

*Does the Sand Hear the Waves?*

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## **Abstract**

The following is a detailed account regarding the creation of the experimental diary film *Does the Sand Hear the Waves?* which follows and investigates the journey of a girl raised in an Eastern culture, but who resides in a Western country. The film is about transformation and adaptation, gaining and losing, memory, nostalgia and building a new self-identity.

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## **Introduction**

Prior to moving to Canada as a child, I could not think about anything else but wanting to move. I do not recall having doubts or if I thought about the separation that was about to occur between myself, my friends and my relatives who stayed in Iran. I gave no thought to the logistics, such as the apartment we would live in, the street, the city, the country, or the culture. When my parents applied for residency in Ontario, my father and his two business partners were building a three-story building for their families in Iran to live in.

Around the same time, I had taken a field trip with my school to an Imam-Zadeh. Imam-Zadeh is a tomb of an offspring or a descendent of a Shia Imam. There are a lot of them in Iran and most of them are located in the suburbs. They are not just like ordinary tombs, but very well made with lots of ornaments and gold. In the Iranian culture, people go there to pray and it is said that if you make your way through the crowd to the center of where the tomb is and touch the lavish fence that protects it, you are very lucky and most of your wishes may come true. As a child, I believed.

Once, I got “lucky” and made my way through to touch the fence. At the time, I had two wishes, the first was to go to Canada, and the second was that if the first wish was denied then I would want to move to the new building as soon as possible. The location of the building was in an increasingly popular part of town at the time and where you live in Tehran is very important for your social standing.

Suddenly, my initial wish came true. I was told that we were moving to Canada and I could not have been happier. However, not long after my wish came true, I soon regretted ever making it. I had been shortsighted. I never took the time to imagine what my new life would be

like in a foreign country. I was fourteen years old and missed everyone and everything back home. There were so many things that I had not paid attention to that had become immensely important and memorable in their absence. For example, I was accustomed to a same-sex school, there was a large language barrier, and I had no immediate friendships. I was alienated in a place I had praised forever. Hollywood had misled me, then reality hit me and I was alone.

## **Background**

I moved to Canada with my family when I was fourteen years-old and it was an increasingly difficult time. As an adolescent experiencing such dramatic change, the culture shock exaggerated my shyness and anxiety. I felt like an outcast, which was in direct conflict with the beautiful life I had envisioned in the West.

As a result, I resisted assimilating to the Canadian way of life, even refusing to be classified as Iranian-Canadian, when crossing the border to the United States. The more I embraced the Canadian aspect of my life, the more I felt like I was betraying my ethnicity. It would have been so much easier to say that I was Iranian-Canadian in order to avoid unnecessary suspicion, but I was hesitant to accept the duality of my upbringing. Meanwhile, I was undergoing the process of transformation and adaptation to the new life style without awareness of its occurrence.

Two years ago, I became an Iranian-Canadian in the eyes of the law. Having spent equal amounts of time in both countries, I wonder if my “Canadian-ness” will cast a shadow on my Iranian ethnicity or vice versa. *Does the Sand Hear the Waves?* is a depiction of that balancing act.

## **Previous Work**

My previous work as a filmmaker has contributed to the current film through a process of artistic evolution and speaks to the genre of films I gravitate to as an expression of self.

Filmmaking has served as a means of personal reflection for someone raised in an Iranian family that did not encourage showing emotion or communicating feelings. Creating films has become a means for releasing these pent-up emotions and thoughts and serves as a foundation for the current project. Despite the very personal meaning behind the films, they have also been widely received by audiences internationally and have been recognized through a number of honors and awards.

### ***No One Thinks About the Garden (2008)***

This film, developed during my third year of film school at York University (B.F.A.), was the first in a series of works delving into personal subject matter. It was inspired by a visit with my grandmother in Iran when she seemed to embody abandonment and loneliness. The film, shot on 16mm high contrast black and white film, was hand processed for a more stark effect and allowed for editing to simulate the diminishing eyesight of the elderly subject. The point of view focused on the typical day of an isolated and aging woman, concentrating on mundane scenes and ordinary sounds. Music along with poetry by Forough Farokhzad worked together and blended with the hand-painted film. This communicated the profound relationship between the symbolism presented, the filmmaker, and the subject.



