

Hi Rouzbeh, thanks for talking to TNC, how is your 2020 going?

Thank you! It will be a hectic year for me. 2020 is the twentieth anniversary of the Experimental Film Society, and we have plans for a series of exciting projects and events to run throughout the year globally. These will culminate in an ambitious retrospective and exhibition that will take place in one of Dublin's most respected galleries.

Congratulations on being part of the 2020 Berlin Talents, what does it mean to you to be part of such an important platform for filmmakers?

It means a great deal to me for various reasons. Foremost, Berlin is one of my favourite cities, and of course, Berlinale is a brilliant festival. I have always had my eye on the Berlinale Talents and wanted to take part but somehow never applied. In 2020 Berlinale Talents's focus is on "Collectives" and this is particularly extremely intriguing for me as this year is the twentieth anniversary of EFS as I mentioned. I will engage with the extraordinary team of film industry people, filmmakers, artists, programmers and critics.

How important are opportunities like this for independent filmmakers?

I think it is an incredible opportunity for us to communicate with one another and exchange ideas and start collaborations in an intense period. It is also very beneficial to be exposed to a different kind of artists outside your regular network and bubble.

What do you personally hope to gain from this experience?

The most important aspect for me would be as open as possible to learn from other people. In 2020, Berlinale Talents going collective: the six-day summit (February 22 to 27) looks at proven and experimental community models in four creative fields: "Cinema", "Film Set", "Company" and "Society". Collectives from the film, art and theatre worlds will come to Berlin for nearly 100 talks, workshops, and networking events. So there are plenty of opportunities to absorb knowledge and make new connections. I also would like to introduce the Experimental Film Society and our films seriously and constructively and hopefully generate interests and future collaborations globally.

You founded Experimental Film Society, can you tell me a little bit more about this?

Experimental Film Society (EFS) is an independent company dedicated to the creation of radical, formally challenging cinema. I founded it 2000 in Tehran, and I have based it in Dublin since 2004. Until 2017, it functioned as a member-based not-for-profit entity specializing in avant-garde, independent and no/low budget film-making. It unites works by several filmmakers and associated artists scattered across the globe whose films are distinguished by an uncompromising devotion to personal, experimental cinema. As a company, it holds true to its aesthetic principles while striving to make possible ever more elaborate projects.

EFS began as an organization focused on producing and archiving films, which it still does. However, since 2011, one of its main activities has been organizing and promoting

screenings of EFS work in venues all over the world. Since then, over 150 EFS events have taken place. As well as screenings, EFS has organized live cinema events, installations, and exhibitions. It has an online archive of shorts and a video on demand site for features. Its side-projects include the online journal EFS Publications, Luminous Void Experimental Film Festival, and the noise project Cinema Cyanide.

How much as the Experimental Film Society changed since you founded it?

As a film collective and later on a company, it produced, Co-produced, or otherwise assisted in the production of over fifty no-budget or very low-budget feature-length films and 500 short films. EFS is getting bigger and bigger, with EFS filmmakers creating new films constantly, and screenings and events happening all over the world. The fundamental value behind EFS and experimental art, in general, is creative freedom, the willingness and ability to break boundaries formally, thematically and sensorial.

Your career has been spent away from the film industry mainstream, what was behind this decision?

When I began making films, I found that the brand of alternative cinema that inspired me didn't exist in Iran and was generally unknown. My response was first to begin making such films by myself, which were by default underground works created in defiance of strict government controls over what was permitted to be shot. But beyond my own film-making, I moved to create a subculture around it. Collaborating with like-minded artists, I formed the first incarnation of EFS. This group of filmmakers made a series of darkly personal films that provide an oblique but coherent mirror of Iranian society as a claustrophobic space of isolation and longing. In tandem with producing these films, I was setting up underground screenings of them and challenging Iranian festivals for refusing to show them. Creating a culture around them was as important as making them. Almost everyone involved in the first wave of EFS moved away from film-making and in most cases left Iran. Were it not for EFS's insistence on archiving these works, many of these films would not have survived and certainly not have remained visible. This precious moment in Iranian underground culture is now preserved online for anyone interested in it to rediscover.

If alienation from official culture and the influence of world cinema history as a way of discovering a personal voice were the underlying motivations behind the Iranian EFS, their significance was redoubled by me moving to Ireland. This condition mirrored in my cultural preferences: the international art and experimental cinema which influenced me appeared, if anything, less known or understood in Ireland than the Iranian culture. I began making films again from this outsider perspective. But this outsider perspective was not a socially determined one; it was the beginning of a definition of EFS film-making as a radically alien way of perceiving cinema and existence.

What are the biggest challenges that face an independent filmmaker?

The term independent film-making has no meaning anymore and being a filmmaker is no longer unique or special in any way. These days anyone can be a filmmaker and everything is independent.

What inspires the films you make?

I have always believed that it is impossible to explain a film simply because it is an "experience". The role of a filmmaker is to create an extreme personal universe. A place that is utterly and thoroughly mysterious to the point of no return. When you have a zero affinity with the accepted images of sociopolitical and with the entire spectrum of current media trends, you must invent and conjure up the images that you need to project to inhabit them. There is no other way!

Whatever I have done in film-making has and will always be about cinema itself, and of course my intimate life, I surrender to nothing outside of these concepts. It took me over a decade or so to fully realize that it was not just a refusal to tell stories using cinema as a tool, but perhaps a near-total lacking that capacity in me, to begin with. Once I came to this conclusion, everything became so much more vivid. I am genuinely fascinated and perhaps hypnotized by this utterly mysterious dream-Kino-apparatus that functions as a very technical, industrial, and dangerous machine. Cinema itself is a complete and utter perversion, sorcery and magic, only because you are looking at people, objects, situations and the universe itself, and not just the things you are not supposed to gaze at but the 'ordinary' things.

