashioned Third World solidarity as a form of international class politics.”<sup>38</sup> Crucially, the view “that sovereign equality had material implications... offered a radically different account of global justice.”<sup>39</sup>

That stance was palpable at the 1973 NAM summit in Algiers, with the presence of revolutionary leaders like Fidel Castro calling for NAM to take a broad anti-imperialist approach. (In *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, we see him introducing Yasser Arafat, who goes on to salute liberation movements across the world, from Angola and South Vietnam to the Black struggle in the US.) Among the clips in Mohaiemen’s film is one of Marcelino dos Santos, founding member and then-deputy president of FRELIMO, the Mozambican Liberation Front, giving an interview about FRELIMO’s participation in NAM ’73, just one year before the colonial war in Mozambique ended, followed by independence in 1975. Reflecting the ethos of post-colonial development, he talks about how the control of national resources contributes to the independence of each non-aligned country, and how the struggle for independence is linked to economic independence.

With all that in mind, it is notable that *Two Meetings and a Funeral* opens with an address to the 1973 NAM meeting by Rajaratnam, at the time the first foreign minister of Singapore, which joined NAM in 1965 following independence from British rule (and ejection from the Malaysian federation). The former journalist and mentee of George Orwell uses a technical breakdown to emphasize an issue that continues to resonate in the field of decolonial politics, past and present, when thinking about the technologies and infrastructures of statecraft that constitute the international system of nation-states, the asymmetries that lie within a global system of interlinked economies, and indeed the positions of thinkers and scholars like Richard Wright and Stuart Hall, when it comes to questions of entanglement and disentanglement. “All the equipment that we are using to threaten the big powers is provided by them,” he says in the clip. “They turn it off, we are lost.”

There is a sense that Rajaratnam is talking both figuratively and literally – aside from the reliance on the developed world for technological expertise, knowledge and equipment, there was the sticky issue of the global economic system to which every nation-state in the movement were inevitably connected and often indebted. Across the spectrum, Rajaratnam seems to be imploring his fellow NAM attendees to consider what it would mean to find a way through the web of mechanisms that had until then kept the world system just so. As Rajaratnam speaks, Mohaiemen stitches scenes into the edit to emphasize the fact that, “a large portion of the audience, including the charismatic liberators, all had their headphones off” – “a tell-tale sign,” Mohaiemen points out, that “they were not really listening to him” or his call “to control the means of technological production.”<sup>40</sup>

It was the way that Rajaratnam framed the “question of technology autonomy, of trading blocs, of shared industrialization” – a “type of focus on trade-driven growth, minus Soviet, OPEC, or other subsidies” – that “was an unwelcome formulation within the socialist-leaning rubric of NAM,” Mohaiemen has noted, which rubbed uncomfortably against the fact that “Oil wealth, Cold War-driven subsidies, and imported labour underwrote some of the rapid infrastructure development of the 1970s” across NAM states.<sup>41</sup> This of course points to some of the internal contradictions that existed within the Non-Aligned Movement when it came to the regimes and administrations that intersected in its community, and the allegiances that criss-crossed through them.

## STEPHANIE BAILEY



Aside from the political and structural differences among states and the external unions to which they belonged, whether OPEC or ASEAN, were the varied approaches towards the post-colonial moment, as characterized by Rajaratnam's intervention. While some of NAM's members were "consciously anti-colonial" they were "not necessarily anti-imperialist," points out Singham, and while "Many of the nations of the world and indeed even the capitalist nations opposed colonialism, very few of the capitalist nations would oppose imperialism."<sup>42</sup> This distinction between colonialism and imperialism is key when it comes to understanding the entanglements that any attempt at re-balancing the global economy would have to unpick, and what effectively split NAM.