### ***Even Flowers Wake Up in the Morning (2009)***

The death of my grandfather had a significant impact on me as featured in the film *Even Flowers Wake Up in the Morning*. The film is a hybrid of both video and 16mm film with musical accompaniment. Video imagery superimposed onto clear film demonstrates the memories of my grandfather flickering in my head as if I were watching a projector shining old film clips in a dark theater. I cut together fragments of memories to express what he meant to me and to simulate the power of his passing.

### ***Night Owl (2013)***

This short film was developed during a summer workshop in Cuba at Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión de San Antonio de los Baños (EICTV) under the direction of film Professor Philip Hoffman. *Night Owl* tries to demonstrate the search for identity through 16mm high contrast film stock, hand-processed, and hand-manipulated.

### ***Flower Casting Shadow on Stone (2014)***

Another short film, which I shot while in Cuba, entitled *Flower Casting Shadow on Stone*. It expresses the feelings I have felt as an outsider surrounded by spectacular natural elements. It was shot on 16mm high contrast film, hand-processed and hand-painted.

In all of the films, leading up to my thesis film, I have noticed now in retrospect, a strong underlying concentration on the figure of the ‘outsider’. In this way, I see that my own search for an identity has been a constant intuitive desire in my work and in my life. My thesis film, *Does*

*the Sand Hear the Waves?* consciously investigates in detail the foundations of this search for my identity as an Iranian-Canadian.

### **Review of Film Influences**

The current film has been created utilizing influences from film, movies, poetry and artwork. Together they have aided in the conceptualization of a more multidimensional work.

### **Sergei Parajanov (1924-1990)**

Sergei Parajanov, an Armenian filmmaker and artist, had a beautiful and poetic vision of the world. His skill at presenting meaning on the screen through use of color, positioning of actors and props and story illustration remains indelible (see Fig. 1). He was imprisoned for many years at different stages of his life in the Soviet Union because authorities did not approve of his tendencies toward bisexuality, but despite being confined, he was able to produce elaborate collages, abstract paintings, and miniature dolls. Parajanov went on to invent his own cinematic style with an ornamental flair. He had been influenced by Armenian and Persian miniature paintings and succeeded in producing stunning images on the screen, incorporated

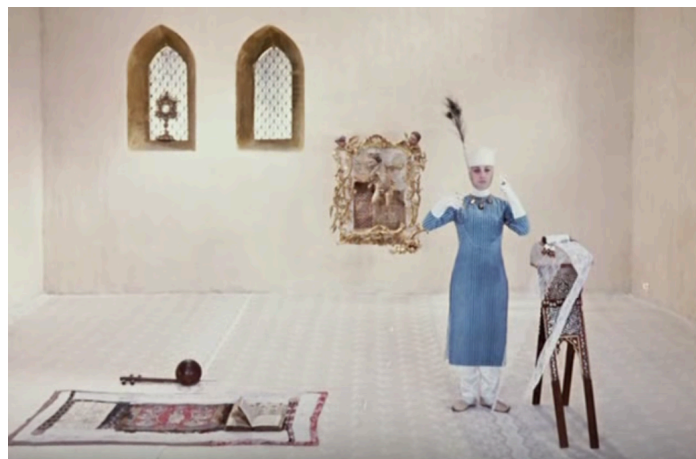


Fig. 1. *Color of Pomegranate* by Sergei Parajanov

with symbolic elements to convey meaning. Every little detail within his films has its own connotation. Unfortunately, there are not many scholarly texts about him written in English, therefore, I travelled to Yerevan, Armenia to visit the museum featuring his work and learn more about his art and vision firsthand. His work continues to impact me deeply.

In 1973, when Parajanov was sentenced to prison, Andrei Tarkovsky wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine. In that letter he explained the mark Parajanov had already made on filmmaking, acknowledging, "Artistically, there are few people in the entire world who could replace Paradjanov. He is guilty – guilty of his solitude. We are guilty of not thinking of him daily and of failing to discover the significance of a master." (1) Parajanov died in 1990 from lung cancer, but the legacy he left behind continues to inspire filmmakers. His influence correlates directly to the set I created for my thesis film and will be detailed in the project description.