Moreover, when these items are put under the microscope, we see the teeming multitude of bacteria, and to some degree, we infest this material with our secret histories and thoughts. I always gravitated toward cinephilia, while at the same time, I have always been a capable technician, so these two elements are enough for me to make my films. All I know is that whatever project I make it will revolve around the most personal experiences of my life. The only reason to be sane is the insanity in filming and rendering your own miraculously shreds of evidence of existence.

Are there any locations around the world you would really like to visit/make a film?

I am densely interested in travelling the world and using various locations, but at the moment I genuinely engrossed in making films in the Balkans. I am developing several projects at the moment to be filmed in different parts of the Balkans.

You are a prolific filmmaker, what was the first short film you worked on?

I made my first film entitled "Nucleus" in January 2000. With this short film, my career as a filmmaker has started. It also gave birth to the Experimental Film Society (EFS). I cannot believe it was exactly twenty years ago that my friends and I came together and started this life-changing experience. On those days, not even in my wildest dreams, I could have imagined how events would develop and turn to what it is nowadays with EFS. In twenty years, I have completed thirty-five features; forty short films; and 199 instalments of a series called Homo Sapiens Project. I travelled and screened these films globally all over the planet.

Since making your debut how much has your approach and style of film-making changed?

I really can't answer that because I am in the constant state of mutation and scepticism. I am also extremely interested in inventing and re-inventing my work and personality over time, like Bob Dylan or David Bowie, perhaps. Therefore, I am in the ever-going state of metamorphosis.

For example, these days, I am revisiting and re-watching my Homo Sapiens Project film series as I recently released them for video-on-demand release. In doing so, I'm finding that I can't remember making many of them because of the massive rate of production (199 films between 2011-2015). Even those that have not been swallowed by this amnesia seem to exist in an artificial memory as if implanted in my mind by someone else without my knowledge. The whole project seems so alien and distant. I always dreamed about having a secret underground cinematic life in my work, like a metaphorical secret addiction. If my feature films can be seen as a daily job to earn a living, I created the Homo Sapiens Project as a private nightlife to feed my addiction to film-making. They serve no purpose, and I could comfortably live without them. The sheer volume of instalments in this series makes it impossible for audiences to watch all of them, and yet I still plan to continue making them. Cinephilia and film-making are a sickness that can be never be cured. You have to live with it and keep feeding the beast. Just as I or some like-minded friends have ravaged ourselves through creating vast filmographies just to survive, perhaps it is possible that watching these films might eventually become someone else's drug? You never know, and the only way to find out is to keep making them.

What would you say have been the biggest lessons you've learned since making films?

The most important lesson I learned from the past two decades is this: in film-making, ultra-radicalism is a choice that you must carefully decide upon because it is not merely a way of film-making but also a way of living. I destroyed myself to sustain my mind to make cinema. It might sound very fatalistic, but it comes from a profound experience of my living condition. And as always there is no difference between my personal life and my films whatsoever, they are the same.

Where did this passion for film-making come from?

I have always been mesmerized by how cinema functions and what the inner workings of this grand machine are. I am still processing what cinema is. I am constantly asked why my films are so far from reality. I am asked to express how these films comment on our daily lives and how can an audience possibly relate to them. I always respond, saying, "I don't know. What do you think?" I have always preferred to explore a different type of dramaturgy.

The idea of fiction in cinema (and art in general) is something that has always interested and fascinated me. It must be utterly fictitious, 100% fabricated and thoughtfully constructed by the creator.

Due to the nature of Iranian society, which was a product of political conditions, I preferred to function as privately as possible, working entirely in the margins. Furthermore, when I

was making films, I could not tolerate any social interaction at all. Later, when I moved to Ireland, I found myself in a similar situation. I immediately became an outsider, for an immigrant and tackling a new language, and also for the culture I was pursuing (underground and avant-garde cinema). I had positioned myself twofold into a place of alienation. I included this atmosphere in my work, creating my universe and in a sense, constructed a means of surviving this alienation, through cinema. The making of such work was not a choice but perhaps the only way I could survive without going insane. Though this is my fault and my own choice, I look at the films made by my colleagues of Experimental Film Society, and I see similar qualities of an atmosphere. I understand not only several shared preoccupations but also a complimentary response from those working from the outskirts, looking in.

It is not merely seeing a district, country, continent or planet from a particular perspective but seeing cinema in that way. Our films are sensory objects, and therefore experiencing them from start to finish with an open mind is the most critical factor. There has always been a sense of tension from the commercial remit and the so-called 'art world'. None of us wants to be an enfant terrible of any kind, and our primary purpose is to make and screen these films on a regular basis.

For an aspiring filmmaker, are there any directors you would recommend them lookup?

The era of silent film encompasses the thirty-five-year span between the initial development of film technology around 1894 and the widespread adoption of synchronized sound around 1929. It was a vitally important period in film history, both for the artistry of the films it produced and for the societal impact of the various institutions that developed to produce and display those films. I would recommend engaging with film history and most importantly, silent films to learn and discover how to express yourself artistically in the visual form and not reproduce text and information.

What has been the best piece of advice you've been given and do you have any advice you would offer a fellow filmmaker?

There are no universal rules. Every filmmaker has their own set of rules. As Oscar Wilde said, be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.

And finally, what are you currently working on?

Currently, I have three feature-length films entitled LOGOS, NYCTOPHILIA and VEIL OF LIGHT developing to be produced in the next few years. I am seeking funding and Co-production at the moment for them. They will be shot in Ireland and Balkans (mostly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia).