

The world premiere of LOOKING THROUGH, happened at *Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival* in Japan on October 2007.

The film was shown at *New Asian Currents* section (out of the main Competition, probably due to its experimental approach).

Touraj Aslani, the Executive Producer of the film, was also present at the interview. He is also the Director of Photography, who supposed to shoot LOOKING THROUGH, when it was still purely a fictional film. But we sadly couldn't use his skills in that field, since our new approach needed the interviewers to be behind the cameras.

Can you tell us why you made this film as a documentary?

-because apparently the original idea was for a fictional film-

As I mentioned in the QA, cinema tries to capture life. I don't really think it matters much, if it's a documentary or a fiction. In some ways, I think making documentary is harder than making fictional films.

The reason that I insisted about the fictional ending of the film, it wasn't because I believe the fiction is more important than documentary. I just thought this approach could be a little attempt to reconcile the two. What is important is capturing life. We should not really be concerned much about the different categorizations of the cinema.

So, was 'life' always the key motif for making this film?

I think trying to be more alive, is the main motif for everyone's life, even if they don't make films. We always try to be as alive as possible. We might listen to a music that makes us happy...Most of the things we do in our lives, are attempts to make us more alive.

How would you want to expose this sense of "being alive" on the screen?

I've been watching your eyes (to the interpreter) and when she (the interviewer) was talking to you,, even though I can't understand Japanese, but I was looking at her eyes too. There is this English saying that "the eyes are the windows to the soul". If you take 'soul', either metaphysically or whatever...as the representation of life, apparently it demonstrates itself, through our eyes.

You captured so many eyes -especially towards the ending of the film- which were very impressive...

In what way does she think they are impressive?

There was something about them...I've never seen such a thing in any other films. Maybe that's why they were impressive.

I appreciate that, but...apparently could be some cultural differences as well. I was told that you Japanese, wouldn't really look in people's eyes, in a way that a Westerner might do (especially when they salute their drink, they supposed to look in each other's eyes). In the fictional

idea, which I was initially planning to make with *Touraj Aslani*, the story was about a Japanese- American woman traveling in Iran. *Touraj's* 35 mm camera's point of view, was supposed to be the Iranian people's point of view. In Iran, we are not just looking at each other, we actually stare at each other. Which in different cultures, might be interpreted as 'too intrusive', least to say. But knowing more about the Iranian psyche, you might take it as too much curiosity, or so much interest in you. Therefore, I appreciate the fact that looking at people's eyes can be interpreted differently in different cultures, but I was trying to get to the main essence of looking in each other's eyes, regardless of the cultural differences.

(After the translation) *Mr. Aslani* referred to an Iranian saying, which is very similar with an English expression of "seeing is believing". In a way, maybe LOOKING THROUGH just tries to put some importance on the act of seeing, because the real seeing, decreases the possibility of misunderstandings. And part of that real 'seeing', is being able to put the cultural differences aside.

In one of the scenes, we see a man who has lost one of his eyes and has implanted an eye of a nine year old girl. Did you include it in the film, because of your focus on the eye?

Not really...When I started to have a conversation with that beggar, heroin addict, semi-blind...of course I didn't know that he was semi-blind. But maybe our goal, the destination that we had in our mind- reaching the eyes of the people- somehow made this

co-incident. In my view, maybe one can say that the real sight, is the openness of the parents of the deceased girl, who gave the possibility of 'seeing' to someone else. To me, that generosity is the real open eyes, not the open eyes in the physical terms.

Mr. *Aslani* says that; "in a way the eyes of the camera allowed us to film those eyes. We obviously shot more eyes, but the ones we have chosen, are the ones which camera was able to capture their integrity and their real dimension".

(Interpreter): I'm not too sure what you mean...

Maani: For instance, when I'm looking in your eyes, you are aware that a person is looking in your eyes. Then you might not be able to be very natural and spontaneous, because you're dealing with a person. Camera allowed us to be more objective in our film. People were looking at the camera (lens), but they were practically looking in the eyes of the person behind the camera. So, the camera has facilitated this process of 'them', looking at 'us'. It is the beauty of the cinema and the power of the camera that allowed those people to open up and feel more relaxed in front of our lens. We tried to capture a kind of vitality through that 'look', with an equipment which is dead by itself, but that dead object allowed us to bring –hopefully- some life into our subjects.

Was it hard to film all those eyes?

Some of those eyes were shot by *Anahid*. Some of those people -two or three of them- were kind of acquaintance of ours. Some of the eyes belonged to the villagers. My ex-wife had that kind of intimate and trustworthy gesture, therefore she could prepare the situation. I think also because of the power of the camera, we were able to cross some boundaries and get closer to the people's eyes.