### **Forough Farokhzad (1935-1967)**

Forough Farokhzad was one of Iran's most influential female poets, a modernist who spoke her mind, which was rare in a patriarchal society. Her poetry is honest and genuine, infused with a feminine perspective not really seen before in the Middle East. Unfortunately, her life was cut short when she died in a car accident at the age of 32. Her courage to speak out has been motivating and inspiring. As I was growing up, reading her poetry and witnessing her honesty in every verse, and trying to picture her in a society where this was taboo and unheard of, I realized that, I as well can express myself and speak my mind and emotions through images. However, I was raised in an environment where affection was not so visible on the surface or in spoken words. As a highly emotional person, I had the urge to dismiss these feelings that had

been suppressed for many years and Forough influenced me to be courageous to reveal myself. One of the first poems I was introduced to is *The Sin*, in which she speaks of her sexual intimacy with someone, in a very beautiful and personal manner. When I read the poem I was shocked at what a brave woman she was.

“desire sparked a flame in his eyes;  
the red wine danced in the cup.  
In the soft bed, my body  
drunkenly quivered on his chest.

I sinned a sin full of pleasure,  
next to a shaking, stupefied form.  
O God, who knows what I did  
In that dark and quiet seclusion.” (2)

Also I find that some of her poetry is about matters that I cannot put into words, and it seems as if she is speaking to me. The title of one of my previous films *No One Thinks About the Garden*, had been inspired by her poem *I Pity the Garden* and I also incorporate excerpts of her poem in the film, to communicate how I felt about my grandmother’s state.

“No one thinks of the flowers.  
No one thinks of the fish.  
No one wants to believe the garden is dying,  
that its heart has swollen in the heat  
of this sun, that its mind drains slowly  
of its lush memories.

Our garden is forlorn.  
It yawns waiting  
for rain from a stray cloud  
and our pond sits empty,  
callow stars bite the dust  
from atop tall trees  
and from the pale home of the fish  
comes the hack of coughing every night.” (3)

Forough's voice has also guided the current film through purpose and prose.

### **Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania (1972)**

Jonas Mekas' personal diary film portrays the filmmaker's visit to his childhood house in Lithuania after living abroad for 25 years. In the film he visits his mother, his childhood home, and the land he surrounded himself with in his youth. It is a very beautiful and poetic film, which made me understand that I am not the only filmmaker going through this emotional process and identity crisis! In fact, most immigrants go through this journey and can relate to the subject I am exploring in my thesis film.

### **Double Happiness (1994)**

The movie *Double Happiness* follows Chinese-Canadian Jade Li who comes from a traditional Chinese family which tries to put on the perfect public persona. Scenes from this movie are indicative of moments from my own life. For example, in one scene the Chinese family is sitting at the dinner table in Canada, eating Chinese food, the parents speak Chinese and the children reply in English. It was a funny, and an eye opening observation for me to realize that without thinking about it, this same scene is happening to all of us immigrants. The movie prompted me to watch and analyze my family closer in order to better understand how these two cultures are coexisting side by side. This duality of culture became a key premise of the current film. The observations I drew from this film and others, helped me to understand the power of film, in the method it assists in reflecting on one's experience. In this way, it can fuel personal understanding and growth.

### **The Places that Scare You (2001)**

As a female filmmaker, I have always wondered what it would feel like to completely know oneself. I felt that through experience and age, my knowledge of myself would grow. This thought, and the search to find myself, troubled me until I read a book by Pema Chördön entitled *The Places that Scare You*. She writes:

“That nothing is static or fixed, that all is fleeting and impermanent, is the first mark of existence. It is the ordinary state of affairs. Everything is in process. Everything – every tree, every blade of grass, all the animals, insects, human beings, buildings, the animate and the inanimate – is always changing, moment to moment... Every cell in the body is continuously changing. Thoughts and emotions rise and fall away unceasingly.” (4)

So how can one possibly know oneself when we are changing every second? Somehow, this notion has eased my struggle and relieved this constant search for self. While I continue to evolve personally, it is undeniable that this search for my identity has made me who I am today and influenced my work as a filmmaker.

### **Persian Miniature Paintings**

It is believed that Persian miniature paintings existed before the development of Islam in Persia, but there has not been enough historical research focusing on the time period prior to the thirteenth century, to be certain. Persian paintings have had a long historical route of evolution and have also had Chinese, Mongol and Arab influences.

