

Railway Sleepers ★★★

(2017) 102 min. DVD: \$375. DRA. Grasshopper Film. PPR.

Filmmaker Sompot Chidgasornpongse's documentary was shot over an eight-year period on Thailand's cross-country trains. Rail travel was introduced to the kingdom in 1893—the film opens with a scrolling text of the royal decree by King Rama VII inaugurating this mode of transportation—and viewers see a few historic photos of the old steam-driven locomotives that initially carried passengers and freight. However, *Railway Sleepers* is primarily focused on quietly observing passengers, and while the trains afford spectacular views of Thailand's beautiful countryside, not everyone is looking out the window. Instead, the cameras capture schoolchildren doing their homework under the gaze of frazzled teachers, exhausted passengers falling asleep while sitting up, a seemingly endless stream of vendors (hawking bottled water, snacks, and souvenirs to indifferent travelers), bored soldiers with nothing to do but wander back and forth, and foreign tourists enjoying the finer accommodations in the first class section while everyone else is crammed into economy seating. While the film may be too leisurely paced for some viewers, it will appeal to those with a passion for Asian travel—not to mention admiration for Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who is the executive producer. An offbeat travelogue, this is recommended. Aud: C, P. (P. Hall)

The Shape of Now ★★★

(2018) 72 min. In Spanish w/English subtitles. DVD: \$24.95. IndiePix (avail. from most distributors).

The violence that roiled Colombia for well over half a century—fueled by the drug trade as well as political conflict, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people—has understandably left deep scars on the population, which was further reflected in the unexpected failure of a referendum to ratify a peace agreement between the government and FARC (people's army guerrillas) in 2016. Filmmaker Manuel Correa's documentary look at Colombia's attempts to overcome the legacy of war, focusing on efforts to effect reconciliation by treating all those who have been touched by the violence—both victims and perpetrators—as survivors deserving of a degree of sympathy as well as medical treatment. Much of the film is devoted to specialists in various fields, including historians, who argue against an absolutist reading of the past, which—they assert—would not accurately reflect the varying perspectives of different people. Ex-soldiers, for example, say they were mere pawns in the control of corrupt politicians, so not really responsible for the horrors, while victims and family members visit prisons to offer forgiveness to inmates, and psychologists offer treatment for PTSD to both. Correa does not endorse

these relativistic methods of trying to restore a semblance of national unity in Colombia; rather, his film seems designed to prompt debate about whether justice is being sacrificed to a dream of sociopolitical harmony. Recommended. Aud: C, P. (F. Swietek)

Time for Ilhan ★★★

(2018) 89 min. DVD: \$129; high schools & public libraries; \$349; colleges & universities. DRA. Good Docs (avail. from www.gooddocs.net). PPR. Closed captioned.

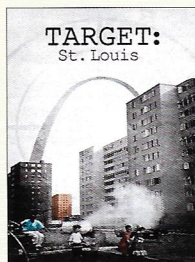
When Muslim, Mogadishu-born Representative Ilhan Omar came to the United States at the age of 12—after four years in a Kenyan refugee camp—"hello" and "go away" represented the entirety of her English vocabulary. But she learned quickly. Filmmaker Norah Shapiro, a former public defender, tracks Omar's rise from being a community organizer in Minnesota's Cedar-Riverside neighborhood to becoming America's first Somali-American legislator. When she decides to run for office in 2015, Omar's husband, Ahmed Hirsi, puts his career on hold to care for their children (the couple met in 1999 at a basketball game). Her father, who lost his wife when Omar was two, proves equally supportive. Shapiro also interviews her rivals: Phyllis Kahn, a progressive candidate who served the state for 43 years, and Mohamud Noor, a Somali-American who lost to Khan in the previous election. In the face of stiff competition, Omar garners the key endorsements and caucus votes that she needs to move forward. Although she wins the Democratic primary, Fox News accuses her of immigration fraud. Even though the charge is false, it still puts a crimp in her campaign (and she asks Shapiro to stop filming until the U.S. district attorney clears her). During his own presidential campaign, Donald Trump travels to Minnesota to speak out against Somali immigrants, a clear attack on Omar, which doesn't prevent her from

winning her race and clearing the way for her congressional win two years later. Shapiro clearly and compassionately presents her subject—an admittedly controversial figure in the news—as a born leader whose grassroots campaign spoke to a state's under-served communities. Recommended. Aud: C, P. (K. Fennessy)

What Is Democracy? ★★1/2

(2018) 107 min. DVD: \$29.95 (\$349 w/PPR from www.kinolorberedu.com). DRA. Kino Lorber (avail. from most distributors). Closed captioned.

As she demonstrated in her earlier documentaries *Zizek!* (VL-7/06) and *Examined Life* (VL Online 3/10), filmmaker Astra Taylor is not afraid to tackle large issues, but like those films, this one is also rather diffuse and opaque. *What Is Democracy?* begins with Marxist scholar Silvia Federici discoursing on Ambrogio Lorenzetti's 14th-century triptych of frescos *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government* before moving on to clips of conversations with other scholars, including Berkeley political theorist Wendy Brown and Princeton philosopher/activist Cornel West, who talk about the praise and criticism directed at democratic rule since the time of Plato and Aristotle. Philologist Efimia Karakantza of Patras University describes how ancient democracy actually worked, noting the contrast between the random selection of officials by lot that prevailed in Athens and the election of representatives in modern quasi-democratic states—where the will of voters can be blithely ignored, as Greek politicians did during the recent debt crisis. Taylor also includes observations by ordinary people—an ex-con barber, park-bench sitters, activists at neighborhood organizational meetings—who give their views on how the system of representative democracy operates in America (virtually all find it unsatisfactory). Taylor, who was



Target: St. Louis ★★★1/2

(2018) 67 min. DVD: \$24.95. IndiePix (avail. from most distributors).

In the years following nuclear bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Cold War weapons testing involving the dissemination of radiation through clouds of aerosol was conducted by the U.S. government on American soil. Repeatedly exposed to radiation was a predominantly low-income, African American community mostly living in a housing project in St. Louis. As viewers learn in this shocking documentary, the reason that particular locale was chosen was because of its resemblance to downtown Moscow. *Target: St. Louis* uncovers both the history of the testing (which was administered through the U.S. Department of Public Health, the same federal agency that subjected unknowing black military pilots to the infamous Tuskegee syphilis project) and draws on the recollections of St. Louis residents who were doused by the spray and spent years seeking answers. Director Sean Slater leans heavily on an extensive interview with sociology professor Dr. Lisa Martino-Taylor, who has written a book on the subject, using her thorough research to provide a structure for the film's narrative, but he also interviews several other experts as well as numerous innocents who were treated like lab rats by their own government. Highly recommended. Aud: C, P (T. Keogh)