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iranian

A film by Mehran Tamadon

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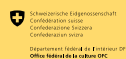
l'atelier documentaire



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FIRST
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FILMS



Iranian

A film by Mehran Tamadon

France-Switzerland 2014

105 minutes

Original version Farsi

Subtitles English,

French, German

Synopsis

An atheist, Iranian filmmaker Mehran Tamadon managed to convince four mullahs, all believers in the Islamic Republic of Iran, to come and stay with him for two days and engage in discussion. In this confined space, daily life is combined with debate, an unremitting demonstration of the problematic issue of how to live together, when each side's understanding of the world is so contrary?

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

باب الحسن
DOOR 3

درب شماره
۳

زائرین محترم توجه فرمایید:
موارد زیر در کلیه محورها و روافضای
حرم مطهر اکثراً ممنوع می باشد

- ۱- خوابیدن
- ۲- سفره انداختن
- ۳- همراه آوردن وسایل
- ۴- پوشش غیر مناسب
- ۵- کشیدن سیگار
- ۶- فیلم برداری و عکس برداری

لطفاً با خادمان حرم مطهر همکاری نمایید.
مدیریت حرم مطهر

وَعَلَىٰ آلِ مُحَمَّدٍ وَعَلَىٰ الْأَوْلَادِ الْحَسَنِ وَعَلَىٰ الْأَخْبَابِ الْحَسَنِ
السلام علی



Director's note

I don't see my films as weapons. I do not use images as means to promote my own thinking or to settle scores. I do not use it as an instrument of propaganda, but to create a context that should enable mutual understanding and make dialogue possible. A space that forces people who hate each other to see and listen to each other, so that one day they may be capable of mutual tolerance. In this sense, this documentary does not show society as it is. It contains a promise within itself. It is creating a situation that does not exist in Iran today. The film creates an arena in which I can talk, following other rules than those imposed by the Iranian authorities. I ask defenders of the Iranian regime to come into my space and agree to listen to my freedom of tone. I ask them to participate in the project of a man who looks at them with a certain distance. A man who has objectives other than theirs, but who treats them as equals. I ask them to sit within a framework which they do not control. A framework that will doubtless show an image of themselves that is different from the one they want to convey. I ask them to accept a film that looks at them in another way.



Interview with Mehran Tamadon

In your film you have brought four defenders of the Islamic Republic to a house, to live with them for two days and discuss the issues of co-existence. Did it take you a long time to persuade them?

I had to meet and film a lot of people before I could find my “characters”. It was difficult to find people who would agree to come to the house. But it was never an immediate, nor categorical, refusal. It was over the course of the filmed discussions that they ended up changing their minds. I really had to re-examine my approach to discussion, before finally getting four people to agree to come and live this experience. It should be said that I started the project in 2010, on the eve of Ahamadinejad’s contested re-election. The political climate was turbulent and divided. There was a genuine popular rebellion happening then, and a lot of violence, a lot of arrests. At the time I was trying to persuade the bassidjis, the religious militias of the Islamic

Republic. But we were all very tense, nervous, everyone entrenched in their own camp. In February 2011, on arrival in Iran, my passport was confiscated, then I was interrogated by an agent of the intelligence services. Over the course of those interrogations, I soon realized that the interrogator knew about my film project. Someone I knew had talked to him about it. So I decided to change milieu, to look for other kinds of people, and went to Qom, which is a very religious town. I preferred to meet mullahs, since they seemed more open to discussion, to debating ideas, less mistrustful than the bassidjis. That was where I discovered Qom’s religious school and met people who were at least initially interested in my approach and the project. In Qom, I filmed a lot of mullahs, in their homes, in their places of work, in their mosques, at funeral ceremonies. Always hoping to persuade four of them to come to a house with me. Again, many agreed at the beginning but then changed their minds.



What were the reasons people ended up refusing?