The imagery evoked by Persian miniature painting as explained by Sheila Canby greatly influenced *Does the Sand Hear the Waves?*

“No matter what its period, a great Persian painting will exhibit a distinct sense of design and an understanding of how to arrange colors and forms on a flat surface to form a rhythmic whole...

Persian miniature paintings invite one to linger and delight in every detail...they do not just illustrate a story. Rather, they breathe life into the hills and animals, clouds and trees that populate the scene of the narrative. Yet Persian artists of every generation and every style retained their innately Persian understanding of design. By favoring two-dimensionality and compositional harmony, they presented things as they should be, not necessarily as they are.” (5)

The basic elements of Persian miniature paintings are form and content. The subjects of these paintings are usually poetry or mythological tales and their style is not three-dimensional, but flat. The paintings are highly detailed, the color pallet consists of vivid tones with each color symbolizing meaning, and geometry plays a large role to create an essence of flatness. Distance is portrayed as not proportional but instead by placing the subjects at the bottom to represent foreground and on the top to represent background. Kamal al-din Behzad, born in the 1450s, is believed to be the greatest master of Persian miniature painting.

“Persian painting of the period frequently uses an arrangement of geometric architectural elements as the structural or compositional context in which the figures are arranged. Behzad is equally skilled with the organic areas of landscape, but where he uses the traditional geometric style Behzad stretches that compositional device in a couple of ways (see Fig. 2). One is that he often uses open, unpattern empty areas around which action moves. Also he pins his compositions to a mastery at moving the eye of the observer around the picture plane in a quirky organic flow. The gestures of figures and

objects are not only uniquely natural, expressive and active, they are arranged to keep moving the eye throughout the picture plane. He uses value (dark-light contrast) more emphatically, and skillfully...” (6)

The current film attempts to embody many of the elements perfected by Behzad and is incorporated into Persian miniature paintings in the opening sequence.



Fig. 2. Painting by Kamal al-din Behzad.

## Project Description

The film *Does the Sand Hear the Waves?* weaves three sections together to create a one-piece film. The film was a labor of love, but also exhausting not only because of the time commitment, but because of the personal and emotional nature of the subject matter. Sever



forms of media were utilized and a great deal of thought went into establishing symbolism through production elements.

### **Film Outline**

The film begins with a staged set, displaying personal items from both my Eastern and Western cultures with myself sitting in the middle to portray the dichotomy of the situation. Close up shots of the objects follow and then the subsequent shots mingle together to portray a sense of diversity. For instance, the film shows a Setar (an Eastern musical instrument) and juxtaposes it with a guitar (a Western musical instrument).

In the next scene, the storyline moves on to Canada, where I live now, and to Niagara Falls, where my parents reside. Snow has covered the surroundings creating an ethereal effect. I decided to set the first scene in Canada with snow at Niagara Falls because I personally associate the name “Canada” with snow and the falls are iconic worldwide. My parents’ house is shown next. After all, it was their decision to bring my brother and me to Canada. I start with the introduction of my mother, watching her through my lens and remaining quiet as I usually am. I show her in her natural environment surrounded by her own personal affects. Next, I introduce my father, a person in my life who I always tried to look up to and please, displaying him in his space and what occupies him in his free time. I show my parents together and I talk about the struggle my father has undergone in order to find a sustainable job.

Then, I go into my own space, introducing myself briefly. This scene reflects a kind of opacity, which comes out of a way that I see myself, in my environment. I indicate my presence

through the reflection of myself in the mirror. Next, I introduce my grandmother when she visited from Iran. I show her occupying herself with sewing and altering our clothes in order to not be bored and keep herself busy while my parents worked. She does not feel comfortable going out by herself in a world unknown to her. Next, I introduce my grandfather who is now deceased, by watching footage of his grave in Iran that I had collected. I move into the shot from the monitor. I observe his tomb, as a man who earns a living by praying for the dead prays for my grandfather, and my grandmother places flowers on the stone.

In the next scene, I'm back in Canada, in the car, day dreaming, I fall into the dream and go back to a dream state within a dream. My childhood and the last time I visited that place plays parallel, remembering, wondering if the space remembers me. I play with time and space differentiating the periods of time by shifting between home video footage, hand-processed 16mm film, and HD video. This is space where I spent a lot of time playing with sand, swimming in the sea, adoring the house and the garden that my grandmother and grandfather build and nurtured with their own hands. Then I wake up in the car and I come back to reality.

