

**TRANSLATING HYPER ABSURDITY
THROUGH A LIMINAL POSITION**

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Abstract

The objective of this artistic research has been to reflect on the conditions for filmmakers in Sweden and identify expectations, contradictions and subject positions available for myself within this discursive field. As a point of departure, I use three letters of rejection that I have received during my two years as a student at the Stockholm University of the Arts.

The first rejection centers what experiences can be imagined for me, as an immigrant filmmaker. It juxtaposes experiences made in Iran and Sweden as opposite and impossible to combine. The second rejection is in relation to content and story-telling, which raises questions about translation as a dimension of film production. In this section, I argue that while it is my intention to make experiences of hyper-absurdity in Iran penetrable for an audience in Sweden, too much concern over the audience may deteriorate the artistic process. The third rejection constructs myself and my fellow director as immigrant others, scrutinizing our ability to make a film in Swedish, about Swedish subjects. In this section, I explore the meaning of diaspora and how it shapes the conditions of film production.

The artistic research is summarized in the final section where I suggest a number of strategies forward in order to move away from the taken-for-granted role of immigrant filmmaker(s).

Key concepts: documentary film, diaspora, translation

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Amnesia

I was born in 1984, in the aftermaths of the Iranian Revolution, which had shifted to the Islamic Revolution without anybody understanding how or when. The Iran-Iraq war was intensifying, the lines for bread and milk growing longer - or so I have been told.

With me in their arms, my parents crossed the border to the Soviet Union, the geographic space which is now the Republic of Azerbaijan. I was barely one year old, my parents weary of the long and dangerous journey over mountains. Happy to be among familiar faces, they were met by leaders from the political party for which they had risked not only their own lives, but that of their families. But the man, who had been a comrade of my father, looked into his eyes and said to the Soviet border guard that he did not know these people, that they weren't part of the movement. It seemed he suffered from amnesia. So they were sent back across the border to Iran. I don't remember this either.

My first memories are from years later, and even then, I'm not sure which parts are my own and what are made up after hearing the stories of others. What are scenes that I have seen and what are pictures from albums and the walls of my grandparents' home, merged in my mind and re-organized as memories of my own.

For a very long time, I haven't paid attention to the archive of memories, neither mine, nor that of my family members or friends. As a journalist, the archives of the public service seemed much more intriguing. I even cringed at artistic work that was centered around the artists themselves. "Come on! Get over yourself!" I wanted to say. Off course I had the manners not to. But I never understood what was interesting about this introspection. It felt self-absorbed and out of touch with "the real world".

I, on the other hand, wanted to tell the interesting, important and relevant stories. As a radio journalist, I got a chance to interview famous persons, artists, politicians. However, something about the format soon became mundane to me. It was the same routine questions, the short format, staying on the surface of things. The most interesting stories always came when the microphone was turned off

and the most exciting parts of peoples lives were seldom their work. Through journalism, I came to be interested in stories behind the headlines. The multitude of micro-stories that build up to large events. Events like the Iranian Islamic Revolution. And the more I thought of it, the more I sensed the ground moving beneath my feet, opening a crack between the world in which I live and the world on my mind. If I tell my story, our stories, in this world to which we are a cliché - who is going to listen and what will they understand?

Truth is, I never had the opportunity to digest the events that dominated our lives as children and youth growing up in post-revolutionary Iran. The morality propaganda, the war, the absurdities of our educational system; it was all obstacles that we found ways to avoid, and these ways became so normalized yet so painful, at least I preferred not to think about it. Like the political activists who had turned into gatekeepers of the border, I choose amnesia. “This is my life now. Just do the right thing” I told myself.

When my son was five years old, he asked why we live in Sweden. This made me realize, that no matter how neutral I attempt to act in relation to our past, the shadows of migration will stay over me, my children, and as the atmosphere in Europe seems, for many generations more. Soon after, I accidentally found a publication made by my wifes great grandfather in the 1950’s. I showed it to her and she, who grew up as the child of Iranian refugees in Sweden, couldn’t read it, because she cannot read in Persian. I realized I’m in a liminal position, not necessarily between Sweden and Iran but between migrants who arrived here long before me and my friends who remained in Iran, between different narratives of Iranian history and the story of those who left. We could have been among those who arrived here in the 1980’s, but a twist of history and a random dude blinded by ideology sent us back “to fight for the cause”.

The stories I want to tell are not necessarily those of my family, but those of us who have inhabited liminal positions for all of these years. Migration is one practice of border crossing, but in Iran, we embodied the borders, or to paraphrase Pouran Djampour, the borders crossed our bodies (Djampour 2018). Everything about us was illegal, our hair, our beard, our music, our jeans, our drinks, our

hands holding our girlfriends hands. One generation before us could end up in prison for what we did. The younger generation is dying to fight for rights beyond this conditioned lives. Also in this sense, my generation was in-between, part of neither the 1979 revolution or the 2022 Mahsa Amini movement. Maybe this notion of neither/nor is a construction in itself. As Derrida discusses, any position requires a counterpart, as we create meaning through contradictions and negations (Derrida 1978). I say my generation is not revolutionary, because we have not lived through a successful revolution, but perhaps this statement should be deconstructed. What are the elements of our collective history and what can be the contribution of documentary film in narration of these memories?

When my son asked why we are here and my wife could not take part of her own family history because of a language deficit that most probably our children, like many children in diaspora, will grow up to have, it became clear to me that the line between what I had perceived as serious and relevant journalism and intimate storytelling through art, is also a construction in my mind. I thought to myself that if I don't tell my story, our story of these liminal experiences that fit no box, nobody else will. Our collective history as Iranians accessible in Swedish or English, will give my children a limited and skewed image. A cliché in which they imagine me on the back of a camel and their mother belly-dancing while kissing my feet. All representations are one of infinite versions of a story, which has no beginning nor an ending. Why not add my own version, no matter how introspective and self-absorbed it may seem?

Reflections on artistic research methods

In academic research, a methodology must be presented in order to provide transparency about the way in which the research questions have been approached, how the result has been reached and what ontological and epistemological claims that can be made on the empirical basis of the project (Bryman 2016).

In artistic research, the case is different from both quantitative and qualitative approaches in the sense that there is no way the artistic work - which is the empirical body and/or the result - can be duplicated by another scientist with the same result. The artist's method can be, painting, literature, performance, music or motion picture, and the research questions can be even more open-ended, stretching from the concrete materiality of the arts (how do I make this sculpture?) to existential or scientifically overlapping issues such as how do I illustrate this issue in a meaningful way and what is a meaningful way, to whom and why?

When the artistic work reflects and is an expression of embodied experiences, it is not relevant or interesting to discuss duplication. The methodological emphasis should rather be on the premises of the artistic work. Here, I find inspiration in post-structural discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, Glynos & Howarth 2007). This provides a theoretical lens through which the conditions for film production can be understood as underpinned by discursive logics. These logics can be articulated in relations and expressions when people interact in the field of art and cinema, but also in ideology through which policy and institutionalized practices are produced. Discourse hence structures the relations between institutions and different subject positions in the context of funding, production and distribution. In order to understand my artistic context, I need to reflect on the multiple – innumerable - possible actions that may take place at any given situation. A practice or a series of inter-related practices can transform or stabilize the status quo. If possible to critically explain such processes, the taken-for-granted truths can be de-constructed (Glynos & Howarth

2007:14).

The film material in this project consists of short movies that I have made. One way of approaching this would be to analyze the films as empirical data, as in any other essay or academic work. A second approach would be to use the films as experiments, a trial-and-error in finding the answer to a research questions. The third approach is to consider the films as both answers and questions, with the status of a critical reflection (Naderehvandi 2020 p. 47). The research hence becomes part of a creative process in which dismantling of the conditions during the productions of these films is a central part. The films are a way to address the questions of why we are here and how this story can be told. It is the process, not the product, that is the material, adding an auto-ethnographic dimension to the research method. The centrality of the process further enables a different conversation regarding the relevance of this artistic research. While the product of art cannot be duplicated, an analysis of contexts in which art is produced, can be reproduced, as can power-relations and discourses that shape our understandings of such conditions.

Another methodological reflection has to do with memory, the loss of it and how representations of our personal and collective stories constitute identity and community. Art can be a pathway to the intimate experiences of life and loss, a process in which remembering and reconstructing our memories is essential. The past is by definition past - lost to us. Nevertheless, it can be described as present in shaping our lives, or to paraphrase Anette Kuhn, the past is a crime scene, the crime irrecoverable, but its traces creating a path to the present. By connecting the dots, knowledge about the event can be re-produced, although the event itself can never be re-lived (Kuhn 2002 p. 6).

The duality of remembering and forgetting can form a practice of political and social resistance as well as oblivion. Schwabe (2018) discusses the case of the Palestinian diaspora in Chile and similarities and differences in how to relate to past atrocities. While the Chilean experience of military dictatorship is to some extent silenced, the Palestinian experience of the Nakbah is continuously spoken about, creating a paradox of remembering the Israeli occupation and an

unwillingness to engage with the violent Chilean past. This finding is interesting to compare with the position of the Iranian diaspora in Sweden. Although the Swedish state is not guilty of violence comparable to the Iranian, the dynamic of remembering and forgetting is a key to exploring what can be narrated and what experiences are marginalized within a hegemonic discourse.

With personal memories and anecdotes of family members as a point of departure, in this artistic research I move from the personal to broader narratives; collective truths and national history documents. My ambition is to challenge the hierarchy between different materials in order to highlight the relations between the personal and the public and ultimately, to illustrate that within every story lies a multitude of other versions of the same story, which all lead to further questions and other stories. Furthermore, I focus on the possibility to create, both in the concrete sense, as in discussing access to material, but above all in a social sense, focusing on the relations, reactions and opportunities available to different productions. Because remembering is not only a private, personal activity. I can remember the story of how my parents were rejected at the border every day, but as long as it is not accepted as a part of our history, as long as this memory remains only mine, every time I remember, I commit an act of resistance against hegemonic discourses in which there is no place for this memory. To a high extent, remembering is a collective process. Hence the conditions to create representations of a certain identity, a memory, a narrative, a subject position, make visible the limits of what is thinkable about this position.

Memory I

Fragmented identities

Hi Babak,

Thank you for your application for development support for the Fragments project, and thank you for the possibility to see the accompanying material. It is in every way important to focus on both Iran and how it is experienced to live in Sweden, separated from ones family and homeland.

But when I see the footage, I'm unsure of the film's shape and direction. I was in the clip watching an older woman talk about the gradual progress with the introduction of the hijab and became curious, it feels as an interesting angle to show how such things happen one small step at a time - and that she can tell it based on a personal experience, combined with images from the streets of Tehran that one recognizes, it's strong.

But when I see the two clips with mother and child with an emotional tone in both image and sound - almost romantic - I find it difficult to see how the two expressions can be connected to one coherent cinematic form, and what the focus will be thematically?

I understand that this is an application for development support, and that answers to my questions can come further along in the creative process – but with many applications it is necessary for me to make a firm priority. Based on the above assessment, this is therefore, unfortunately a rejection of your application for development support.

The Swedish Film Institute

Department of productions support

[name] film consultant

Presenting the unimaginable

In order to approach the question of conditions, there are several key subjects that need to be clarified. Who I am - that is to say, what is the subject position that I am identified with in the context of Swedish film production. What are the invisible, unspoken rules and expectations for a person in my position in this field?

Second, what is the context? Where am I and what do I mean by conditions for production? Sweden is a free country, a democracy - unlike my country of origin. Anyone is free to produce whatever work of art they may please. Even controversial acts with questionable ethics and contribution to the field, are supported, encouraged and protected in the name of freedom of speech (no one mentioned, no one forgotten).