While a power bloc in its own right, Non-Alignment was ultimately a coalition of nascent, neutral states—neutral in their refusal to take sides or become wholly subsumed into a superpower battle between capitalism and communism by officiating allegiances—and their paths forward were multiple, messy, at times contradictory, and not always clear. Take Singapore, which took a "positive-sum" approach in working with both sides of the Cold War's bipolar conflict according to historian Daniel Boon Chua, though Singapore and the US did share "the similar objective or curbing communist influence in Southeast Asia."<sup>43</sup>

This sense of individual autonomy within NAM's collectivity of nation-states comes through in Chua's history of US-Singapore Relations during the Cold War. Chua references the scholarship of Tuong Vu, who has asserted that "Asian actors—while possessing limited military and economic capabilities—were neither victims nor puppets of the superpowers as conventionally believed."<sup>44</sup> Amid a diversity of priorities, limitation and common interests—whether international, regional, national, local, or even oligarchical—countries were not only exploited, but were also able

to exploit the superpowers and their anxieties to suit their own ends; or as Chua points out, quoting Michael Szonyi and Hong Liu, “tails could wag dogs.”<sup>45</sup> Which is not to deny that the Cold War “profoundly shaped the context in which regional and national change unfolded,” or contest Prashad’s view that what ultimately did the Third World Project in was the neoliberal Atlantic counter-revolution;<sup>46</sup> but rather to also affirm that the “history of Asia in the late-twentieth century” — not to mention histories elsewhere — “cannot simply be subsumed within a Cold War narrative.”<sup>47</sup>

The main point is that the currents which affected the world’s populations were and continue to run thick with difference and nuance, and certainly ran in more than a one- or two-way direction, and some of those currents are made visible in *Two Meetings and a Funeral*. 1973, after all, was a watershed year, what Garavini describes as “the high point” of a “battle in which oil producers and other Third World countries were on the same side in the effort to achieve similar goals.”<sup>48</sup> The NAM summit in Algiers took place just before the Arab-Israeli War would initiate an oil crisis prompted by Arab oil-producing countries cutting the production of oil and establishing a total embargo on the delivery of oil to nations supporting Israel, including the United States, which was followed by a December decision by OPEC nations to raise the price of the barrel to four-times its cost compared to 1970.<sup>49</sup> Both events contributed to an “oil shock” — a point from which, according to Eric Hobsbawm, twenty years of instability and crisis commenced, and the Third World project was subsumed by an overwhelming global debt crisis.<sup>50</sup>

One particularly neglected cause of the so-called oil shock, writes Garavini, is “the co-operation between oil-producing countries and the rest of the developing countries of the Third World.”<sup>51</sup> *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, however, seems to take a different view. The film’s second titular meeting is the inaugural gathering of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which took place in 1974 in Lahore, the year the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 3201 (S-VI): Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order.

Mohaiemen’s film presents the OIC meeting as a rupture in NAM’s socialist momentum and unity, as tracked by the admission of Bangladesh into NAM in 1973 and the country’s attendance at the OIC meeting in 1974, where Pakistan’s recognition of Bangladesh following the territory’s separation in 1971 was regarded as a highlight of the event. “As the film’s intertitles invoke,” notes curator Sarah Lookofsky, Bangladesh’s “participation in this second meeting marked a shift from socialist aspirations to a new Islamic alignment shaped by the geopolitical oil bloc.”<sup>52</sup> Those same intertitles explain that after the OIC meeting, in 1975 Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheik Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in “an Islamist allied coup with alleged CIA backing,” with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the latter a driving force behind the OIC, being the first to recognize the country’s new military regime. Just before the cut, Rahman appears in *Two Meetings and a Funeral* addressing the 1973 NAM meeting about eliminating the values and legacies of colonialism, harnessing technology for the common good, and socialist revolution. “We are fighting what appears to be impossible odds,” he says.

At the time, Bangladesh’s split from Pakistan had been preceded by a brutal response from the Pakistani Army, supported, as declassified documents and White House tapes show, by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.<sup>53</sup> This was followed by Saudi Arabia’s refusal to recognize the new nation-state (it did so in 1975), and the People’s Republic of China’s casting of its first Security Council veto against Bangladesh’s UN membership, citing the hand of Soviet Socialist Imperialism<sup>54</sup> — a rich accusation given the PRC’s past and contemporary global intentions, which architectural historian Cole Roskam traces through China’s architectural projects in Africa from the 1960s onwards, from temporary exhibition halls built in Conakary and Accra in 1960 and 1961



respectively, to the African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa, completed in 2011. Whether or not China's early or later interventions in Africa signal international class solidarity or opaquer national-imperialist interests, such architectural projects, to borrow Roskam's words, "allowed China to transmute its diplomatic and economic exchanges into real projects that demonstrated idealistic objectives, while enhancing and internationalizing China's political and economic influence."<sup>55</sup>