I introduce my brother, presenting what he has experienced as an immigrant and portraying his contrasting view to my own experience. We go to the store where my parents have placed all of their time and effort when they were not able to find jobs in their respective career fields. They went back to school in Canada to have a better chance of establishing their careers, but, soon after they graduated, 9-11 occurred and finding jobs became much harder for people of Middle Eastern descent. I show my parents working. My mother's birthday and the gathering they have with their friends. I note that they bring Iran into their living rooms often through personal objects and the people with which they associate. They have learned to live in Western society, but choose to interweave these elements into the practice of their Iranian culture. I show

televisions and what plays on the monitor are memories that are stuck in my head. The nostalgia depicts elements of both Iran and Canada.

The film then takes a shift as I go to Iran, to my grandmother's apartment, showing her in her own space. I mention my relationship with my grandparents and my grandmother's journey after my grandfather passed away. I go back to my grandfather's tomb and remember the video I saw of his burial and his still face, not having had enough courage to attend the funeral myself in 2003. Back in my grandmother's apartment, walking in the space that is so familiar to me, my childhood memories are "flooding" into the scene, as I show the apartment in which we used to live.

Moving on to my paternal grandmother's house, showing her as I perceive her to be, she is seen as weak and ill. I understand this to be my perception of the world around me, feeling invisible at times and just observing what is happening.

In the next scene, I am in the studio where I currently work with my four other Iranian friends. I show the space and talk about the creative projects we collaborate on as a team and how they might jeopardize my status in Iran. I incorporate audio of Obama giving a speech in which he talks about the nuclear deal with Iran and also the sounds of people celebrating the lifting of sanctions in Iran.

Finally, I move to my parents' house in Canada when my grandmother visited again from Iran. I display the reflection of my mother, grandmother, and myself in a mirror, but with a wall separating myself from them. The next shot is of my grandmother working in the garden. I ask her a question, and this is the first time in the film the audience audibly hears my voice.

Although my presence in the film is felt at all times, this is the only time I interact directly on screen, and in a sense depict the end of this journey.

### **Project Evolution**

The film has undergone major reiterations since the idea was originally conceived. Initially, this project began by thematically focusing on the “transition” from an Iranian to a Canadian and how the process occurred. I had not realized this transition had taken place so intuitively until I returned to Iran, the first time. I was deeply impressed by how much I had changed during those years of living in Canada, although at that time I was not interested in searching for my identity, but rather had the desire to test the boundaries of my newfound freedom. But in 2010 I visited Iran again after six more years in Canada. By then, I had grown more mature and my interest in understanding what I had been through intensified. I explored the country, the arts and the culture. This trip occurred before I had the idea of making this film. I noticed how much I had changed, and how the culture was unlike the culture I carried with me now. By the third time I visited in 2012, the idea for this film had emerged. I began to understand who I was in relation to this new life. I now could point out things that used to be at one time familiar and customary as now peculiar and strange because I was not living in that society anymore. This was the major reason behind the film: for me to understand the full range of my experience of immigration. The experiences and the difficulties involved would be narrated overtop a divergent staged set, which would represent the East and the West, reflecting the style of the filmmaker Sergei Parajanov.

After executing some tests by editing and making different versions of the project, it became clear how difficult it would be to get my message across through imagery alone. Also, I

realized that living the experience was so multidimensional and multifaceted that it would be difficult to translate this to film. Thus, I decided to take a different approach and make the theme broader and more about the life following the transition, with remnants of the past remaining.

The purpose was to try to show the “baggage” that I carry with me every day and how it affects my view on a daily basis. As well, I would dig deeper within my consciousness to recover memories that I had repressed for many years. The intention was to portray moments that were hard to cope with, but it was an emotional and tiring task. Undergoing a traumatic journey allowed me to be in touch with what I had lost for so many years, and to understand the strains I had dealt with to be where I am today.

I decided to keep a small part of the divided scene to play as a metaphor in the film, but I also added different chapters that are interspersed throughout the film, which depicts my life after immigration and adaptation.

### **Set Design**

Having access to the York University sound stage for only four days and having never built a set before, proved challenging at first. In advance of shooting, I drew what I had in mind for the set and then I utilized Photoshop to help with the visualization. The original design was to divide the set into two discrete sections, which would illustrate the East and the West, where each represented parts of my background symbolically, with material objects (see Fig. 2). I collected objects in my apartment that personified the different cultures. I bought paint for the Iran side and wallpaper for the Canadian side.

