

The Patience of the Image

A letter to those who have chosen to stay near the work

I began in the year 2000 without a plan, and I have kept nothing since but the refusal of one. What follows is not an explanation. My films do not carry explanations, and I have learned to distrust anyone – myself first among them – who offers one. It is only a way of standing before the image, set down here because you have come close enough to be owed it.

The cinema I make is not a means of telling. It is a means of perceiving. The camera does not record what has happened; it holds still until duration gathers, until the light begins to think on its own and no longer needs a story to justify it. Narrative, in this work, is not withheld to be difficult. It is subtracted – patiently, deliberately – so that what remains, image and time, is left alone to think. Most of what we call watching is in fact waiting for meaning to arrive and relieve us. I am asking for the opposite: that you stop waiting, and let the image fail to explain itself, and stay anyway.

This is the whole of the demand, and it is not small. These films will not meet you halfway. They do not resolve; they do not console; they offer no key that turns and admits you to a room where everything is understood. There is no such room. What there is instead is duration – the slow, unforgiving accumulation of a moment that refuses to end when you expect it to – and in that refusal, if you do not flee it, something opens that no explanation could have given you. Not comprehension. A kind of perception you did not have before, and cannot afterward set down.

I have never believed the image was there to be deciphered. It is there to be undergone. A face held too long ceases to be a face and becomes a landscape; a landscape held longer becomes a pressure, a weather, a state of the soul. Nothing has been added. Only time, and attention, and the willingness not to look away at the moment looking away would be easiest. The films are made of that willingness, and they ask for yours in return. It is the only thing they ask.

I will not pretend this is a gentle practice. It is a discipline of staying when everything in you, trained by a century of images that flatter and hurry, wants to move on. But I have found – across twenty-five years and more films than I can account for – that the reward is not understanding, which fades, but a change in how the eye itself works, which does not. You will watch other things differently afterward. You will find yourself giving the world the same patience, and the world, occasionally, will give something back.

So begin wherever you like. There is no correct first film, only honest ones. Come to them not to understand but to undergo; not to arrive but to remain. Bring no expectation the image is obliged to satisfy. Bring only your attention, whole, and the willingness to let it be held longer than is comfortable – for it is exactly there, past the comfortable, that this cinema begins.

I make these films alone, by choice, keeping the means of their making in my own hands, because the freedom to fail is the only freedom that has ever mattered to me. You have chosen to stay near that. It is not nothing. I am glad of it, and I will send word when there is new work to send word of – never otherwise.

– Rouzbeh Rashidi