All of which brings us back to *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, and the titular 'Funeral' chapter that concludes the work. In Dhaka, Mohaiemen's camera follows Bangladeshi politician Zonayed Zaki as he walks through a bustling trade fair taking place on the grounds of the Bangabandhu International Conference Center (BICC), renamed in 2013 to replace its former title, Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Center. One of the many construction projects directed by China in the country, BICC was designed by Beijing Institute of Architectural Designs and Research and built with Chinese money. The Centre was completed in 2001 and was originally intended for a NAM summit,<sup>56</sup> until the finance minister of a newly elected government called the movement a dead horse and said the country could not afford to spend millions on its burial<sup>57</sup> — a statement that echoes the man who demands Mohaiemen stop filming at BICC in *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, proclaiming: "There is no Non-Aligned Movement anymore."

The Bangabandhu International Conference Center feels like a metaphor — the visualization of a drift from a transnational anti-imperialist movement to that of neoliberal (read: insidiously imperialist) free trade. But in truth, what the building symbolizes is far more complex, as evidenced by a scene at the start of *Two Meetings and a Funeral* where Prashad stands inside La Coupole, an indoor sports stadium in Algeria, and claps his hands so that the echoes emphasize the empty building's cavernous form. Designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer and opened in 1975, Prashad is apprehensive about the structure. He likens it to "an inter-galactical egg" — a "monumental construction" that in "about fifty years... will look like a Mayan ruin."

Prashad's critique is connected to the history that La Coupole embodies. It was constructed in the years following Algeria's independence from colonial rule, when the state's international anti-colonial activism and domestic policies of resource nationalization, land redistribution, and universal health care and education constituted "a developmentalist, state-capitalist project aimed at what Samir Amin refers to as 'delinking' the national economy from the global imperialist-capitalist system."<sup>58</sup> Back then, writes Garavini, the revolutionary Algerian state was a leading force in the Non-Aligned Movement, yet Prashad finds no motifs of the anti-colonial project in La Coupole's construction. He calls the stadium an example of architectural gigantism — emblematic of its time, when projects spoke to ambitious nationalist visions, like Brasília, an entirely new capital city in Brazil designed by Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer and Joaquim Cardozo and founded in 1960, and Chandigarh, "the dream city" of India's first prime minister Nehru, constituted as a "Union Territory" in 1966 and planned by Le Corbusier.<sup>59</sup>

Returning to La Coupole, Prashad asks, "How are you supposed to maintain something so enormous?" Beyond the building itself, the question seems directed at the systemic and ideological architectures from which it emerged. As with other construction projects like it, this was an anti-colonialist design realised at a time when newly independent nation states — hard fought, hard won — not to mention regions compromised by the tendrils of historical capitalism, were vying to create a new world order in which they, too, had a place. But as Prashad suggests, many of the buildings that stood for this moment have since been emptied of the ideals that infused them. Take Constantine 1 University in Algiers, a campus designed by Niemeyer after Colonel Huari Boumedienne,



chairman of Algeria's Revolutionary Council, commissioned him for the project in 1968 – "the year," wrote Dirlik, "of the Third World," which had come "to represent a revolutionary way out of the dilemmas presented by capitalism and actually-existing socialism."<sup>60</sup> In Mohaiemen's film, archival and contemporary footage of the campus are shown side by side in a segment where Algerian publisher Samia Zennadi talks about a crisis of contact and transmission between older and younger generations. "To return to the memory of the Non-Aligned Movement," she tells Prashad, "there's not much left."