There were different reasons. Some of them told me I was ‘impious’ and that they couldn’t live with someone like me; others got scared, telling themselves that they might end up in trouble with the Iranian intelligence services themselves, that’s understandable. I should say that if I were in their place, I’d never have agreed. And then there were people with whom I’d spent almost thirty hours in discussion, just to persuade them to come to the house. After hours of filmed discussion, we’d already said everything there was to be said, there wasn’t anything left to debate at the house. You have to realize that what you see in the film was shot two years and ten months after the start of the project, that before those two days there is almost sixty hours of filmed discussion and nearly two hundred hours of footage.

So how did those four people finally agree to come?

I met each of them separately, to talk and try to persuade them. I had then decided to be as succinct as possible. So as not to exhaust the topics for discussion, not to put them on the defensive, to ensure they had the curiosity, the desire to come, in order to convince me, to talk and convey their

ideas. In the end, the best way of going about it was the simplest. I simply suggested the idea without making a polemic about it. In short, I told them: “I am Iranian, I live in France, I don’t think the way you do, I’ve already made two films in your world. I have a project: to see to what extent religious believers like you and I, who am different from you, might be able to share a common space. What you say will be treated with respect. Watch my other films and judge for yourselves”.

For you, who make dialogue and confrontation so central to your work, how did your own interrogations play out?

Let’s say that I’ve been filming for twelve years now in the milieu of the defenders of the Iranian regime. That I make an effort to see the man behind the system he is defending, even with those whose ideas I do not share, even those who are capable of harming me, confiscate my passport, arrest me, put me in prison. I would say that my only weapon is that of taking people into account, seeing them as equals. And what I’m saying here isn’t a theoretical position. It’s what I do when I’m debating with the bassidjis, the Guardians of the Revolution and what I did with my interrogator, you have to try to

break through that distance, to be yourself. Expose yourself, in the hope of getting through to the “other”. To look him in the eye as if he is someone you know, someone you can work out. I’ve never hidden my convictions, I’ve never sought to pass myself off as a believer.

How would you describe your attitude to the protagonists of “Iranian”?

Let’s say I’ve got questions, and I would like to understand. I am not cynical, I take what is said to me seriously, with no condescension. Even if I don’t share the opinions of the people I film. But I always make sure there is a degree of distance. A distance that is proper to film, that enables viewers to make their minds up about what they are seeing and hearing. A distance that enables them to not be manipulated and to take the film and the statements they hear on board for themselves, in relation to their own backgrounds, sensibilities, temperaments. A distance that enables them to realise what we have in common and what there is that is fundamentally different.

Why do you think some viewers expect a more aggressive attitude on your part?

I don’t know. Perhaps they are more militant than I am. But one can be aggressive, be more parti-pris, because one feels oneself a victim. I am not a victim of my condition. I’m not a good soul who suffers in my life as an atheist Iranian. I am not passively waiting for a microphone to be handed me that gives me an opportunity to speak out. I want to exist! I want to speak out! I want a place! I have my camera, I find people with whom I can debate, I take the time that’s needed and I encourage people who don’t want to make room for me, to give me that place. If I want a space for that action of speaking out, I use my camera like a space that enables me to create something more egalitarian from a power struggle.

Why don’t the victims and their testimony, interest you? Why do you film so many people who have power?

Because I am a potential victim. I can completely imagine and understand what they are feeling. My camera is not there to denounce but to understand. What I don’t get, are the arguments of those who defend a system I consider to be unjust. And that’s

where it gets problematic, because you realise that often they are the same arguments we use, but to justify their actions. That's where, for me, there is a troubling mirror effect. Where each sees the oppressor in the other and you end up doubting and being no longer sure of who exactly is the oppressor. And then I think, that if I am less interested in the testimony of victims, it's because my approach is quite introspective. In focusing on my relationship to the other, I am questioning myself, it gets me moving.

What influences your choices in terms of mise en scène?