What I mean by conditions for production, is both the practical issues such as access to funding, possibilities to create and distribute a film, but even more the underlying normative and ideological claims that define what film projects are interesting, relevant and important. On what grounds is a project approved or rejected in official applications for funding? What ideas are possible to develop and what images of us - of the subject position which I embody and represent - are imaginable to the society in which I produce film?

I approach these questions through the memory of a rejection - one of many. The application was for development of an idea. *Fragments* is a short movie in which I use memory work and micro stories to create a coherent narrative on the contemporary history of Iran. It begins with my then five-year-old son turning to his mother, asking her why we live in Sweden. Why are we here, when the rest of our family is in Iran? The question, like a Pandora's box, leads to new questions and the more my wife tries to answer him, the less she realizes she knows.

We made a road movie where we took the children, five and two years old, to the refugee reception center where my wife's family had first stayed when they arrived to Sweden. She showed the children albums, pictures of herself when

she was five years old, playing in the snow and surrounded by other kids. Her parents - the grandparents of our children - together with other refugees, dancing on the beach to celebrate the Persian new year. Everybody looked happy on all the pictures. We stayed in one of the cottages that the Migration Agency had used at that time, maybe even the same house as my wife had lived in for months with her family. The road movie ended with the conclusion that the explanation on why we are here is not something my wife can tell on her own, that it needs the memories of other family members. It was titled *Not my story* and produced as a small, Indy project. I was myself not very pleased with the result, given that I had done everything myself, from filming to editing, sound, color etcetera. It was therefore a positive surprise that a few festivals - none with high status in the field, but still - chose to include it and even grant it a few nominations. No Swedish festivals chose to show it. When we shared the Vimeo-link in social media, the reactions among our own network was encouraging enough.

With *Not my story* as a pilot project, the idea for *Fragments* was formulated. The question “Why are we here” cannot be answered through a trip to one of the halts of a continuous journey. Why were we there, is the follow up-question by the five-year-old. For every question, a new layer of history and memories need to be approached. Why was there a war? Why was there a revolution? Why was there a dictatorship? Why was there a coup d’état?

All these why’s have a multitude of possible answers. As Derrida describes, all processes of meaning-making are open ended. There is always a possibility to understand a phenomenon in different ways (Derrida 1978). This contingency of meaning can be more or less stable depending on how hegemonic dominant discourses are (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). In the case of Iran, any claim about national history is contested. Every dictatorship has its own propaganda and with a history shaped by coups and revolutions, the “truth” about different events depends on the source, its perspective and ideological affiliations. To present our children with one neutral, objective and factual representation of history would hence be impossible. Therefore, the *Fragments* project was designed through personal interviews, portraying the lived experience of the grandparents and

great-grandmother of our children. Three micro-stories addressing three events in three decades from the point of view of “ordinary” citizens that were neither kings or ministers, nor famous in any other way. What do they remember of those specific days and how do they connect the events to our situation today?

The film contains interviews, archive material, private footage from different stages in the families’ process of migration. With an essay holding the pieces together, footage from today, the children with their mother, the attempts to explain, the fragments function as three chapters to answer the question “Why are we here?”. But this combination of images was unimaginable for the Swedish Film Institute where I applied for funding to further develop the idea.

I find it difficult to see how the two expressions can be connected to one coherent cinematic form, and what the focus will be thematically?

This difficulty to see the two expressions connected to one coherent cinematic form can be de-constructed in several ways. One way to understand this is that the two expressions (an older woman describing compulsory hijab in Iran and a younger woman in Sweden with her child) do not naturally relate to one and other. This reflects an unwillingness to recognize that these stories do have very palpable connections in terms of how the events in Iran in the 1980’s are very much in the minds and daily lives of second generation migrants who live in Sweden today. That the question my son asked when he was five is a question on the mind of thousands of Swedish children who are the sons and daughters of migrants and that the memories of revolutions and war “elsewhere” are intertwined with identities “here”. The question in this film, or rather to say, my son, embodies a challenge to the border regime that defines us through distinct categories based on national identity. These children are both here and there and for them, the combination of a grandmothers’ stories from a distant revolution and a mother who tries to soothe the trauma off their shoulders, is not only possible, but a central aspect of their everyday life. When this experience is unimaginable to the consultant, it reflects the lack of representation in the position she occupies

and the lack of recognition to the diversity that exists in Sweden. By stating that our experiences are unimaginable, this gatekeeping function not only reproduces a hegemonic discourse, but further silences our experiences by not allowing them to take form in the field of Swedish film.

Another way to understand this difficulty to see the two expressions can be from the point of view of orientalist expectations on “the other”. What seem to have caught the interest of the institute is the compulsory hijab-episode of the material I sent to her. This fits a well-established cliché about people from the Middle East (Said 1978). The story about Iran, about patriarchy and religious fundamentalism, makes the consultant “curious” but the rest is not as interesting. The great-grandmother who talks about when she was drinking beer at a restaurant the night of the coup against prime minister Mossadegh, is unmentioned. Perhaps this episode is harder to grasp, because it doesn’t create a distinct subject position for the “Iranian Women” in the film as a victim of oppression, nor does it feed in to the ideas of Nordic Exceptionalism and Sweden as the most gender equal society on earth (Keskinen et al 2009). When the images are difficult to categorize in “here” or “there”, “us and “the others” the consultant seems to see a challenge, while I would argue that this summarizes the very ambition of the project. These speculations bring my attention to the question of diversity and representation in Swedish Film Industry in general.

In 2015, a report released by the Swedish Film Institute showed a representation deficit both in relation to gender and race/ethnicity; white, heterosexual male without disabilities were overrepresented in relation to their number in the Swedish population (Svenska Filminstitutet 2015). Following the report, a number of measures were taken in line with ideals of inclusion and diversity. The film institute formulated a strategy for broad representation:

THE FILM INSTITUTE must be an open and inclusive institution, and a just one and rule of law perspective must permeate all activities throughout the organization. The Film Institute strives to promote and maintain a broad representation long-term by harnessing the skills of employees, support applicants and others affected by our mission (Svenska Filminstitutet 2015).

The program was controversial. Newspaper columnists described the ambitions as “putting a wet blanket over culture production” (). From 2017, reports on equality were produced within the institution (Svenska Filminstitutet 2017, 2019/2020). In one of the reports, based on qualitative interviews with 19 film workers racialized as minorities in Sweden, all of the participants gave accounts of implicit racist expectations on them to represent “their marginalized group” and to be its voice. In the report, it is argued that such expectations may limit the artistic space for these film workers, as it conditions their presence in the industry (Svenska Filminstitutet 2019/2020 p. 15). The very idea that there is such a fixed position as the ethnically marginalized, which can be presented in particular ways by particular subjects, is essentializing and reproduces Eurocentric discourses (Isac & Mercer 2006). The expectations to produce “authentic” images of “the other” makes it difficult to tell a story that is in essence a deconstruction of the “here” and the “there”, the “us” and the “them”. As filmmaker and literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha asks in her essay on interlocking questions of identity and difference:

Furthermore, where should the dividing line between outsider and insider stop? How should it be defined? By skin color, by language, by geography, by nation, or by political affinity? What about those, for example, with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities? (Minh-ha 1997).

However, complex this paradox of multiculturalism, on the other side of the theoretical spectrum is the paradigm of colorblindness, which can obscure attempts to address experiences of discrimination and exclusion (Lundström & Hübner 2020). In order to further explore the premises for film production, I will therefore look at existing so called representations of Iranian and/or Middle Eastern subject(s) in the Swedish film industry.

Performative assimilation

In the previous section I introduced the experience of being rejected on the basis of a film idea being perceived as incomprehensible to the Swedish institutions in charge for funding. The roles and the story did not fit a pre-destined box for diasporic or immigrant films. So what are these expectations?

Looking back, there is a self-image in Sweden, that the country has been homogenous for a long time, and that ethnic/racial/cultural diversity is a new phenomenon (Lundström & Hübinette 2020). Nevertheless, documented policy toward what was defined as racial minorities goes back to the beginning of the previous decade, including forced sterilizations and compulsory care of children (Runcis 1998).

Before the Second World War, Swedish actress Greta Garbo broke through in Hollywood and paved the way for the following generation of filmworkers, among which Ingmar Bergman is perhaps still the most famous (Andersson & Sundholm 2019). Meanwhile, an almost unknown genre of film was produced in Sweden by immigrants, people who had escaped the Nazis, guest workers and refugees from non-European countries (ibid). In the 70's refugees from Latin America produced movies in Sweden (Sergio Castilla, *A Chilean Girl in Sweden* produced for SVT). In their overview of immigrant filmmaking in Sweden, Andersson and Sundholm describe the independent production *Hägring/Mirage* (1984) by Iranian filmmaker Saeed Assadi. It tells of an Iranian refugee unhappy with life in Sweden. The film was made without institutional funding. The critics wrote that it gave a negative image of the Swedish Welfare State. The review below is quoted in the book, as written by an anonymous critic in *Svenska Dagbladet*:

In the above quote, a frustration over the outsiders perspective on “our” society is expressed. The book further describes the film *Consuelo* (1988), another one of

the first “immigrant movies” produced in Sweden. The plot is centered around Manuel, a refugee from Chile, and his attempts to create a sense of home and belonging in Stockholm with a Swedish girlfriend. One day he hears the news that political refugees are granted asylum in Chile, and he contemplates to return. It turns out he has left his fiancé behind. The moral of the story is that Chile has also changed and Manuel is home neither here nor there. The film received funding from several institutions, among others the Swedish Film Institute (Andersson & Sundholm 2019). The critics wrote that this movie gave a superficial image of Swedish society.

In the 1970’s and 80’s, different platforms were created for independent immigrant filmmakers; Cineco, Kaleidoskop and Tensta Film Association to mention some. According to Andersson and Sundholm this was due to a sensed necessity to articulate the lived experiences of migrants and that existing institutions did not fully understand the experiences of immigrant cinema (ibid).

In the 1990’s and early 2000’s a wave of “immigrant movies” were produced, with *Jalla Jalla* (Josef Fares) perhaps being the most famous one. While the immigrant movies of the previous generation depicted the first generation refugee migrants and challenges in establishing a new sense of home in the new host country, these new movies had a common central theme in depicting a generational conflict between the first and the second generation of immigrants. In *Jalla Jalla*, the protagonist Roro is a young man of lebanese origin, who is dating a Swedish girl without the knowledge of his family. The drama intensifies when he parents present him a bride in an arranged marriage. The Swedish Film Institute provides a guide for teachers who want to use this film in educational purpose:

Jalla! Jalla! touches on differences between the conditions for men and women in Arab and Swedish culture. And the perspective is mainly Roro's and Mån's, i.e. male. Admittedly, both guys' girlfriends are Jenny and Lisa, independent young women who are not afraid to make demands and get their own ways, but Yasmin seems prepared to accept the life that the men have chosen for her (Ludvigsson 2001).

The project to portray cultural differences and cultural clashes was also dominant in the film *Vingar av glas/Wings of Glass* (2000). Here, the main character is Nazli, a teenage girl born in Iran, who has lived most of her life in Sweden. While her father wants to arrange a marriage for her, she wants to become “Swedish”. This is articulated by changing her name to Sara, driving a motorcycle and having a Swedish boyfriend. The diplomatic boyfriend meddles for peace between her and the father, which leads to a happy ending. Also this film comes with a teachers guide to discuss cultural differences and difficulties for immigrants to adjust to the new society (Lagerström 2000).

In 2002, the film *Hus i helvete/House in Hell* by Susan Taslimi offered a new twist to the culture clash discourse, in a plot where Minou returned home after some time abroad, only to meet the rage of her parents over her career as a stripper. Themes of chastity, honor culture, brothers controlling their sisters and stereotypical gender roles are sprinkled over the family as they argue loudly in a crowded apartment in an immigrant suburb. The role as Nazli in *Wings of Glass* as well as the role as Minou in *House in Hell*, are casted to Swedish female actresses, which connects to a tradition of white actors playing roles depicting persons of color (Simons 2016).