It took three days to construct the set. A couple of friends helped, which was a great experience not only working as a team, but also learning to direct them on where to place the objects. Being inspired by the works of Sergei Parajanov, and trying to stick to creating a flat space similar to a miniature painting, we had to try to place the objects so that they were not too far from each other, avoiding the appearance of too much depth. In the end, I did achieve the set I had visualized and was satisfied with the work we had done.



Fig. 3. Sitting in the middle of the Eastern and Western sides of the set.

## **Visuals**

The visuals were key to the success of the film, thus the process was complex and incorporated several different film styles. Four different formats such as 4k HD, 1080p, 16mm film, home video VHS footage, were incorporated within the making of the film to depict reality, symbolism, the past and memory.

## **Equipment**

The studio footage was shot on the RED camera at an Ultra High Definition resolution of 4K, although the Apple pro resolution codec compression was used in the final version.

The film footage, as well as some other shots in the film, was captured on a Bolex Reflex Camera with 16mm high contrast film stock. The 16mm film was hand processed, parts of the footage tinted, and then digitized to HD format. The scratches on the footage were deliberately created for an effect that characterizes diminishing recollections. During the hand-processing, I developed 100 feet at a time in a small bucket, which is a lot of film to be developed at once. The filmstrip tangles and rubs against itself as well as scraping the emulsion of silver off the film, creating scratches that suggests imperfection. The premeditation of this method was used to effectively portray the decay of memory. Parts of the 16mm film look degraded, the reason being that the film stock had expired and therefore the footage appears faded and has a bluish tone to it. Home video footage, converted from PAL to NTSC, and transferred from VHS to a digital format was infused into the film. The remainder of the project was shot in 1080p on the Canon T2i/ 550D.

## **Style and Point of View**

The in-and-out-of focus perspective within the film has been captured by holding down the shutter. When doing so, the focus goes back and forth and lets increased light into the camera until it finds a focus and halts. By creating the jittery in-and-out-of focus shots, I create a sense of confusion and complication and thus the implication of attachment and detachment. As well, this suggests a sense of searching. The 16mm film resonates memory and the past, while the

digital footage suggests the present. The television scene where memories flicker in fast motion (at 12fps) suggests the recollections of my childhood revealed quickly and with little detail, perhaps the way memory works. This is done by using found footage clips of television shows and events, filming them on 16mm high contrast film through the computer screen, and hand processing the images in order to make the memories and the moments my own. The hand processed images have stains and scratches on them and are not sharp or clean similarly to our childhood memories. Using an expired film and experimenting resulted in visual imagery suitable for this purpose.

Using a hand-held camera technique where the world is seen through my eyes, gives the notion of the first person point of view. The audience experiences my perception of what surrounds me. In contrast, in the studio scene the camera is set on a tripod and I am sitting in front of the camera allowing myself to become the object of analysis.

As suggested, the setup in the studio is a portrayal of my two identities. The East (on the right side of the screen, since on the map of the world Iran is located on the right side) represents Iran, my homeland and contains my Persian identity. The West (on the left side of the screen) symbolizes Canada, my second home country. All the objects placed on the set are mine; the apartment is decorated with a mixture of ambiance from both lands. Placing myself in the middle of the set declares my double identity. There are no shadows and the lighting is even, without any chiaroscuro to create a flat space, inspired by Parajanov's film style and Persian miniature paintings as previously referenced.



## **Cinematography**

I wanted to take my experience at York University farther and take advantage of the opportunities provided; therefore, for the first time I brought in a cinematographer to shoot the studio footage. It was a learning experience, as I had some communication difficulties and I usually prefer to work alone. Mehran Jabbari is a friend, so I was comfortable working with him and he tended to provide the overall look I was going for, although I wish I had taken the time to shoot and experiment more rather than simply going with the initial shot list I had created. I also shot the studio footage on the 16mm high contrast film, but it did not make its way into the final cut.

I filmed myself, all of the footage with exception of this studio footage shot on the RED Digital Cinema camera. I prefer to do the shooting myself in order to try to show my point of view of the world and how I perceive human interactions. As well, I am interested in reflecting my relationship to others and to the objects around me. After all, it is a personal film and I believe it is crucial to use the camera as a tool to portray my frame of mind as I see fit. Adjusting the focus and composition while the camera is running, communicates both the past I have lived, and how it influences my current worldview.