Standing inside that empty La Coupole stadium in Algiers, Prashad not only seems to contemplate the enormity of the stadium and the echoes it contains, but also the waves that brought it into being and those that have diluted its memory since. In this frame, the building is at once dead and alive, void and sentimental—not so much a spectre as a zombie kept standing, constantly revived and reformed as it evolves with the passage of time, much like the Bangabandhu International Conference Center. In the temporal warps and wefts of *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, in which time is stretched out and folded in so as to amplify the gaps in a thickly woven historical fabric, these buildings function like prismatic objects of contemplation and interpretation, not unlike an artwork. Not unlike, perhaps, *Two Meetings and a Funeral* itself, or the exhibition in which it finds itself in conversation with other affective documents of a transnational inheritance that Stuart Hall succinctly sums up when describing history as "not yet finally wrapped up."

But while a study of history and its residues in the present, *Two Meetings and a Funeral* is not exactly a historical work, much like *Nucleus of a Great Union* and *Unfinished Conversation*, insofar as they piece together documents to explore facets of a broad and divergent intersectional movement in order to open its legacies to the present. Considering the position of scholars of diplomatic history, in particular John Lewis Gaddis and Melvyn Leffler, this goes against the grain of historical study and

highlights the different registers that art enables when it comes to exploring the legacies of the past and their implication for the future. As Chua writes, Gaddis and Leffler advise against the synthesis of diplomatic history with other disciplines like social or cultural studies, because, quoting Gaddis and Leffler, “[t]he pursuit of synthesis will not lead to consensus; quite the opposite. Controversy over the relative weight [that] we should assign a multiplicity of variables will open new interpretative vistas.”<sup>61</sup> Those new vistas are precisely what works like *Two Meetings and a Funeral* seek to open up.

Across Mohaiemen’s film, the camera captures historical architectures almost passively, as if to reflect the excerpts drawn from the archival footage of the NAM meeting in Algiers that feature so heavily, much of which focuses on the seemingly non-descript moments between speeches, when leaders are but men (and some women) gathered in a room as both individuals and embodiments of varying collective interests: dis-united yet together. Caught between the lines in this moving portrait of a moment in history, collectively shared yet divergent, is a moment of radical, active imagination, in which real-world attempts at crafting new trajectories for a global future did not only happen collectively albeit imperfectly, but in many ways succeeded. That is, before coming up against the unavoidable challenges, not to mention divisions and fragmentations, that such a bold attempt—at renegotiating a post-imperialist social contract defined by a world economy fashioned from histories of racialized, colonial occupation, exploitation, and expropriation—ultimately triggered.

For Singham, this is what has been missed in critiques of Non-Alignment in general. Far from “an ideological movement that demands total submission to its particular stance of those who join the movement at a given juncture in history; it is, at best, a broadly defined anti-imperialist front in world politics that is seeking redress for the ravages of nearly three hundred years of capitalist exploitation.”<sup>62</sup> Thinking back to La Coupole, this overlooked point extends to the fact that the building is still standing. Just as *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, beyond being a film about the demise of a broadly leftist, anti-imperialist transnational coalition within NAM—the Non-Aligned Movement, after all, is still going—is an act of re-connection rather an explicit study of breakdown: the marking of an end in order to open up a new beginning for a movement that, in the long view of a global history in which imperialism continues to shape the world, is far from over. To quote Hall again, “Another history is always possible; another turning is waiting to happen.” If only we might remember rather than forget.

Consider here Niemeyer’s spectre, which seems to hover over *Two Meeting and Funeral*. Though he is never mentioned, there is something to be said about the confluence of ambiguities when it comes to the man, his modernist designs, and the politics they serviced. Take Brasília, whose construction, writes culture writer Carolina A. Miranda, “might have seemed like a wildly authoritarian gesture”—just as Niemeyer’s leftist solidarities at times felt questionable, if stretched—yet was in fact “a way of shaking off the legacy of colonialism.”<sup>63</sup> This anti-colonial positioning, Miranda asserts, means Brasília “was about rejecting northern paternalism and showing that Brazil was capable of devising its own design solutions—ones that could resonate at an international level.”<sup>64</sup> Through Niemeyer’s architecture, continues Miranda, “Latin America was finally able to see itself—in ‘all its grandeur and its poverty’, as he once wrote. In its time, few ideas could have been more radical.”<sup>65</sup>