I have asked myself a lot of questions concerning form and narration but not so much about discourse. I've privileged exchange and relationship, by bringing out moments of tension, joy, laughter, moments of closeness, others of estrangement, those in which I lose my footing, rather than the

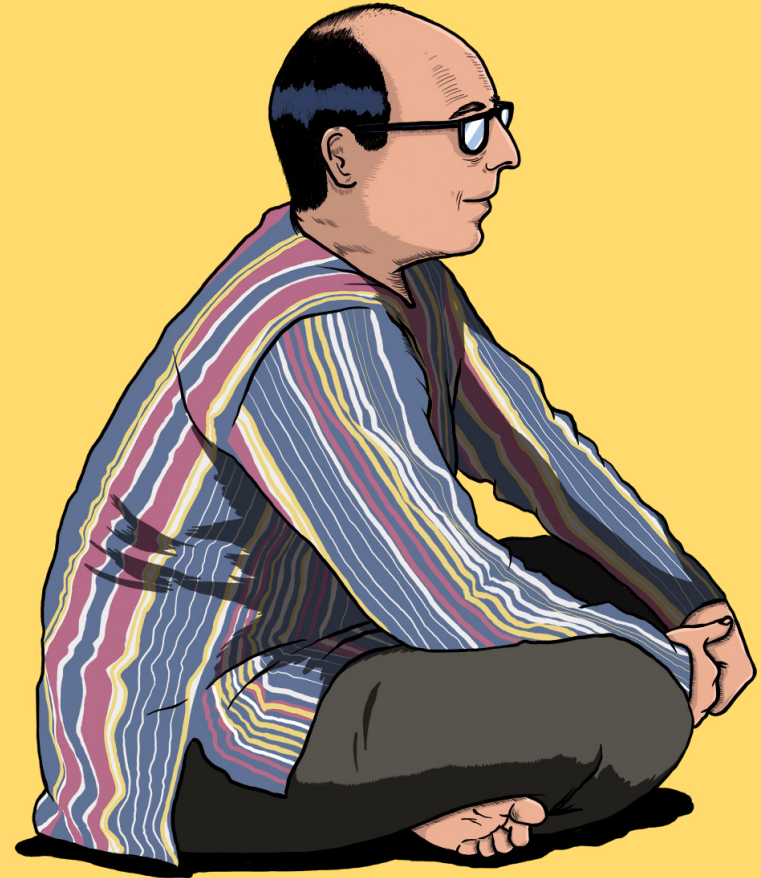
“good answers” I give them. I find it interesting to create a sense of insufficiency in the viewer, something I have experienced at certain moments. That's where the viewer stops being passive and reacts, wants to enter the frame, to talk to them. I have shown an account of those two days by making an effort to see people who are developing a relationship and trying to live together. Trying hard to have no indulgence for myself. Because I'm wearing two hats: that of the filmmaker and that of one of the characters. When I'm editing the film, long after I've shot it, I no longer know exactly why I said this or that. I am viewing from a distance, I am an “other”. I might even no longer go along with a whole bunch of things I say in the film. I made an effort to retain that distance from myself, to see five characters, one of whom is me, and to dare to show my weaknesses. That too is a form of distance.

Interviewed by Carine Bernasconi, Paris, January 17, 2014



Director's biography

Iranian architect and filmmaker Mehran Tamadon arrived in France as a boy of 12, in 1984. In 2000 he returned to Iran, working there for four years as an architect. Since 2002 his career has taken a distinctly artistic turn as a filmmaker. In 2004 he made his first documentary, “Behesht Zahra, Mothers of Martyrs”. He followed this in 2009 with his first feature-length documentary, “Bassidji”, about the defenders of the Islamic republic of Iran, which was selected for numerous international festivals. With Iranian he continues his unique approach of engaging in a dialogue with partisans of the “Iranian” regime. He has also published two essays in Persian (“Moments of Agony” and “Friendship”).





بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ
الضَّلَالَةِ يُخَوِّدُهُمْ وَيَهْدِيهِمْ لِيَجْزِيَ اللَّهُ
عَمَلَهُمْ وَلَهُ الْوَجْدُ الْوَحِيدُ



مسجد حضرت ولی عصر
عجل الله فرجه

نویسنده: ...
تألیف: ...
تصحیح: ...
مطبع: ...

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Mohammad Reza Jahanpanah
Reza Abiat

Sound

Ali-Reza Karimnejad

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Myriam René

A France-Switzerland coproduction

l'atelier documentaire – Box Productions

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