## **Audio**

Sound was another key element to the film. I utilized natural sound recorded using a zoom microphone. In addition, by distorting music, I made the composition my own in order to overlay it onto my footage. I also played the Setar and Daf (Persian percussion) and recorded the sounds heard on the television screen while showing my Iranian childhood.

There is another poignant sound that plays in the beginning of the Iranian TV scene and that is the alarm the government played on local media during times of war. The sound warned people to find shelters, while Iraqi forces bombed the city. This sound is stuck in my unconscious as a symbol of terror; every time I hear a similar alarming sound it creates a sense of anxiety and takes me back to my childhood. It reminds me of when my parents would grab me and run to the neighbor's basement to take shelter in case the bombs were to fall in our neighborhood.

I downloaded the other sounds that play over the western television images. The intention behind not hearing sounds of the cartoons on the Iranian TV and only hearing vague music and noise, is to evoke the sense that those memories are fading as time passes. More immediate sounds of Western television depict recent memories, which are not yet as opaque as the older reminiscences.

## **Post Production**

### **Video Editing**

Editing was the most difficult task of this project. Not having a script and building a structure different from a conventional narrative film, took a lot of energy. Not having a specific guide or storyboard to follow, allowed me to be free with a wide range of options, but also presented a challenge.

By developing this nonlinear concept, the project has been evolving and growing since its conception. The film did not follow a specific blueprint, but developed throughout the days, months, and years. It changed gradually, just like everything around us that changes moment to moment. If I were to continue the film, it would continue to develop and grow, just like a diary.

The primary reason the film was delayed was a lack of time to spend on it, since I had to work to support myself financially, making it very difficult to find free time to dedicate myself entirely to the film. If I did not need to worry about paying expenses, *Does the Sand Hear the Waves?* would have been finished long ago. But sadly, that is not the case for most filmmakers and artists.

Throughout editing, I had a difficult time with the structure and so made many different versions of the film. The first cut was about 45 minutes in length and as time passed, after two years, it is now down to 31 minutes. Figuring out where to place the shots and merging the different chapters together has been a long process. Taking on different exercises such as picking only ten shots from the movie that were very significant to the film and cutting them down to five and then three proved to be informative. I would then start to build from there to manage and to feel where each shot, which proved to be a difficult but revealing task. After many versions I now feel I have found the correct structure. The benefit of working in this manner, without a definite script, letting the images collected lead the way, allows the film to find a unique narrative trajectory.

### **Audio Editing**

Instead of having a voice over, I chose to use titles as my voice, keeping myself less visible, more of an observer. I often have voices in my head, trying to keep me safe from judgment and criticism, which ultimately creates anxiety within. It is only when I feel safe with the people around me that I say what is on my mind.

Throughout the film we do not see me interact with people, nor hear my voice until the end, when we see my grandmother in the yard gardening. For the first time in the film we hear my voice asking her a question. The goal is to point to myself as someone who has been silenced until now. And the words spoken ask a question of my grandmother, referring back to my childhood, a place that no longer exists.

### **Significance of the Film**

This project is not only a film, but also an art piece that has been therapeutic for me. I am unclear as to how I will feel about it in the future, but at the moment I can say it took some weight off my shoulders. Thoughts, episodes and emotions that had been restrained for many years have been released; although not completely for I remain on this journey.

I believe many people will relate to this film, as it is the story many might have endured themselves. Canada is the land of many nations. People from all colors and cultures reside in this vast land. Some adapt to the new lifestyle more quickly than others. Toronto alone consists of different “towns” affiliated with different nations. Just like Chinatown and Little Italy, Iranians have occupied North York and Richmond Hill referring to it as Tehranto. It is in Tehranto that they find a westernized version of Iran. Almost anything you can buy in the supermarkets in Iran, you can surely find in the Iranian supermarkets in Tehranto (although more expensive due to import expenses). When you walk the streets of Tehranto you hear the sounds of people speaking Farsi and many find it more comfortable to live where they do not need to learn English.

Some immigrants may not be aware of their own transition and assimilate subconsciously, but perhaps by watching this film they will begin to investigate and be more attuned to their metamorphosis.