That loss of radicality, or rather, the forgetting of that radical audacity to imagine and demand otherwise—in which a group not only of nation-states but *people*, mobilized to challenge the neo-colonial, neo-imperial post-war world order—is at the heart of Mohaiemen’s film, and perhaps *Non-Aligned* as a curatorial gesture: a counter-forgetting to the amnesia of colonial and

imperialist powers past and present who end up projecting their own failures—and transgressions—onto those whom so much of their existence is owed. But rather than settle on making that point, *Non-Aligned* seeks to open it back up in order to make visible a track already laid, but perhaps neglected; particularly when it comes to what Getachew calls the last great project of the Third World, the New International Economic Order, that was ultimately blocked by neo-imperialist interests.

Indeed, while ostensibly about a failure of imagination, there is a critical clue in the opening of *Two Meetings and a Funeral* that suggests a more optimistic, if hopeful undercurrent. At the outset, Prashad mentions the launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 and the science-fiction that it inspired across the Global South—a genre predicated on envisioning and realizing future worlds. What follows are open horizons and possibilities; an ongoing struggle, a dream to be reimaged, and a challenge worth taking up.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Arif Dirlik, 'The Bandung legacy and the People's Republic of China in the perspective of global modernity', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 16:4, 2015, p. 625

<sup>2</sup> Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Kelly Gaines, 'Revisiting Richard Wright in Ghana: Black Radicalism and the Dialectics of Diaspora', *Social Text* 67, vol. 19, no. 2, 2001, pp. 77–79

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83

<sup>8</sup> Richard Wright, *The Colour Curtain*, The World Publishing Company: Cleveland/New York, 1956, p. 140

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153

<sup>11</sup> Gaines, p. 77

<sup>12</sup> Wright, p. 150

<sup>13</sup> Getachew, p. 72

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Getachew, p. 72. See also David A. Kay, 'The Politics of Decolonization: The New Nations and the United Nations Political Process', *International Organization*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1967, p. 786. "By the end of 1966, the percentage of newly independent territories gaining membership to the UN stood at 45 percent compared to 13.2 percent in 1955."

<sup>16</sup> Kay, p. 793

<sup>17</sup> From the 'History' section on the UNCTAD website; <https://unctad.org/about/history>

<sup>18</sup> Michael Bordo, 'The operation and demise of the Bretton Woods system: 1958 to 1971', *VoxEU*, 23 April 2017; <https://voxeu.org/article/operation-and-demise-bretton-woods-system>

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<sup>19</sup> 'Member States Call for Removing Veto Power, Expanding Security Council to Include New Permanent Seats, as General Assembly Debates Reform Plans for 15-Member Organ', United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 20 November 2018; <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/ga12091.doc.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Castle, 'Belgium admits role in killing of African leader', *The Independent*, 17 November 2001; <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/belgium-admits-role-killing-african-leader-9215790.html>

<sup>21</sup> Department of State, United States of America, Office of the Historian, 'Memorandum From the President's Acting Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Komer) to President Johnson', 12 March 1966; <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d260>

<sup>22</sup> Getachew, p. 151

<sup>23</sup> William Burnett Harvey, 'Post-Nkrumah Ghana: The Legal Profile of a Coup', 1966. Articles by Maurer Faculty. Paper 1187; <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/facpub/1187>

<sup>24</sup> A.W. Singham, 'The Fifth Summit Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement', *The Black Scholar*, 1976, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 7

<sup>25</sup> Giuliano Garavini, 'Completing Decolonization: The 1973 "Oil Shock" and the Struggle for Economic Rights', *The International History Review*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2011, p. 474

<sup>26</sup> Taimoon Stewart, 'The Third World Debt Crisis: A Long Waves Perspective', *Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1993, pp. 150–152

<sup>27</sup> Getachew, p. 144

<sup>28</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism*, London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965; accessed at [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)

<sup>29</sup> Getachew, p. 144

<sup>30</sup> Latha Varadarajan, 'The trials of imperialism: Radhabinod Pal's dissent at the Tokyo tribunal', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 21(4), 2015, p. 810

<sup>31</sup> Arif Dirlik, 'Global South: Predicament and Promise', *The Global South*, vol.1, no.1, 2007, p. 16