In the field of documentary, several Swedish productions portrayed Iran in the 2000's. The most famous, or at least most productive Swedish-Iranian documentary film maker is perhaps Nahid Persson Sarvestani, with 17 movies made between 1994 and 2021. She became known to a broader audience through the documentary, *Prostitution bakom slöjan/Prostitution behind the veil* (2004), about short-time marriages as a legal loophole for prostitution in Iran. In *Fyra fruar och en man/Four wives and a man* (2007) she follows a man with four wives and 20 children in Iran. In 2009 she made the film *Drottningen och jag/the Queen and I*, where she interviews Farah Pahlavi, the former Queen of Iran. Persson Sarvestani has also made two documentaries about exiled political dissidents from Iran; *Min stulna revolution/My Stolen Revolution* (2013) and *Hör min röst - slöjans revolution/ Hear my Voice - My Stealthy Freedom* (2021). As stated when she received a culture scholarship, most of her movies are rooted in her own life

story (Per Garneviks Stiftelse för kulturella ändamål 2019)). The at times oversimplified depictions of Iran as a underdeveloped place, Iranian men as perpetrators, can be understood within the conditioned context of production in which she as an Iranian female filmmaker, is expected to reproduce such clichés.

Another one of the more well-established Swedish-Iranian documentary makers is Nima Sarvestani, who, as the name tells, is the brother of Nahid Persson Sarvestani. Among his more famous films are *Rea på njure/Kidney for sale* (2006) and *Frihet bakom galler/No burqas behind bar* (2012) and *De som sa nej/Those who said no* (2014). For *No burqas behind bar* he received an International Emmy Award. Although the theme for Nima Sarvestanis movies, is to depict the misery, misogyny and testimonies of political refugees in exile - unlike his sister, he does not center himself in the plot.

Having gone through archives and read about Swedish immigrant cinema, I can't help but wonder what my future in this field will be. My interest until now has been stories to which I can relate. In this sense, perhaps I have something in common with the Sarvestani's, but the stories that catch my interest are not necessarily the most vulnerable characters, child wives, victims of domestic violence or refugee trauma. I want to make a documentary about the rock scene that evolved from underneath the censorship of my teenage years. I want to tell the stories of engineers that became café owners, who emigrated and became students at the age of 40. I want to follow the Iranian environmentalists and their quest for the survival of the Asian Cheetahs. Every day, I have new ideas of stories I would want to work on. But just like the Chilean and Turkish immigrants before me, I doubt that the institutions or the field in general, shares my visions.

Perhaps I'm overtly cynical. There are also film productions from the millennium wave of immigrant movies, which break the pattern of stereotypical stories - at least partly. *Före stormen/Before the tempest* (2000) by Reza Parsa depicts parallel stories of a refugee blackmailed by the militia to which he previously was affiliated, and a young teenager who is bullied. In a complex web of events, the two become interdependent of each other. The theme of the movie is moral dilemmas and pushing the limit for what one can do without losing

oneself - rather than the one dimensional story of an immigrant with difficulties to adjust to the new country. The film has a political undertone, touching on issues such as export of military arms and the corruption of both the welfare institutions in Sweden and the militia in Iran. The teachers guide for this film brings up these questions rather than the discourse on clash of cultures (Lagerström 2000 B). The tone in immigrant movie production in Sweden changed in the 2010's, with more emphasis on contrasting underprivileged suburbs with inner city/traditionally Swedish subjects (Eriksson 2019). What is perhaps different now, compared with the 1970's and 80's, is that informal and independent structures such as Cineco, Kaleidoskop and Tensta Film no longer fill the void for immigrant filmmakers. I can only suppose the division between immigrants and the children of immigrants, so called second generation immigrants or mixed identities, is not as distinct as then. With many more persons of color in the field, the need to distinguish between immigrants and Swedes is (hopefully) less dominant. One aspect of this lack of space is that persons with different social, cultural and economic capital compete over the same positions and resources, perhaps on not so equal terms (Bourdieu 1986). Another aspect is that the inclusion of persons of color is conditioned by their role as cultural others. Besides from the problematic dimension racism and colonial mindset in this process of othering, it also encourages a self-exotification; to brand oneself as the cultural expert in order to at least be included in some arenas. This also fosters a culture of competition rather than cooperation among migrants, because there are only so many spots for the role as experts and so much demand for films about the miserable conditions in our countries.

An anecdote that comes to my mind is a conversation I had with one of my lecturers at the Stockholm University of the Arts. She was interested in the Iranian theater scene and I told her of my experiences and contacts. She told me of one of her previous students, also of Iranian origin. When the lecturer had suggested to the student to invite a team of actors from Iran to co-produce, the student had replied: they are all agents of the regime. This event raises the question posed by Spivak more than 30 years ago - can the subaltern speak, and

can they be heard? Spivak wrote about the conflict of interest that is inherent in any situation where a more privileged group tends to represent a more marginalized group (Spivak 2015). While immigrant filmmakers in the 80's struggled to be accepted in relation to the Swedish institutions, the anecdote with my teacher implies the contested reality of diaspora art production, where claims about authenticity and who is the legitimate representation of the community, create division and further marginalization.

I arrived to Sweden at the age of 25 as an international student, and I am very familiar with the prejudice that the international students are government spies. I never felt comfortable arguing for my non-spyness, by dragging up my parents political background or that I used to visit my grandfather in prison while I was in middle school. Because I did not participate in certain political protests or because I continuously traveled to Iran, I heard rumors behind my back, sometimes more explicit comments. I didn't care much, because I didn't categorize myself in the box of "Iranian diaspora". However, definitions belong to the definers, not the defined, to paraphrase Tony Morrison. I obtained my masters in film and media production from Lunds University in 2012 and started working in a production company as an assistant, then TV, then radio. Although I had documented experience from culture and media in Iran, from our rock band, which I will return to, to columns in a satirical magazine that was later closed down - although I read in Persian and was regularly there, I was never invited to panels or events in the role of "expert".

This year something changed. I'm not sure if the expert role ran such a high inflation that suddenly anyone who identified as Iranian could perform it - or if something happened in my relation to the culture sphere in Sweden, perhaps due to my enrollment at the Stockholm University of the Arts. Anyway, I am now ascribed an identity as expert and invited to panels or workshops addressing Iranian cinema or music. I find this position complicated and uncomfortable and it makes me uneasy. I just want to be a filmmaker, not a cultural expert. Off course I could say no and go back to unpaid assistant work. At the same time, often in these panels, I find myself being the only person who has actually lived in Iran. I

don't make claims to authenticity, but that is the core of the problem. I know that Iran consists of 80 million individuals with extremely different experiences, that no such thing as a general Iranian culture exists. Sometimes, I'm the only one who points this out, and if for no other reason, I see that as a legitimate motive for my presence. Consequently, with a more fluid definition of who is an insider and outsider, the position as "the immigrant filmmaker" or the "cultural expert" can be an arena for contestation and/or competition. The role can be commercialized and commodified in ways that serve individual careers, similar to ways in which "gender experts" have become a profession which is not necessarily in line with feminism and gender theory (Künz & Prügl 2019). To whom is the role as an expert accessible, to whom not, and on what grounds?

Performativity is a useful concept to understand how migration is not simply a physical movement of people from one place to another, but also a social and cultural process that is shaped by language, discourse, and other forms of communication (Butler 1990). In the context of migration, performativity refers to the ways in which language and communication create and reinforce social identities and hierarchies among migrants and non-migrants. For example, the use of certain terms and discourses by media or politicians can construct migrants as a threat to the receiving society, or as an underclass that needs to be assimilated or excluded. Similarly, migrants themselves may use language and communication to construct their own identities as belonging to a particular community or group, or to challenge dominant narratives about migration and its effects. Performativity also has implications for the experience of migration itself. For example, the use of certain language and communication practices can shape how migrants are received and treated in the receiving society, or how they navigate their own social and cultural integration in the new context. Migrants may also use language and communication to negotiate their own identities and sense of belonging in a new place, or to resist marginalization and discrimination. I would argue that taking on a role as "expert", can be a way to negotiate over space and belonging in the new society.

Anthropologist Shahram Khosravi discusses a tangible issue in his article

about divisions within the Iranian diaspora in Sweden, where those who arrived as refugees in the 80s doubt the newer migrants, and the newer migrants, who often came as students or skilled labor, look down on the refugees (Khosravi 2018). At least to my experience, the further away from whatever is perceived as Swedishness you are categorized, the more limited the margin for maneuver. That is to say, the student with whom my lecturer had spoken, obtains a function as not only an expert, but also a gatekeeper in relation to other, newer immigrants. She can reproduce a narrative in which people like myself are excluded from the culture scene in Sweden. Ironically this exclusion is motivated through humanitarianism. The expert immigrant filmmaker can in such situations position him- or herself more or less in contrast with other immigrant filmmakers, as a performance of identification. In this case, the student positioned herself within the scope of Nordic Exceptionalism, Sweden and Swedishness as the humanitarian super power and the Iranian actors as inevitably entangled with the regime. The problem with immigrant filmmakers having to engage in acts of performative assimilation and/or self-stereotypization remains, regardless if it's her, me or a group of visiting actors from Iran that are involved. This othering is inherently embedded in the position as "immigrant filmmaker".

What kind of immigrant filmmaker can I be?

In the previous two sections I presented myself as new in the role as “immigrant filmmaker” and how this makes me uncomfortable. So far I have focused on Swedish film production in a historical perspective. In this section, I look further into what productions are actually invested in today, to further understand what ideas and themes are made relevant today. Has there been any shift in discourse or is it still the same narratives and voices that are reproduced? I analyzed the Swedish Film Institute list of grants for the years 2020 to 2022 and looked for both documentaries and featured films, both long and short formats, which portrayed immigrants from Iran or the Middle East in broader sense (including Afghanistan, Turkey and the Levant). This search is not to be viewed as a content analysis in terms of methodology, but rather a contextualization for my artistic research. In the following section, I provide quotes from the Imdb and/or the production companies as an introduction, in order to further discuss the themes and narratives in the films.

Films centered around masculinity norms and lgbt-identities

- Habib & The Thief (short 2021)

Habib & The Thief” follows the intimate relationship between Habib and Amir, their strong bond is undeniable. Unfortunately, it isn’t the time for their love in this lifetime as Amir, pressured by his family, chooses to marry a woman. Their breakup encourages Habib who decides to come out to his own parents.

- Who the fuck is Bobby? (TV movie 2021)

A succession of artists, politicians, sports stars and show hosts land in his chair. Today, Bobby Oduncu is one of Sweden's most sought-after hairdressers, but behind his success is hides also sadness and an unusually tragic story. Raised in Södertälje in a Syriac family with a deeply religious Christian Orthodox father, Bobby put up a false facade for a long time, even though his body and soul

yearned for love and touch. When he finally came out as gay, his father didn't want to accept it. This is a movie about the right to love whoever you want, but it's also a movie about picking yourself up after losing someone you love. In the film, we get to follow Bobby in the hair studio together with e.g. Carola, Carolina Gynning and Roy Fares, but we also get to come along to the parental home and to meet with his family.

- *Motståndaren/Opponent (long 2023)*

When the wrestler Iman's life is put at risk, he takes his family with him and flees to Sweden. Despite the precarious existence in the asylum center, the parents manage to create a safe place for their daughters, but have they really escaped the threat from their home country? A dark secret threatens to tear the family apart - and forces father Iman to confront his past.

Films centered around life in Sweden for migrants (both newly arrived and children of migrants / "second generation")

- *Vi var barn då/We were kids (short 2022)*

Alexander has gathered his childhood friends in their old classroom to show them a short film he's made about them. A short film about the bullying within the macho culture and the hard jargon that kills young mens dreams from the suburbs.