### **Understanding My Culture**

This project has been a wonderful journey through which I feel closer to understanding the path that got me to where I am today. It has been an opportunity to research my heritage and to appreciate my Iranian culture; to make sense of the traditions I still practice and the new conventions I have embraced during my residence in Canada.

Prior to this project, I had been practicing and carrying out the Iranian celebrations, such as Nowruz (the Persian New Year marked by the spring equinox. Celebrating the beginning of life), Charshanbe-Soori (known as the “Fire Feast,” celebrating the last Wednesday eve before the new year by jumping over fire, keeping the fire alive until the morning), Yalda (marked by the winter solstice, the longest and darkest night of the year, celebrating the night with family and friends until the morning by reading poetry and eating watermelon, pomegranate and nuts. The redness of the fruits represents the hues of dawn. This film allowed me to educate myself through a historical sense and to interpret the metaphorical aspects of these conventions.

My two worlds are coexisting side by side: East and West. I have personified through film how I feel more connected to these two cultures and how I have made them my own. I am able to do this with found footage film, recording on 16mm film, and processing as well as manipulating the stock. This project has helped me be more aware of the division of my worlds. I have become more integrated and now feel comfortable with my two identities.

As I keep myself informed and involved in Canadian news I also keep track of what is happening in Iran. The same is true with political activities. As much as I am involved in working for a better government in Canada, I also try to be involved with human rights campaigns in Iran that promote freedom of speech and other basic rights, hoping for a reform in the current government and perhaps gradually a change of regime. Recently, three of my friends and I have formed a design and production company in which we produce various multimedia products such as animations, music videos and commercials. Along with these, we are collaborating with a few companies that focus on online freedom, online privacy, and online safety in Iran. For instance, we make animations that explain the risks of being identified on the net and how people can prevent these occurrences, our target mostly being Iranian bloggers, activists, and journalists. I feel proud to be a part of these projects, but at the same time, I fear that if I return to Iran I could be imprisoned. Just recently, Mostafa Azizi, an Iranian-Canadian screenwriter and producer was sentenced to eight years in prison. He received 5 years for “gathering and collusion against national security,” 2 years for “insulting the Supreme Leader,” and one year for “acting against national security in cyberspace.” Atena Farghadani, an Iranian artist has also been sentenced to 12 years and nine months in prison for a drawing she made depicting the Iranian leaders as monkeys and cows. As much as I enjoy informing and educating the people of Iran to be more cautious by illustrating different ways they can express their basic rights, I worry about my status in Iran. Ultimately though, this fear will not stop me from continuing this important work.

## Conclusion

The making of this film has been an undertaking all on its own. I learned more about my abilities and myself as well, more about the culture I have been carrying with me all my life. This film has been a journey with lots of emotional factors. The more I experience with film and video, the more I realize that my films are more autobiographical and lyrical than ever. I tend to make films that lean in the direction of the visual and poetic, and *Does the Sand Hear the Waves?* follows in that tradition. By utilizing the raw materials of my unplanned daily life and by specifically using a handheld camera, I am showing what I see and by incorporating subtle movements and sounds to evoke my presence even though it is not so visible. Jonas Mekas and Philip Hoffman, both diary filmmakers, have both inspired me to see that it is possible for one to create personal films and to express what one feels through images. Filmmaker Stan Brakhage has repeatedly said in his writings and speeches that his “films arose from visions and needs that could not be verbalized.” (7) I feel a connection to this sentiment and find it relevant to my story. Although in my life it is perhaps a little bit different as I am not yet fully able to speak my mind and must instead depict it visually.

I believe this film communicates what my intentions were and the trained eye can see that every detail has some sort of connotation or purpose. I attempted to illustrate my feelings, whether they were ones of anxiety, depression, contentment or nostalgia and I hope these emotions are evident to the viewer who can associate them with their own experiences, whether as immigrants or not.

This is the first of my films that has taken a long three years to complete and it is also the longest in length as previous films were less than 10 minutes.

I am grateful to have had this experience and I feel like I have accomplished an important milestone in my life. I look forward to producing more personal films along with working at our production company to try to take my filmmaking practice further. I hope to produce films and animations that are culturally in touch with both Iranian and North American folk tales and mythological stories. It is my desire to communicate the interweaving of culture, thanks to the more open-minded nature of a democratic society.



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