<sup>32</sup> Kyle Steenland, 'Two Years Of Popular Unity In Chile: A Balance Sheet', *The New Left Review*, March/April 1973; <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i78/articles/kyle-steenland-two-years-of-popular-unity-in-chile-a-balance-sheet.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> See 'As Copper Goes So Goes Zambia', *The New York Times*, 4 February 1973; <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/02/04/archives/as-copper-goes-so-goes-zambia.html>, and John Fleming, 'The Nationalization of Chile's Large Copper Companies', *Contemporary Interstate Relations*, 18 Vill. L. Rev. 593, 1973

<sup>35</sup> Steenland, 'Two Years Of Popular Unity In Chile: A Balance Sheet'

<sup>36</sup> Stewart, p. 155

<sup>37</sup> Getachew, p. 145

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 145, 175

<sup>40</sup> 'The History That Did Not Come to Pass: Naeem Mohaiemen in Conversation with Sarah Lookofsky', *MoMA, post: notes on art in a global context*; <https://post.moma.org/the-history-that-did-not-come-to-pass-naeem-mohaiemen-in-conversation-with-sarah-lookofsky/>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Singham, p. 5

## The Spectre(s) of *Non-Alignment(s)*

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- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 9
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 10
- <sup>46</sup> Vijay Prashad, 'Dream history of the global South', *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, vol. 4(1), 2012, p. 45
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 9
- <sup>48</sup> Garavini, p. 483
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 480
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 473
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 474
- <sup>52</sup> 'The History That Did Not Come to Pass: Naeem Mohaiemen in Conversation with Sarah Lookofsky'
- <sup>53</sup> Gary J. Bass, 'Nixon and Kissinger's Forgotten Shame', *The New York Times*, 29 September 2013; <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/opinion/nixon-and-kissingers-forgotten-shame.html>
- <sup>54</sup> Robert Alden, 'China's First U. N. Veto Bars Bangladesh', *The New York Times*, 26 August 1972; <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/08/26/archives/chinas-first-un-veto-bars-bangladesh-soviet-union-and-india-are.html>
- <sup>55</sup> Cole Roskam, 'Non-Aligned Architecture: China's Designs on and in Ghana and Guinea, 1955-92', *Architectural History*, vol. 58, 2015, p. 285
- <sup>56</sup> That NAM meeting took place in Malaysia in 2003 instead. See Lim Kit Siang, DAP National Chairman, media statement: "The single biggest challenge of the 13th NAM Summit is to rediscover its relevance in the 21st century and one test is whether it would make a greater impact than the global people power manifested in last weekend of world-wide anti-war protests and marches," 19 February 2003; <https://www.limkitsiang.com/archive/2003/feb03/lks2114.htm>
- <sup>57</sup> 'Non-aligned summit in Dhaka next year put off: Official', *Zee News*, 16 October 2001; [https://zeenews.india.com/news/south-asia/nonaligned-summit-in-dhaka-next-year-put-off-official\\_23287.html](https://zeenews.india.com/news/south-asia/nonaligned-summit-in-dhaka-next-year-put-off-official_23287.html)
- <sup>58</sup> Hamza Hamouchene and Brahim Rouabah, 'The political economy of regime survival: Algeria in the context of the African and Arab uprisings', *Review of African Political Economy*, 8 August 2016; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2016.1213714>
- <sup>59</sup> Official Website of Chandigarh Administration; [http://chandigarh.gov.in/nowchd\\_general.htm](http://chandigarh.gov.in/nowchd_general.htm)
- <sup>60</sup> Dirlik, 'Global South: Predicament and Promise', p. 14
- <sup>61</sup> Chua, p. 17
- <sup>62</sup> Singham, p. 5
- <sup>63</sup> Niemeyer confirmed the sentiment when he wrote: "We were beginning to show the Old World that there wasn't much they could teach us Latin Americans." Carolina A. Miranda, 'Oscar Niemeyer: Man of the People', *Architect*, 23 January 2013; [https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/oscar-niemeyer-man-of-the-people\\_o?o=1](https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/oscar-niemeyer-man-of-the-people_o?o=1)
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.