Your film starts with a scene that Anahid- the main character- removes the camera cap. What was your intention?

I think, the filmmaker should not really talk about his/her interpretations, but unfortunately sometimes one cannot avoid it. In my own view, I wanted to put the importance on the camera as a character. There was a narration in *Bushehr-Persian Gulf*- when *Anahid* says: "Those kinds of intimate conversations, would not have happened, if we hadn't had a camera." In my view, the camera is a character in the film. Removing the cap is emphasizing on the fact, that we're going to see everything through the eyes of the camera. Just imagine if we, as the strangers supposed to get to know each other. How much time or energy we would have needed to have some ideas about each other? But the camera allows us to strip our soul in front of the viewer's eyes. It saves time and energy and hopefully it decreases the possibility of misunderstandings among each other. One of my favorite directors is Jean Luc Godard. In one of his films -about 100 years of French Cinema- he says; it's sad that we celebrate

the anniversary of the cinema, by defining it through the 'projection of the image on the screen'. He believes by doing that, we put more importance on the box office and the industrial aspects of cinema. He believes the real birth of the cinema, is the existence of the camera, not the projected image on the screen. I think the camera is like what that confectioner says in the film;" the whisperer is the one who converses with himself." When you want to tell the personal stories, the camera allows us to have little conversations with ourselves. Camera can also tell the stories of the others and provides information - which most of the documentaries do- that's another function of the camera which shows your surroundings. So, LOOKING THROUGH in my view, is looking through the camera towards outside, but also towards your own inside.

Can I ask a question, as a matter of curiosity? You don't have any word for the 'camera' in Japanese? Because I noticed the word 'camera', when she talks to you.

Interpreter: We have another word for it in Japanese, but nobody uses it anymore. We just use the word, 'camera'.

In Farsi we have the same word for the camera and the binocular. 'Dour bin', literally means 'a device which allows you to see the distance'. If you want me to be too philosophical- or whatever bullshit it's called- I should say that most of the little simple truth about our lives are very simple, since they are very

accessible and near to our lives. However, at the same time they are too far, since they are too near...'A device which allows you to see the distance'...that distance can be geographical and social or the distances within ourselves...Vow, this became too philosophical...

(Interpreter): one can become philosophical after midnight.

(pointing to the camera) This is just a piece of plastic, don't worry... To be honest 'philosophy' can be interesting too, but I am personally more interested in sociology and psychology. Because as far as I know, the philosophy is more concerned with describing things. But sociology and psychology- and even this kind of filmmaking- hopes and tries to change things. Of course, we're not really sure if cinema can really change anything, but we do our best.

How much preparation you did for this film?

Preparation can mean different things. I had this idea from 1993... so, I must have been ready by the time of the shoot. But in terms of the route that we took in the film, I had done it 3 times before the shoot. And in terms of logistic, we spent 22 days in the south of Iran (*Shiraz, Masjed Sulleyman, Shushtar, Bushehr, Bandar Imam, Abadan*) - bearing in mind that we also have another 30 minutes edited materials about the people whom we met along the way- We actually noticed that the people in the south, with the hot climate, desert, not much water...were more inclined to express themselves.

(You remember the lady who didn't want her face to be filmed, but she DID want to talk). In contrast, *Turkmen* culture (in the north, along the *Caspian Sea*) is very closed. We actually shot just 5 days along the *Caspian Sea*, but we spent at least 15 days to break the ice.

Any discoveries you made, or anything happened during the making of this film, that changed you in some ways?

(Pause) We say things that we might not necessarily do in our own lives. For instance, I'm keep saying: "how life is important and not the cinema"... but maybe part of my own problems with my ex-wife actually stemmed from the fact that I spent 18 months editing and writing the narrations for this film...So, I appreciate the fact that you take us seriously, but please don't take us seriously, because we don't necessarily make films about whom we really are. Sometimes we make films about our wishes, our utopias, or the things that we think we should be.

Is there anything you would like to add?

What we're all really looking for at the end- according to the film- is having close relationship with people...with your friend, with your beloved...in a way that one could be able to look in his/her eyes, as long as one needs it. We might not have enough money, we might even not be healthy, but if you feel connected to your lover or beloved as a person, or to your lover and beloved as anything which is alive, then we might overcome a few things

in our lives...we might even overcome our physical shortcomings,
with the fact that we are really able to look in someone's eyes.

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Photography: Motoko Hiroya / **Video:** Motoko Hiroya / 2007-10-06