- *Åsnelandet/the donkey country (short 2023)*

In the last part of director Bahar Pars trilogy on structural racism the audience is invited to join two women on their journey of avoiding, expressing and ultimately fighting about these issues and the way those affect their life.

- *Allting är bra nu/All is good now (short 2024)*

Rami is a determined young Syrian who has convinced himself that everything is normal with his new life in Sweden. But soon the pressure of life

upended becomes unbearable, the haunting ghosts from his past inescapable. Slowly, the monster he has been running away from breaks through

Films centered around plots in countries in the Middle East

- *Lussy (short 2022, Turkey)*

Abandoned, distressed and angry dogs roam the streets of a coastal town but a much worse fate awaits them. Just like soldiers sent to battle, women slaughtered by inequality, refugees fleeing war, old people who are good for nothing.

- *Abolis resa/Abolis journey (documentary 2021, Afghanistan)*

As a 17-year-old, Abolfazl walks all the way from Iran to Sweden. After three years, he is deported and now lands for the first time in his life in Kabul, Afghanistan. Kicki calls from Sweden and says that he has got a job, but now he needs a work permit and ID card to be able to return. Obtaining papers turns out to be more difficult than Abolfazl first thought. The plan is to embark on a dangerous journey to Jaghori, where he has relatives who can verify his identity.

- *Costa Brava Libanon/Costa Brava Lebanon (long 2021, Lebanon)*

The free-spirited Badri family has created a utopian life in the countryside far from the associations and corruption of Beirut. But the dream is brutally crushed when they discover one morning that the city's growing mountain of garbage has ended up outside the house. Now they have to decide. Resist or bury your head in the sand? Or to do like grandma. Sneak out and get a cell phone!

Films centered around islamist terrorism (the IS)

- *Sabaya (documentary 2021)*

Armed with a mobile phone and a gun, Mahmud, the father of several children, Ziyad and the other volunteers at the Yazidi Home Center risk their lives

to save the Yazidi women held captive by IS in one of the world's most dangerous refugee camps, al-Hol in Syria. Captured, often at a very young age, they have been forced into years of oppression and humiliation and the film follows how their fortunes are reversed when they are allowed to return to life.

- *Imads barndom/Imads childhood (documentary 2021)*

After two and a half years in captivity, Imad, his little brother Idan, and their mother Ghazala are released into a displaced persons' camp in Kurdistan. Healing from the trauma is hard for all of them, but it seems Imad is having a particularly tough time. Not yet five, he has already spent over half his life enduring terror, abuse, and "training" meant to make him heartless. Speaking only Arabic, he cannot communicate with his family, and the only means of expression at his disposal is violence. He hits and spits, and his only game is pretending to be an ISIS fighter who shoots, blows things up, and kills. This poignant film follows him as he takes hesitant steps on the hard road to recovery, guided and held by his mother, his grandmother, and an incredibly supportive therapist.

The list above is not comprehensive; I have only looked at granted financial support from the Swedish Film Institute and based on the title and crew narrowed it down to these works. There are many other institutions for funding, scholarships and private investors. To only focus on one state institution does hence not give a full picture of the context for film production. It is however one of the most important institutions when it comes to larger budgets and because it implements government policy, it is of particular interest to me. The list of films gives an estimate of what narratives, what characters, what stories and what configurations are appreciated. It says nothing about the applications that are rejected or ideas that never even reach the table of the decision makers at the Swedish Film Institute.

To present oneself in diaspora is a heavy burden. There is always a fear that any given representation will be generalized by the majority populations as a fact true for everyone in our category - be it Iran, the Middle East, Muslims or

some other label. The problem with the single story is not the story in itself, it's how it is perceived and how it can be operationalized by person with different agendas - ultimately, how one single narrative can be applied on a large population, marginalizing the multitude of experiences within this group (Adichie 2009). Stories become representations of history. The untold becomes silences (Elahi 2017).

The themes I have seen in the new film productions show both continuity and discontinuity with the first and second wave of immigrant film in Sweden. This is perhaps most visible in the first category. While films like *Jalla Jalla* and *Wings of Glass* depicted cultural and generational conflicts with the case of arranged marriage, the new films illustrate the conflict through unaccepted lgbt-identities. This means that while an East-West divide previously was constructed around gender, it is now sexuality and the freedom to choose who to love, that is at stake. An interesting note is that the three films with this theme all have main characters that are gay men. This again is a contrast compared to the movies at the turn of the millennium, when the protagonists were young women trying to liberate themselves from patriarchal families. Similarities in these films is that migration to Sweden is associated with an opportunity to reach freedom.

The issue of masculinity and patriarchal norms is also present in the short film *We were kids* with close up cameras in the sweaty faces of young men that try to solve a deeply rooted conflict about who they are and who they can be. It seems the time has come to see the same story as in the past, but this time from the perspective of the fathers and brothers. When the narrative of the violent oriental man is pushed as far as it goes, past the criminal youth in the suburbs, it reaches halt in the camps with the victims of the IS. How can a documentary about this brutality be presented to a European and Eurocentric audience, without falling in the pit hole of the single story? In my opinion, both production manage this balance well, perhaps mainly because the IS-fighters are in the periphery and focus is on positive characters such as the therapist and the volunteers who save

women. This provides an alternative figure of thought for the Middle Eastern/Muslim man and his “goodness” in lack of better word, cannot be derived from his proximity to what is defined as Swedish society and culture.

A general observation is the similarities between the new films and what has been produced in the past. In this broad (and in fact non-existing) category of immigrant film, the continuous plot seems to be clash of cultures, refugees struggling with “a ghost from the past” and experiences of segregation and racism. My biggest take away from reviewing these films, is that the films with a plot outside of Sweden seem to have more varied stories. Perhaps it is easier to leave the clichés behind when the film is not about how immigrant experience Sweden. Here, we see a film about street dogs in Turkey, a family that breaks with city life in Lebanon and a young man in limbo, neither here nor there, but with agency and various interactions while in Afghanistan. But what am I to do with this information? Is the lesson to be learned that I, as an immigrant filmmaker, am doomed to either assimilate to the Swedish cinema and ignore the immigrant experiences all together, to join in on the tradition of depicting life of migrants as miserable, or to always and only make movies in Iran about Iranians? The core issue comes down to two questions:

- What kind of (immigrant-)filmmaker do I want to be?
- What kind of (immigrant-)filmmakers is there room for within Swedish society?

For me, these questions bring an experience of liminality to the fore, which has dominated much of my life, both in Iran and in Sweden. Truth is, I don’t mind being labelled as an immigrant filmmaker. Migration has been a life-altering experience that defines my adult years. I am an immigrant. My problem with the category is the meaning it is loaded with. If being in this box limits my artistic freedom to a few themes, which all have in common the centering of immigration as a traumatizing event, I’d rather be an Iranian filmmaker, doing movies in Iran, about Iranians, without involving Sweden and immigration. The problem with that is obviously that I haven’t lived in Iran the past 15 years. My connection to the geography is weakened with every old hos that is replaced by a sky scraper in

my home town. My friends are scattered all over the world. Even the language I speak is not up to date. I read slang on Twitter and realize I'm losing touch over the space that remains my imaginary home. Sometimes I dream about Tehran, that I fly over the roofs, the Tehran of the early 2000's. At the time, I was an angry teenager and I hated everything about our life, the forced religious confessions in school, the lack of freedom. Never could I have imagined that I would grow up and migrate, only to dream of the days when we walked with our oversized boots and coats up and down the long Vali-Asr Avenue, for lack of better entertainment.

Liminal experiences

I have always felt like I belong to the space of in-betweenness. Between the border of events. Shoe size 42 is too small for me and shoe size 43 is too big. My hair is neither curly like my father's nor straight like my mother's. I was born just after a revolution. The old world crumbled under us. As I took my first steps, so did a new order. I was born there, in the middle of two different worlds, in the midst of chaos.

My childhood can be summarized as a private life in a leftist family with both my parents holding degrees in literature, bookshelves filled with uncensored translations of authors and albums with forbidden music - in contrast with a public life, where all of this was to be unmentioned, where we had to recite the Quran and shout political slogans to greet the headmaster every morning in the school yard. I wasn't part of the political movements from the era before the revolution (obviously, since I was not to be born until five years after). But the system, the regime, the TV, everything about this society was alien and disgusting to me. This displacement, this living between two worlds and not fully belonging to either side, defined growing up in the post-revolutionary era. Me and my friends were not *The Rich Kids of Tehran* (An instagram account exhibiting the privilege and luxurious life of some Tehranians who can be assumed to have been on the winning side of the revolution). We weren't internally displaced during the war (like Bashu, the child refugee in Bahram Beyzai's film *Bashu the little stranger* 1989). We didn't run from door to door with torn boots, in a remote village on the hills, searching for our friends homework (as in Kiarostami's film *Where is the friends house*, 1987). While we did not identify with any of the typical characters of Iranian kids, we knew we did not live the life we saw on our illegal MTV film clips.

The sense of in-betweenness was hence something I had experienced long before migration. Music is the symbol which most vividly illustrates this no mans land. The alienation motivated me and my friends to search for symbols and identities outside our own society. I was in my early teens when we discovered a

subculture of Norwegian neo-paganists that burned churches. They were our heroes for a while. For us, living under a theocratic regime, the concept of burning down religious centers was interpreted as a progressive act against an oppressive power. We didn't have the capacity to understand the difference between Scandinavia and Iran, nor that this act, differently interpreted, could be understood as fascism with the same ideological logic as the regime that we hated. It was first when I came to Sweden and faced the xenophobia within the metal music community here, that I realized the fundamental differences between our experiences. Our thrive for opening up spaces to breathe in an oppressive theocratic dictatorship had nothing in common with their far-right anti-immigrant extremism in a functioning democratic society.

The middle phase of a rite of passage, *the liminal phase*, is characterized by that individuals or groups are in a state of transition between their previous status and their new status (van Gennep 2019). I can be seen as a *creative and transformative force* but also a period of ambiguity and disorientation (Turner et al 2017). Turner argues that liminality is a crucial aspect of the ritual, because it allows individuals to experience a state of *anti-structure*, where the norms and social hierarchies are dislocated. Thus, new possibilities for social organization and identity can emerge - a situation that within post-structural discourse theory is explained through the increased contingency of symbols and meaning (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). A liminal position can hence give individuals the discretion to change the meanings and of their social roles and engage in new forms of social interaction - or as Turner puts it, they can break free from constraints (Turner et al 2017). But what happens when this liminal phase never ends? Perhaps the liminal position has become intertwined with my self-identification to the extent that if I ever get rid of it, I will also loose a part of myself.

When I lived in Iran, my identity was almost exclusively constituted by symbols that were considered either foreign or ant-revolutionary in the eyes of the regime. I dressed in the same jeans and band t-shirts that I continued wearing after immigrating to Sweden. My hair grew longer and eventually a little thinner, by most of my social norms, taste and values basically remained unchanged. Many

aspects of life in Stockholm felt more comfortable than in Tehran. I could have my beer without checking over my shoulder and I could go to concerts that weren't in somebodies' uncles barn. I wasn't shocked by the new culture, because it wasn't very different. And I didn't emphasis on the experience of migration, to be a migrant. To be a migrant filmmaker. I remember an early conversation with my then girlfriend, now wife, when she referred to us as non-white. I had never considered myself in terms of ethnicity at all. Even though my family is azeri and belongs to a language minority in Iran, I always had a million other labels to identify with above ethnicity. But in Sweden, slowly, a sense of self-identification both with the label immigrant and Iranian came over me. This probably happened in reciprocity with push-backs from society. Like my friend Ali, who has grown up in Sweden, said at one point: no matter how hard you try to melt in with the Swedish society, you will never be accepted as one of them. This society will spit you out like a used chewing gum.

