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The Host

United Kingdom 2015
 Director: Miranda Pennell
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Reviewed by Sukhdev Sandhu

Miranda Pennell's 2010 short *Why Colonel Bunny Was Killed* was a fascinating example of colonial forensics, which used a forgotten 1908 memoir entitled 'Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier' as the starting point for a suggestive and never dogmatic exploration of Englishness, subaltern history and the relationship between empire and photography. Pennell's *The Host* continues in this vein, being at once a fragmentary narrative about malformed modernity, an enigmatic fusion of the personal and the petro-political, and a series of inconvenient truths about the long history of Anglo-American interventions in Iran.

What a chastening – and tersely synthesised – history it is: the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, founded in 1909, bought the rights to half a million square miles of Iranian territory, before the British government purchased a majority stake in 1914. The name changed to Anglo-Iranian oil in 1935. In 1951, secular democrat Mohammad Mossadeq was elected prime minister with a mandate to nationalise the country's oil industry; just two years later he was ousted after an Anglo-American coup that installed the pro-western Shah in his place. By 1979, British Petroleum (the name AIOC had assumed in 1954) finally ceased trading in Iran. Covert operations, sham democracy, economic self-interest masquerading as benevolence: any connections with international geopolitics today don't need to be spelled out.

The journey Pennell undertakes is altogether more personal and tentative. Curious to learn more about her own parents' involvement with BP, she comes across a tantalising memoir by a young geologist, rifles through her father's Polaroid-crammed photograph albums and meditates on strange, fitfully contextualised documents and images in the BP archive. At first it seems as if she's some kind of truth-seeker, eager to cut through thickets of corporate opacity in order to experience vital revelations about herself and her family; over time, though, she seems most drawn to a feeling of lostness, and of Anglo-Iranian history as a thicket or maze.

Pennell scripted and narrates the film, and there are moments – fortunately infrequent – when her self-reflexivity echoes that of an anthropological fieldworker. Mulling over her interactions with Joy, the nonagenarian widow of a BP employee, she recounts the old woman claiming that the past coexists with the present and future: "I tell her that's interesting because sometimes looking at all these pictures feels like that." On another occasion, she responds to a relatively scarce image of Iranian oil workers in close-up: "They look straight through the lens at me. I want them to get back into their box, but they are holding me against my will."

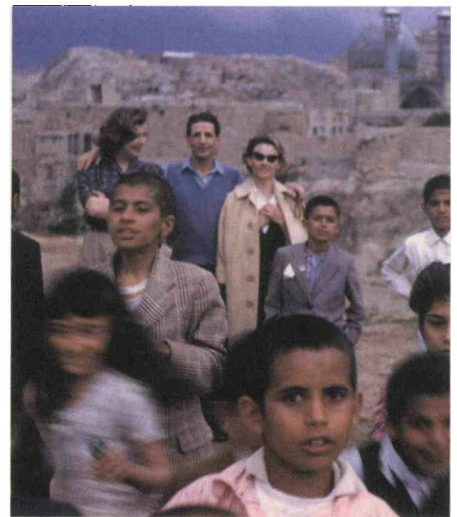
The Host is at its most insinuating when it drifts away from journalism or deconstruction of the colonial gaze and gravitates towards more speculative terrain, such as rogue archaeology, earth mysteries, visionary landscapes. The aerial photographs BP used to pinpoint oil locations are eerily beautiful: refineries that look like circuit boards, diagrams that read like hieroglyphs, an Iran that looks potentially 'other'. It's here,

and when she mentions that the author of a seemingly Orientalist volume entitled *Eastern Odyssey* went on to write bizarre books about how extraterrestrials named the Shining Ones were responsible for the development of Homo sapiens, that Pennell seems on the brink of establishing a droll Anglo-futurist aesthetics.

There are other moments when the muted, elliptical mood of the film is punctuated. Pennell dwells on an archival – and life-size – drawing of a centipede found in the author's bathroom. Reflecting on the time she spent in the BP archives, she includes a photograph of a plastic-wrapped sandwich that evokes a pyramid, and one of a paper napkin sporting a coffee-mug imprint that looks as if a spaceship landed on it. The sound design is consistently inviting and intriguing, shifting subtly between late-70s revolutionary chants, Kathleen Ferrier 78rpm and field recordings that suggest subsidence and disappearance.

Undoubtedly some viewers will want a stronger narrative and a tighter resolution than *The Host* is interested in or capable of providing.

In some ways it's a crime movie, but one in which the corpse remains undiscovered and the criminal is not as obvious as might be imagined. Like the Iranian oil workers who haunt Pennell, this is a film that refuses to get back in its box. ☹



Inconvenient truths: *The Host*

Credits and Synopsis

Devised/Written by
 Miranda Pennell
Edited by
 John Smith
Sound Edit
 Miranda Pennell
 John Smith

A film by Miranda Pennell
 Supported using public funding by Arts Council England
 Arts & Humanities Research Council

In Colour and Black & White
 [1.78:1]

Distributor
 Independent Cinema Office

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 Production Companies

Spoken by
 Miranda Pennell

British filmmaker Miranda Pennell is inspired to investigate her family's past, particularly her parents' involvement with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, now known as BP. She embarks on a series of researches, both personal and political, into Anglo-Iranian oil history since the 1930s.