I - who despised nostalgia and old Persian music, suddenly found myself alone in a student dorm in Stockholm, searching for Viguen and Delkash (musicians from the 1960's). It was the push-back from society, the impossibility to melt in, that stopped the ritual of immigration in this liminal phase. For every year, every intensified anti-immigrant policy debate, this position is further reproduced. As Derrida argued, our sense of belongingness is always in a state of flux, constantly shifting and evolving in response to changing social and cultural contexts. One of Derrida's key concepts related to belongingness is *différance*; the process by which identity is both created and deferred through language and social relations. *Différance* refers to the idea that meaning is always deferred and delayed, never fully present or stable, and that this process of deferral is central to how we construct and understand our sense of self and belongingness. Drawing on this idea, I can only become through differentiation in relation to others. I can become an immigrant filmmaker in contrast to the Swedish filmmakers, but if I push to be seen as a filmmaker without ethnic label or concepts of migration attached to me, I risk becoming incomprehensible to this society. In migration research, the concept of liminality is understood through its temporality; a

transition from the home country to the host country (Massey et al. 1993). The state of liminality is during this period, as the migrants navigate the cultural, social, and economic differences between the two contexts. How this experience falls out is an important factor that shapes the migration process and ultimately the decision whether to stay in the host country or return to their home country, as well as their integration into the host society.

I argued above that the experience of cultural clash did not appear in my experience of immigration. What did happen was however a disorientation in relation to the public institutions. Every time I visit my daughters kindergarten, I'm amazed with the pedagogy, the way the teachers listen to the children and teach them about fairness and inclusion. It is the opposite to our schools in Iran. How things function, from the bank to the health care, to the working conditions in different sectors, is worlds apart. I can see how this affects so many aspects of life. Just like I didn't reflect on myself as a person with an ethnicity before I migrated, I wasn't fully aware of how dysfunctional our society was. As citizens living under a totalitarian regime, we experienced a permanent sense of liminality that was marked by disorientation, uncertainty, and a lack of control over our lives. We were constantly subjected to strict social norms and expectations, censorship, surveillance, and repression. According to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000), living in a state of liminality can lead to a sense of anxiety and insecurity, as individuals struggle to make sense of their place in society and their relationships with others. He argues that in such contexts, individuals may seek to create order and stability in their lives through the development of rigid social and cultural boundaries (Baumann 2000).

Living in the Islamic Republic has deprived us of seeing many images, hearing sounds and having experiences. A part of people's lives in this system was spent smuggling sound, image and experience into everyday life. Our cassette tape salesmen were wandering in the quiet streets around the main square of the city, you would approach them and ask in a whisper if they had your favorite bands latest album. There were video renting services, men on motorbikes who passed the committee checkpoints (what would later be re-organized as the

morality police) to bring us the latest Scorsese film or to see the latest Tom Cruise performance or to watch three hours of random footage from MTV and wish that maybe a moment of the new Guns n' Roses video was recorded in between. Even today, living in the west has made me a smuggler. This time, however, I am smuggling images and sounds out of Iran. I ask my brother and my cousin to send me a picture of the streets of Tehran. I send a VPN to them so that I can hear their voice for a few minutes. It seems somehow, whatever I do, I'm stuck in this role of bringing material from one side to the other.

In interviews regarding his latest movie *Combatant*, and also his previous movie *the Charmer*, Swedish-Iranian filmmaker Milad Alami, a depiction that is repeated is that these are stories about freedom, masculinity and *a man whose body is his only currency* (Etc 2023, Dagens Nyheter 2023). When I read these words, I thought they were spot on. This embodied experience of liminality, temporality and exclusion is the only currency with which we can build our trademark in the cultural sector. It is a currency that has been repeatedly devaluated in comparison to the exchange rate for Swedishness. It remains our only currency, even if we, like Alami, arrived to Sweden at the age of 6. Comparing the two movies with those of Reza Parsa (before the Tempest 2000) and Saeed Assadi (Mirage 1984), the latter were produced from the lived experience of the refugee immigrant, whereas Alami has the gaze of Danish migration regime. The main character in the first film presents bogus asylum claims, then takes advantage of women for the case of residence permit. The second film has a main character with patriarchal views, his wife having left her career for his sake. These examples reflect a gap between refugee migrants who arrived to Sweden in the 1980's saw and depicted Iranianness and the arrival to Scandinavia, compared with the second generation. I imagine yet another gap between the second generation Iranians in Sweden and persons like myself - again, not because we all have the same perspective, but because we are more or less aware of this lack of homogeneity.

In the eyes of many within the Iranian diaspora, the existence of my generation has been an impossibility. This explains why it has been so chocking

and fascinating, if not hard to digest, the sheer amount of contemporary art coming out of Iran in the face of the recent protests. Where did these young artists learned to play instruments? How did they learn to produce art? They are educated inside a theocratic medieval Islamic regime, heavily bombarded with anti-western anti-progressive rhetoric. Everything has been forbidden in this gender-apartheid regime. How is it possible that they sing and dance? How are they possible?

I have heard Iranians in diaspora say *Nothing healthy grows in Iran because it's a rotten system to the root*, because it is *Kapak zadeh (moldy)*. This could be true. We are the Kapak. In terms of Animalia, molds do not belong to any particular group of animals. They are classified as part of the kingdom Fungi. Fungi are a separate kingdom of organisms that are distinct from animals, plants, and bacteria. While they may have some superficial similarities to plants, such as their ability to grow in the soil, fungi are fundamentally different from plants and belong to their own distinct biological group. However, we, the moldy generation of in-betweenness, must find alternative visions for our existence, beyond the here-there dichotomy.

Memory II

Essentialism in diaspora

Hi Babak

Now I have looked! Thanks! You have a lot of exciting material, but questions that arise for me are very much about the dramaturgy. Because I miss something that drives the story forward. I feel that now in your clipping there is a lot of "this happened and then this happened". But what do you really think the story/film is about? What is at stake? What/how does the story move forward? And what kind of film is it that you want to make? Is it a personal film - but if so, what are you looking for? How will you show it? What scenes will build up the film, as you see it now? And is it a film in the 58 min format or perhaps a short film? These are my spontaneous thoughts after watching.

You wondered what the next step is. I think that if you continue to develop the film during your time at SKH, maybe you should look into submitting it as a proposal to our preparation group after SKH?

This is what our application system looks like and here are some questions we usually send with those who apply

All the best, [name]

What part of me is interesting to you?

The second film project that I initiated during my two years at Stockholm University of the Arts had the working title *A Weekend in Tehran*. My artistic vision with this work was to portray the underground metal scene that grew out of the censorships in Iran during the 1990's and 00's. The soundtrack of my own youth. Because everything about this sub-culture was illegalized in Iran, it is only documented in un-official ways. I wanted to make a music documentary. Visually, I was inspired by punk and grunge documentaries such as *The Filth and the Fury* (2002), *Classic Albums: Nevermind* (2005) and *The Gits* (2008) but also feature movies centered around music and bands, such as *Singles* (1992) and *Reality Bites* (1994).

My first approach was chronological. I mapped out the evolution of music, from the emerging progressive rock bands in the late 70's to the silence of the 80's to pioneers like Koroush Yaghmai, Farhad, Fereydoon Foroughi and Habib. I wanted to include a number of female musicians in this genre, such as all women punk band the Finches. The stories to tell, the characters to follow, the details to focus on in legal and social matters, soon led me to think less as a history teacher and more to dig where I stand. It would be too of a big project to introduce all of Iran's rock music history in one film. The risk would be to mention a lot but stay on the surface, while my ambition was to break the surface and the taken for granted ideas about music production in Iran, to show an inside perspective with day to day experiences and how everything is connected; our history, the politics, economy and personal choices. I was still reluctant to center myself in a story. However, with the repetitive narratives about "the Middle East" I also felt a strong urge to produce a different story. With everything that makes Iran a complicated place for artist, I thought that at least, if I center this project around myself, I will also focus at least some of the attention on myself instead of putting other people at risk. This is something that many have criticized diaspora filmmakers for in the past – that it is unethical to just go back to the country to collect stories about other people's misery, putting them to risk and returning to

receive the awards (Pittaway et al 2010).

During my first year in university, me, my brother and three of our friends started a band together. A death metal band where I – the least musically talented among us – had the role as lead singer. We had rehearsals twice a week at my parent's house according to a strict schedule because we had to finish before the neighbor came home from work. We were always worried he would report us to the police. At the same time, we weren't worried about anything, because we were 20 years old. We partied on my dad's home-made liquor, sneaked around with girlfriends and drove around late at night to have junk food and listen to loud music in the Iranian car "pride", that was smaller than a VW Polo. This was our routine until we finally managed to get an underground label to release our album. Jittering with joy, we came out from their basement with a big bag of very illegal CD:s, right to a street where riot police was beating students. It was 2009 and the Green Movement still had hope for reform. We did the only thing we had been doing for all these years. We ran. Eventually, we came to safety and the CD:s sold out in a few days. We thought this would be our breakthrough. The political situation in the country said something else. Not only did we miss out on reforms. We got a new president, who introduced the morality police and ever so strict policy on anything that was fun or meaningful to us. Only a few months later, I left the country. My best friend, our guitarist, got married and gave music classes to kids. Our bassist committed to the art of sculpturing and my brother joined new bands. I thought I had come to metal heaven in Sweden. The first summer, I went to Sweden Rock Festival. The rockers in Värmland were about as hostile as the mosquitos. Even if I hadn't learned Swedish yet, or knew how to decode racism, I could sense the angry stares. After a few concerts me and my friend came back to find our tent trashed with a swastika painted on it. The years passed, me and my band-mates had occasional contact. In 2018, almost a decade after we split up, my brother and his new band had a real, legal concert in Iran. I could get vacations, so I went back for a weekend, only to see him growl from the stage, the audience head-banging as much as they could without breaking the rule that everyone must remain seated. Then again, the swinging pendula of politics hit the Iranian culture

scene with renewed restrictions. And here we are, watching clips on Instagram of a young generation, the same age as we were when we started our first band, brave young girls and boys who sing and dance and play instruments with their hair out, kissing in public, breaking all the rules at once. Some of them are the students of my friend. This is the story I want to tell with the film *A weekend in Tehran*.

This was in many ways a typical independent project. Had it been about a Swedish band or any other subject, it would have been difficult to find producers and financial support. My friends working on similar projects in a Swedish or European context have also struggled with making the production happen. This is part of the process. I didn't expect it to be easier for me. As I worked with the material to the film, I thought it would be a good idea to send it to a Swedish TV producer that works solely with documentaries in culture and arts. I was interested to see what the reactions to this story would be, from a Swedish institution. What part of my story is interesting to someone outside of my circle of friends? Outside the context within which these stories make sense. I anticipated that the channel would say things like "we already have a music documentary from Egypt, so that covers the region for this year" or "we would rather see newer material - this is from fifteen years ago". I also wondered about comments on technical issues, such as the voice-over, maybe they preferred a film that tell the story through dialog. I had a vague idea in my head to make parts of the story with animations – both to protect the other participants from exposure, and because it would allow to re-create scenes that I don't have any footage of. Ethics, technicalities, relevance, these were issues on my mind.

However, when the producer had seen the clips, her reaction was "what's the story?". This came as a surprise to me. Months have past and I have had time to process her email. The tone is not negative. It says the material is exciting. But to the outside observer, there is a question about what I want to tell. Considering the film a mode of self-expression, the question reflects a mis-communication in the relation between me as an artist and the TV channel representing an audience. The film that I sent had about the same storyline as the section above; how we

started the band, how we split up and the connection between these experiences and what we see today among young artists in Iran. There is also some parts about the connection to our parents' generation and how they compensated for the guilt of having made a revolution, by giving us access to illegal MTV-tapes and instruments, even if it could be punished with lashes. To me, this is story enough. To her, no story at all. What about the material is then exciting, if not the story?

I showed the same material in a seminar at university. I perceived the reactions as positive. Some were moved. Some laughed at the right places. Afterwards, my fellow students gave me feedback and we had a conversation. One of them said the part of the film that made the most impact on her, was when we were on a hike, making tea and eating in the forest. She said this reminded of her own youth, the nature, how she spent time with her friends. Judith Butler writes about grievable lives as a concept; all life is in its essence vulnerable and all human beings feel pain and suffering. But in every society, we are wired to sense the suffering of others in biased ways. Some lives become dehumanized, while others are seen as life worth grieving (Butler 2009). When we realize that people in other places or positions are "just like us", this dismantles an idea of difference. It's an observation I tend to forget, because I didn't grow up in this society, I didn't internalize this idea of difference between myself and the majority population.

Even with this in mind, when I returned to the email, it was even less clear to me what the producer thought was missing. Consequently, I asked fellow students and other friends how they interpreted the email. Is it not a story, just to tell about a band? *Well, Kurt Cobain shot himself*, someone said. *Your band wasn't famous, so it's not interesting. You should make a film about Googoosh*, someone else said. Although a rock star that commits suicide and a billionaire pop diva are undoubtedly more intriguing than me and my buddies, I don't see this as the missing piece the producer talks about, in the way the email is written. She doesn't ask for someone more famous, but a more clear-cut dramaturgic curve. Something must be at stake and there must be a search for something.

One way of understanding her questions is that it isn't explicit enough that

when we ran from riot police with our bootlegged albums, we ran for our lives. That all the steps, from our illegal instrument lessons as kids, to our secret rehearsals, to the so called concerts in somebodies living room, the migration, the shift from musician to teacher... that all of this is different strategies in search for freedom of expression. Maybe, a person who has Sweden as her point of reference is not susceptible to these experiences. If she sees five dudes with instruments and wonder what the point is, I can't blame her. That's what I feel every time I see diaspora film with lengthy scenes of mothers cooking. She might think *So what? They're playing music. Where is this going?* and she thereby misses the point that it's not going anywhere, because life as an artist in Iran is a dead end with quicksand. The band goes through a series of events, only to evaporate into thin air. That's the story.

Science-fictions author Ursula K. Le Guin wrote in her criticism of classical dramaturgy that it premieres male experiences of hunting over female experiences of gatherers. It is considered more exciting with a story about a hero killing a mammoth than a subject walking in the fields for hours, collecting seeds. The first story has a hero and action. As long as the history of human culture was told through hard objects, weapons and violence, it didn't interest me, she writes (Le Guin 1996). As an alternative for the killer-story, she argues for the urgency to identify a different story, an open-ended story that can continue with another story, much like the gatherer's bag that is filled with new content. The hero does not look well in this bag, because the hero requires a stage, a pedestal.

Arguing against classical heroic dramaturgy, the tragedy or the epic tale, is one thing within science fiction. The question I return to is what this means for me, as a documentary filmmaker. If I cannot make film this way, in what ways can I tell the story of the underground music scene in Iran. Can young men from Iran be seen in grained clips, long hair, drunk eyes, giggling and growling? I think – and this is only my reflection on this short communication – that a Swedish gaze needs something familiar to make sense of a story set in Iran. Maybe if one of the band members is imprisoned or has a conservative family that arranges a marriage with a cousin. Or if one of us would suffer from severe drug

addiction – a social issue that unfortunately is very real in Iran - but also a dramaturgical curve, a challenge to overcome or loose. I could add some salt to the story of my migration. Instead of a student visa and a flight to Arlanda Airport, I could ride on the back of a donkey across the Zagros mountains, in snow off course, and with soldiers everywhere. Such additions to the story would make the movie both exciting and predictable. However, I'm not sure this is what the producer meant she was missing in the dramaturgy.

As a reaction to the comment, I analyzed the structure I had in my head and compared it to the film material that I had sent to her. The overarching theme of the film is to illustrate the conditions for rock musicians in Iran, with the case of our own band. The characters are introduced in the first scene, the band members and their different personalities. The external conflicts relate to the censorship, the police etc. This is also what might make the story exciting (will we be arrested or will we manage to get the CD:s?). The internal conflicts have more to do with the coming of age experience we all went through in different ways. To be rebellious and disillusioned, and then to find new ways around prohibitions. It's these very dilemmas that are difficult to translate to an audience outside Iran, the fine-grained puzzle of daily life, where so many rules are broken, while some rules just cannot be confronted at all.

If there need to be something familiar about a story for the observer to make sense of it, it's relevant to look at what other movies about music in Iran that have been shown in Sweden. The year I arrived to Sweden, Stockholm International Film Festival showed Bahman Ghobadi's *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009). It's a feature movie about the indie rock scene in Iran in the 00's. The story is centered around a band that is accepted to a festival in Europe, but not all of them have foreign passports and the difficulties to get visas lead them to human traffickers. The casting and scenarios give a credible image of the sub-culture, with some minor deviations. Ghobadi moved from the Kurdish province to Tehran in 1992 and commenced his artistic career in the capital, but born two decades before us, he wasn't part of the scene that he portrayed and therefore lacked the details that someone with an insider perspective might have.

Script writer Roxana Saberi, who went to Iran from the US to do research for a book and got arrested, surely did a good job in packaging the story of the Iranian music scene as a story that made sense to a western audience, but this was also on the cost of the music. The story evolves around censorship and visas, with a few scenes of band related activities. There is no right or wrong in the dilemma of finding a balance between different aspects of a story. To me, a question to explore is what makes people defy laws to play music, knowing that it won't lead them anywhere. It's the very act of making music that is interesting, not the act of migrating.

Another documentary about the conditions for musicians in Iran, which was shown in Sweden, is *Sonita* (2015), directed by Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghami. This is the story about a young girl who has Afghanistan left Afghanistan for Iran to escape forced marriage. The family continues to insist that she should marry an older man. *Sonita* goes to an educational center for underprivileged children, where she gets counseling and support in her passion for hip-hop. Her family is critical of her incipient career as a rapper. At the end of the movie, she receives a scholarship to study in the USA. She is liberated, both from the patriarchal family and the Iranian society. Again, the story is centered around other aspects of life than the music. *Sonita* is followed in her daily routines, the school she attends, the conversations about marriage, and between scenes she does little performances for the other girls in her class. The happy ending is by virtue of migration, reproducing and concept of an American dream and how women of color can be "saved" within this narrative.

Both *No One Knows About Persian Cats* and *Sonita* are really good movies; a feature film and a documentary depicting the difficulties for musicians in Iran. However, none of them are centered around music. This over-politicized representation is not unique for music documentaries set in Iran. This has been a criticism toward the reception of "world literature" in the west for a long time (Steward 2020). The vision I had with *A weekend in Tehran* was to tell the story of a band, like any music documentary, without over-explaining the political and social situation surrounding them. It wasn't articulated within me, but I can see

now that I wasn't drawn to the political, because I didn't want to make this about human rights and freedom of expression. Inevitable tangible because these issues are at the core of existence in Iran, to me it is not necessary to make everything a pamphlet. Now, I'm re-considering this position. The film is a work in progress. I take the consultants feedback seriously but try not to overthink it. What I understand must be made more clear for a Swedish audience, is *the what is at stake-question*, in every scene. For us, who have the lived experienced, the subtle undertone of a prohibition is all we need to recall the visiting hours of Evin prison. For her, this must be spelled out. This realization, or as the Swedes call it, a-ha experience, brings me closer to an understanding of why so many movies produced in diaspora, depict Iran and Iranians in such unelaborate way. Perhaps it is the result of compromises that the artists have made, in order to translate the experiences, they want to show, to an audience that has never been close to such events.

Translating experiences

The reason I want to make films is to tell stories. This is a cliché, but I think it's true for many of us who choose any kind of creative profession. We are interested in human relations, in history, in conflicts and to re-build them in ways that make people feel and react. I've lived 25 years in Iran and 15 in Sweden. The Iran years have provided me with material for a million projects. One day I will make a movie about my grandfather, son of a feudal who lost his land in a game of backgammon and went to prison on accusations of treason. Some of our experiences growing up in Iran were extremely absurd, but like scholars have described life in the Soviet Union, we were surrounded by these extreme and ideologically orchestrated paradoxes to such extent it became normalized (Bal et al 2022, Yurchak 2013). This hyper-normalization in itself contains a myriad of stories to tell.

A distinction can be made between diaspora filmmakers in general and immigrant filmmakers, where the first can include people born in diaspora and the latter refer to persons who are firmly rooted in experiences in one country, but have access to language and lived experience in the diaspora as well. Artists in this group are often characterized by identifying as bi-cultural and transnational, the artistic plight not centered around the identity issues but rather ideological division of the world (Ghoneim 2014). The challenge for people like me is that we cannot work on the projects that we want in our "normal context" where people share and understand our references. Because of the dictatorship, I would never get through the ministry of censorship. Some years ago I translated a booklet with the writings of the famous Swedish filmmaker Roy Andersson. The text is about "the complex picture", his artistic vision and how he fears that society moves in a direction where everything is simplified and superficial. Written in the 90's for the Gothenburg Film Festival, the content is not even close to criticism of the Iranian regime. Yet, it has been stuck in limbo, waiting for different permits. First, an image of a medieval painting had to be removed because it showed a woman. Then it was something else. Two years after the

planned publishing date, it hasn't been sent to the printing house yet, and as it seems, it will not proceed.

Working in Iran as an artist is hard due to regulations and the risk of punishment. Not comparable, yet relevant, working in Sweden has its own challenges, which are more internal and related to identity and expectations. To suddenly be reduced from being a filmmaker to becoming an immigrant filmmaker is a role shift that, in my case, was both unexpected and unwanted. This new role comes with certain per-conditions, which I have discussed in the previous sections. My ambivalence stems from on one hand, wanting to tell stories related to Iran, but on the other hand, not wanting to design these stories to meet the expectations and needs of a Eurocentric society. Professor in music, Arash Saedinia describes the role of diaspora story telling like this (*Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies* 2019):

"...growing up, I sensed my absence, on the small screen, on the big screen. I seek out this material. I compile it. With an eye toward sharing it. So that there is a space for us. To know ourselves as meaningful members of this collective. Because a lot of the really important work has actually been done in diaspora. About Iran. And our perspective is vitally important. Because the reality of being an outsider everywhere affords that individual, myself, a unique perspective, that I think is generative, and I hope is useful, in doing the work that some of us have chosen to do. And the work that many of us think has to be done. Whether I or anyone else does it."

This account resonates with me and articulates a perspective that I have been in search for. The role of diaspora is not necessarily to present the story of the diaspora, the story of the immigrant - but also to document and represent stories from and within Iran, because due to the political realities, these stories run the risk of remaining silenced otherwise. With the liminal position of the emigrant/immigrant comes not only an outsider perspective, but also a potential to challenge the dichotomy of inside-outside. Looking to myself, my experiences are made inside Iran, but now I haven't lived there for so long, I cannot claim to have an inside-perspective. I am both outside and inside at once. With this perpetual liminality, creating film becomes the art of translating experiences.

In the field of sociology, the concept of translation has been discussed as a competence for the cosmopolitan subject (Beck). A competence which involves situating and relativizing ones own lived experiences within alternative visions, and at the same time, the ability to see oneself from the perspective of another. This requires a “boundary transcending imagination” (Beck 2006 p.89). Although the wording makes it sound beautiful, conceptually the idea reinforces the notion of two distinct and different cultures.

When the practice of translation of literature from Arabic to French and vice versa was analyzed, the findings showed that the process of selecting texts for translate as well as the alternations of text during translation, confirmed biased ideas of the “other”. French translators likely choose Arabic texts that confirmed pre-existing representations of Arab alterity and Western values, while Arab translators were likely to select French texts that articulated a sense of difference between the cultures, that could function in contrasting and re-affirming the own culture (Richar 2000). Translation in broad sense can hence both be a tool to reaffirm already existing borders, and to deconstruct them.

To create a complete replica of the original experience that is to be translated, is an impossible task, because semantically and syntactically, languages are not the same. This can be transferred to experiences, spatially, temporally, they will never be reproduced, re-experienced. What is the purpose of the translator in the process of translation? Drawing on critical epistemology and the idea that knowledge, as a reflection of reality, can never be objective, Walter Benjamin wrote in the essay *The task of the translator* that no translation would be possible if it were to strive for similarity to the original (Benjamin & Rendall 2001). Benjamin stated that the appreciation of the audience in relation to the work of art is not relevant. The art is not made for spectators, rather, it can be considered a mode of self-expression.

Seen in this light, filmmakers do not make films for their audience, hence the receiving side is not to be considered during the production process. The work of art is produced for its own existence - not to please an audience! With this perspective, if the film is not made for its audience, it is relevant to ask what the

purpose of translating experiences made in Iran to a Swedish context would be. The work of art, expressing whatever memories and experiences, can stand for itself, regardless of the audience, right? However, the position of the immigrant filmmaker has a double role, both as an artist and a translator. While art is produced as a mode of self-expression, translation in its essence is made in order for an audience to access a work that is otherwise inaccessible. There is hence an inherent contradiction in a role that combines the two functions. The translator should, according to Benjamin, not work solely with the audience in mind, because that was not the conditions under which the original work was produced. Consequently, the immigrant filmmaker, however eager to make experiences from one context accessible to another, should not propel around this objective. To conclude, Walter Benjamin inspires me to not over-emphasize the translational aspect producing film in diaspora. The work is not about *what* is said, but about *how* it is said. A translation of hyper-absurd experiences, merely focusing on the content (the actual experiences) would not become a valuable work of art. This would be understood as focus on the inessential content rather than the task of communicating the story, hence an inferior translation.

My concern has been with translation as a means to communicate about the abstract, absurd experiences, to make them penetrable, or what Ricoeur described as the ontological paradigm of translation (Kearney 2007). This means to transfer understandings - not only meaning - from one language to another. Already communicating with another person in one's native language, entails this work of translating from oneself to the other. The same process is at play when translating between languages and context-bound experiences. Drawing on Ricoeur's analysis, the work of translation is a labor of memory and of mourning. Memory, because all story-telling builds on other stories, experiences, feelings and fantasies. Mourning, because we can only feel for the subject of the story, when it becomes human and grievable to us. In other words, it requires not only openness to the other, but a readiness to diffuse oneself; *to reconstruct oneself as an "other"*.

If I aim to tell a story about something I experienced in Iran (or a

hypothetical *other* in Iran), I need to find ways to communicate so that this *Iranian Other* can find a way inside the hypothetical Swedish audience, for the audience to find the other within themselves. This points to the *how* of communication, which renders translation as an artistic expression. A successful translation would give the audience a narrative that is both new and familiar, that is at once tangible to memories and experiences, and becomes part of the inner web of stories heard and told (Kearney 2007). Such approach to film-making as an act of translation and story-telling means to historicize and contextualize, to help the audience take off the orientalist glasses and to see the film in a more empathetic way (Amireh 2014). Like my fellow film student who saw herself in the tea-in-nature-scene. To be able to see oneself in the “other” is to deconstruct the very idea of this East-West-dichotomy that unfortunately still dominates much of the institutionalized expectations on immigrant filmmakers. Working from a position where we are painfully aware of the global context and our role in it, immigrant artists can make thematic and technical choices to counteract the hegemony, instead of taking on the role as “good immigrants” and reproducing stereotypes about ourselves (Shukla 2016). The act of translation is thus entangled in post-colonial relation, the hierarchies of concepts and “knowledges” about the “other”. With the liminal position of inside-outside comes an ethical responsibility to not reinforce these structures, but to work with marginalized narratives and to de-hegemonize ideas such as “clash of civilizations”.

Memories of memories of memories

Before I moved to Sweden I wasn't into nostalgia. The air in diaspora does something to you. At one point I found myself listening to old music. Another time, I asked my mother to send me pictures of my grandparents to put in the bookshelf, a Swedish classic String model, retro from the 1960's. I migrated as social media became a thing. One of the activities me and the other Iranian twenty-something students often ended up doing at the end of parties was to search YouTube for old Iranian commercials. Ladies with squeaky voices and mini-skirts selling batteries and soap in past that was never for us to see. *Look! That's an old video of Hayedeh!* Someone would say and someone else would imitate her coquette dance moves. We consumed the images as if they were old family albums and they gave us a sense of connection, between us and in a time-space logarithm with more dimensions than we could grasp. This yearning for a golden past through old sepia-colored pictures is a collective process of memory production specific for the second generation in diaspora (Malek 2021). We play with the idea of what could have been and re-imagine what was and what was lost. I do this too in my project *Fragments*, where I use family albums and archive material to trace the history and memories within one family. Nevertheless, I would say my generation, at least many of us who grew up in Iran, have an anti-nostalgia in juxtaposition to this memory of the exiled. The most vivid example of this is the band *Bomrani*, with their emotional black satire lyrics. In the song "Roozhaye khoobe koodaki" (the happy days of childhood) the lyrics are about a fun games, clapping hands, being joyful, with a child choir sampled singing a famous nursery rhyme. The images in the music video show children in Iranian school from the 1980's - a childhood far from happiness. In the same generation we have *Marjan Farsad*, singer-song-writer from Iran who migrated to North America in 2008. Her most famous song "Khooneye Ma" (Our house) is about longing for the trees in the back yard of the house and to play on the streets. In this image, the childhood has a sweet taste of cherry and pistachios. In the experimental documentary *Sans Soleil* (1983) it is at one point stated:

*We do not remember,
We rewrite memory much as history is rewritten.
How can one remember thirst?*

How can I remember Iran before the revolution, when I was born after it? How can anyone remember anything, without distorting the image a little bit every time? With the understanding that all meaning is contingent, all processes of meaning-making open ended, every time we remember, we forget the parts that we don't remember. We tell the story differently. With time and new memories added to the experience, we see it in new ways, remember it, yet remember a new memory. The same event may be described in different ways, by different generations or depending on the narrator. When we work with collective memories and documentations of history, these perspectives and angles shape the entire story. No one experience is more valid or true than the other. As a narrator, or filmmaker, one can only be attentive to these nuances, to know from which horizons voices speak and be able to identify the silences.

Memory work was developed as within feminist studies as a means to overcome the gap between theory and lived experience (Haug 1999). It is a collective process of analyzing individual memories within a group, to make sense of the process through which we become socialized into a collective (Onyx & Small 2001). The inherently collaborative structure of film production enables this work (Hornday 2016). This calls for an active search after voices that are marginalized, both in the official history of Iran and in the host countries, and even within the exiled communities, if there are dominant narratives about the collective. By incorporating more voices, the collective history and memory can be re-framed (Levey 2023)

Drawing on the ideas of memory work, I have reached two strategies to avoid the pitfalls of nostalgia and romanticizing the past. The first is to work with a plurality of narrative perspectives. In *Fragments*, I have three interviews with persons born in the 1930's, 40's and 50's respectively, voice over by a persons born in the 80's and who lived most of her life in exile, and added to this is

archive material for yet another dimension. The concept *fusion of horizons* refers to when several distinct perspectives may come together (Gadamer 1975). The process of understanding is here defined through a fusion of our past and present horizon. Past and present are thus interdependent and to make sense of a story, a film, and experience, requires to integrate it to the already existing memory and mind. In Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology, we do not change our horizon with new understandings, we add to it, modify it in a constant process of experiences (Clark 2008). Hence, my first strategy, to work with multiple voices, enable multiple horizon to be communicated to the audience.

The second strategy has more to do with my self-identification. Coming from a background of journalism, concepts such as objectivity, neutrality and unbiased facts have been ideals in documenting news. Now that I shift to film production in broader sense, the journalistic ideal remains somewhere within me (the horizon hasn't completely dissolved), although other perspectives challenge these norms. Obviously every story is told from a perspective and nobody can make claims on objective, unbiased facts. The key is to not give in to the pressure to reproduce the established narrative and the single story. One way is to make way for multiple micro stories in every story. But another strategy is to renounce the claim to authenticity and representation. This is not a film supposed to encompass the lived experience of 80 million Iranians in Iran, nor the millions abroad. This is one of innumerable possible ways to remember a story. It's the narrative I fell for.

In the communication regarding *A weekend in Tehran*, the producer asked if I planned to make a personal film. At first, I didn't intend to. My inner journalist had more a historical documentary in mind. However, as I edited the material, it dawned on me that I might lose the film by detaching myself from it. Everything about the topic, the pictures, why it was important to me, had to do with my personal memories. I was there. I couldn't un-see what I had seen during those days, pretend to be an outsider with a camera who just discovered the music scene in Tehran. Here, I deselected to include a plurality of narratives. We were five guys that had a band and this will be our story. Like in Marjaneh Satrapi's

graphic novel *Persepolis*, many in our generation have the plight to not forget, to never forget (Chute 2008). Satrapi's narration has two voices, her older self in the text and her younger self in the graphics (as well as other characters). This way of approaching the past through the present can be a way to try to separate the two, a diffusion of horizons one might say, which can be an alternative path to both nostalgia and cynicism.

The two strategies, to include multiple voices and a (dif-)fusion of horizons, have the same goal; to enable the audience to access the same story through different angles, to create a thickness or complexity that tickles the memory and creates bonds of empathy.

Memory III

The Swedish project

Hi [name],

Here comes the updated budget.

Has [name] made her final decision regarding our application? We spoke on the phone a week or so ago and she said then that she had granted support in the form of technical equipment and not financial funding because she wanted to give [name] (the director) the opportunity to test what it's like to work with a Swedish team. There had been a misunderstanding about his previous films and his experience of working in Swedish/with Swedes. We had not thought of sending clips in Swedish in the application and she said that the clips in "Arabic" (Persian/Dari) were difficult for her to assess. We agreed that I will send some other documentation so that she can make a new assessment, but since then I have not heard anything. Are you up to date on this?

I'm mostly wondering if there's any point in you producing this document now, if another decision comes soon (which I hope it does). If this is the case, of course we want to have the written confirmation as soon as possible in order to proceed with other applications, and in that case I would also like a written motivation for the decision, i.e. for [name] to briefly write what she told me on the phone.

Thank you so much and nice to have contact with you here :-)

Best Regards

Babak

Diaspora filmmaker

In 2020 I was going to produce a short film with a fellow immigrant director. The director had arrived to Sweden at a young age and was at the time a student at Stockholm University of the Arts, a program in Swedish which is difficult to enter. We sent the required documents to receive a small grant for the production. None of us thought about the aspect that the decision-maker might assume that he didn't know how to speak or work in Swedish. It didn't cross my mind. Sometime after we submitted the application, the case officer called me and told me that they had doubts over the directors' ability to work in Swedish. Therefore, they would provide us with technical support. We could borrow cameras and supplies. If his movie turned out OK, this would maybe qualify him for financial support in future applications. I was mind-blown. They assumed, based on his name, that he didn't know Swedish. When I sent additional material and asked for a written rejection with motivation, the money was granted.

What does this memory say about the conditions for us, the immigrant filmmakers, in Sweden? My observation is that the previous films that this director had made, were either set in Iran or Afghanistan and/or centered around main characters from this region. In this film, the main character was a teenage girl. A blond Swedish girl and her parents, equally Swedish. The case officer was hesitant, because the director overstepped the invisible boundaries of his subject position. The immigrant filmmaker is supposed to produce immigrant film. S/he is not free to choose among topics and genres as freely as a filmmaker without a label. The circumstance that this project had nothing to do with Iran, Afghanistan or migration, was a deviant from the beaten track, as was the unimaginable idea of an immigrant director working in Swedish or with Swedish actors. The decision was not for appeal. The scenario could have ended with a no, simply because I could have accepted the role ascribed to us. My own understanding of why I didn't, is because I resist the position of the immigrant filmmaker, I don't want it. I distinguish between the immigrant filmmaker and to make film in diaspora, one being an identity, the other an act.

Diaspora is defined as a scattered population, people who once lived together in one place, now displaced in many disparate geographies. As a concept, it challenges the idea of geography bound to nations, it provides an imaginary of spatiality and temporalities characterized by ambiguities. Foucault introduced the concept *heterotopia* to describe a space that is different in quality compared to the places and nations established within a given time and culture, spaces that are contradictory or disturbing to the dominant discourse (Foucault & Miscoewic 1986). Heterotopic diaspora can dissolve essentializing dichotomies and boundaries that are used to define center/periphery, belonging/non-belonging, nation/diaspora, self/other (Okuroğlu Özün 2013). To produce film in this space is to simultaneously represent, contest and invert the sites considered to be real (Chung 2012).

If I bracket my antipathy for the concept of “the immigrant filmmaker” as a single entity, a second dilemma is what stories can be accessible and at the same time meaningful. If I am not standing steady on any ground, neither here, nor there, whose story is mine to tell and where is my audience? Apparently, according to established institutions with the power to provide funding, it is not my place to make film about “ordinary Swedes”. That is to say, to make film about non-immigrants. Nevertheless, it’s equally complicated to be located in Sweden and make movies about Iranians without constructing us/them as “others”. And to make film about Iran when I don’t live there and can’t get the required legal permits to work there seem even more far away.

During the Toronto International Film Festival a few years ago, the issue of cultural appropriation was discussed in relation to movies depicting indigenous communities through a white settler/colonizer perspective (the Hollywood Reporter 2020). It was argued that white directors do not take on the voices of underrepresented minorities as their own, and that the history of cinema hasn’t valued authenticity. All these are valid criticism of the Hollywood global hegemony over culture production. However, there is also the basic assumption that there are authentic voices, which inevitably constitutes a division between the “real” indigenous and the fake. Transferring this to the context of cinema in Iran

and the Iranian diaspora, there are similar discussions about who is a “real” Iranian and who is “försvenskad” (Swedified).

Unpacking this issue, there is (I) a question about when an immigrant is trusted to tell a story depicting Swedes/Sweden, but also (II) a question over what immigrants are more “real”. I can only reflect on this based on my own observations during this time. I see a lot of persons from different origin within arts and media. And among these, it would be a lie to claim that everyone works with the typical themes of migration, racism, identity or culture clashes. There is hence a path to a broader artistic spectrum than the “immigrant topics”. As I see it, at least in cinema, this path has a number of gates and one of the first gate keepers check your language. Immigrant film makers with broken Swedish, or who do not speak Swedish, are automatically excluded from working with these broader stories. Again, this is my personal observations.

When it comes to the “realness” there seem to be a fetishization of the misery of others within arts in general and cinema in particular. This isn’t unique for Sweden. We seem to naturalize the habit of defining a category as our opposite, only to reproduce this category as poor, uncivilized, strange etc. In Iranian cinema, this happens often when middle class filmmakers from the big cities make a picture of life on the countryside, fused with all their own prejudice about rural areas. In Swedish-Iranian diaspora the discussion goes something like this: if you don’t show the suffering of the people under the regime, you legitimize the dictatorship. All art from Iran or by Iranians should therefore include this open, very explicit criticism. For Iranians that work in or travel to Iran, this may be a difficult or non-existing choice, which then reduces their work to the pile of “less real”. This is reflected in which films are accepted from Iran for screening here, which bands are invited for concerts etc. What is considered as “real” reveals what we expect to see, what reality we want to be aware of. We I write, referring to a general collective of art institutions and consumers in Sweden.

Answering the questions for myself, I have no problem with criticizing the Islamic Republic in Iran, I have done some my whole life. But I don’t want to

make films with simplistic characters and narratives, which often is the case when the character is constructed around a few stereotypical attributes. The diasporic experience of marginalization and to be reduced to a cliché can be used actively as a language of translation of experiences, from one minority to another. If we within film production, manage to build networks and practices in which we listen in new ways, we can also hear the voices that have been silences. The diaspora film community can thereby be a path to a wider heterotopia in which eventually all our identities dissolve into something else, that is yet unimaginable, but hopefully more characterized by mutual understanding and peace.

Re-thinking us and the others

There is an ethical dilemma of representation in all situations where stories are told - especially if minorities are presented in the stories to an audience that generally do not interact with this minority. Any film made about immigrants in Sweden risk becoming the newest manual on how to understand immigrants. When the book, then film trilogy, then series *Snabba Cash* came, it was often referred to as a factual description of the situation for youth in underprivileged suburbs (Aftonbladet 2022). The same with the series *Kalifat*, which was frequently discussed as a realist depiction of how recruitment to islamist terrorism is done in Sweden (Expressen 2020). Film is hence not limited to an art form or entertainment; it constitutes our understanding of reality in a much broader sense. Documentary film even more so with its' claim to truthfulness as a contract with the audience. It not only shapes the collective memory; it can be used as evidence in negotiating the right or true understanding of a historic event or social issue (Nichols 1991). It is thus relevant to reflect on who gets to give their truth, why, and what perspectives are excluded. It is even more relevant, as an ethical point of departure, to reflect on the premises of this production. Who am I to decide what voices to be heard or not? What are my own perspectives and what am I advocating for, if anything at all? What is the purpose of the project? Who needs this story to be documented? Like all ethical considerations, this is not a check list that can be theoretically discussed at one point during a project and then considered done. Ethics need to be returned to and grounded collectively throughout the work process, in every context and related to the issues at hand with emphasis on care and empathy for the subjects (Ellis 2016).

My initial drive and attraction to cinema was story telling. However, after migration, the desire to change the narrow image of "us", as in immigrants in Sweden, has grown within me. Furthermore, with distance to my life in Iran, the absurdities of everyday life and the contradictions have become increasingly clear, the experiences of people under the shadow of this regime, what was just an ordinary day to me before, is now a very important story that must be

documented, because it's part of our collective history. Regardless of where in the world I am situated, I feel entitled to these experiences because I have lived them and because my loved ones continuously re-live them.

The discussion about cultural appropriation is relevant to have for diaspora filmmakers, but with a different emphasis. From what I have seen in recent years, not least after the rise of the Women Life Freedom-movement, the interest for Iranian diaspora artists to produce work in Persian and/or in relation to Iran has risen. I do see a risk of marginalizing voices from Iran, when lifting up ourselves and creating platforms for us in diaspora *as representing Iranian arts*. If possible, during my years in Sweden, I have had the ambition to co-produce, to send material for post-production, or to co-operate in other ways with Iran-based artist. I don't want to establish and make a career at the expense of fellow filmmakers in Iran, who are not funded by Swedish institutions and who do not enjoy the freedom of expression that I have here. This is not a discussion about charity or pity, but recognition of the unequal terms on which we produce arts, be it film or other. As much as the Swedish gaze of difference is heavy on me, the material and legal conditions for me to produce film here is incomparable with Iran. Especially documentaries about exiled political dissidents and underground metal bands. I acknowledge this privilege and I commit to the only way I know how to change the injustices of the great world; through creating a micro cosmos within my production sets where we can practice democratic decision-making and collective memory work, where I can dispatch what is possible of the production to colleagues in Iran or elsewhere in diaspora, where we can begin to re-think the borders dividing us and hear each others perspectives as an act of disobedience to the hegemony of nationalist thinking. On this account, we can reach within ourselves and access stories that haven't yet been told.

I have discussed the concept of the single story. If I were to have one shot at telling a story about my hometown Tehran, what would it be? Would it be in the tone of Marjan Farsads nostalgia and longing for the trees of my grandfathers backyard, or more with the bitter sentiment of Bomrani's depressed children and empty streets where everyone have migrated? Frankly, I tune in to both these

feelings, sometimes simultaneously. I hate having to choose. Already as a kid, I was the one crying in the amusement park, because from the seats of every ride my parents took me on, all I could see was a different carousel, and I wanted that too. I want to make film in/about Iran, but also about Sweden and about the diaspora. The artistic vision starting to take form builds on layers of ideas; to work with collective memories through multiple voices and a fusion of horizons and to activate the contingent meaning of diaspora in order to form a different imaginary. This way, the stories told can help us dissolve ourselves and others, instead of cementing stereotypes.

Navigating the discursive field(s)

Subject agency and strategies to challenge the status quo

In de-colonial ethics, importance is given to the act of centering the periphery, to use positions of privilege in a way that benefits the marginalized positions, even when it is against my own interests (Spivak 2015, Pittaway et al 2010). In this artistic research, I have discussed the subject position of the immigrant filmmaker produced within the context of film production in Sweden. The process of becoming this figure can be dismantled in different practices and questions:

- Owning the narrative
- Self-stereotyping
- Translation of language and experiences
- Collective memory work (and collective acts of forgetting)

My approach to processes of meaning-making is inspired by post-structural discourse theory, emphasizing the contingency of all meaning. Hence, all subject positions constructed within a discursive fields have a space of ambiguity, which provides a possibility to navigate the role in different directions. I may be reduced to the figure of *the immigrant filmmaker*; a role with limitations in terms of what stories can be told and how. Nevertheless, within this role there is a capacity of maneuver. Any subject depicted as this particular figure still has a subjectivity, a possibility to act in different ways, to stretch the possibilities given, to reproduce or to challenge. Subsequently, if at some point, given a position of privilege through the discursive practices that I have discussed so far, what can be constructive ways forward to re-frame the entire picture? In this final section, I discuss concrete strategies in film production and the outcome of this artistic research in terms of practical strategies.

Owning the narrative

Everything from Iran is moldy and everyone from there are potential regime

agents. With such statements at the back of my head, there are a number of alternative choices to be made. I can go along with this, which has become an almost hegemonic discourse within Iranian diaspora art and culture in Sweden. This would mean to reproduce this perspective in my work, creating characters that fit with existing stereotypes and closing the door to transnational collaborations. Another strategy would be to do my own thing, not allowing this dominant narrative to impact my work. With a zen-mode yogi approach, whatever happens in the outside world can be considered futile debates of no significance. This strategy would argue that art is above and beyond the political conditions discussed here. Such understanding in effect would mean to ignore the privilege given to some and the marginalization of others. Staying oblivious protects the unearned advantage of the privileged (McIntosh 1990). However, disapproving of such conditions is not going to change them. In Sweden, as well as in many other places, we are often taught that injustice in general and racism in particular, can be resolved by educational efforts and change of attitude. We cannot expect to create a system of equal opportunity, if we do not acknowledge the system of dominance. To talk about the political conditions of arts, the ethical dimensions and the discursive dominance of white Swedish perspectives on who I can be or what story I can tell - to break the silence - is hence a key to my artistic freedom. If I find myself in a position where I can shape the narrative, where I can produce film about us, the immigrant others, the Iranians, the Iranian diaspora, how can I unlearn the privilege that comes with this position?

I have argued that the liminal experience of the diasporic filmmaker can provide an opening, not only to access insider-outside perspectives but to deconstruct this very dichotomy. One concrete strategy in productions can thus be to identify dominant narratives and to work against them, by introducing silenced experiences, marginalized voices and alternative visions that do not fit within the pre-existing narrative. Furthermore, as a diasporic filmmaker it becomes important to self-scrutinize, to not take for granted that I know or that my film represent the fullness of any experience.

Self-stereotyping

The Swedish gaze not only loves our misery, it needs it for its own existence. The nordic exceptionalism and the Swedish self-image can only be, as long as it is juxtaposed against “others” that are less democratic, more barbaric, less equal, more patriarchal (Lundström & Hübinette 2011). As a filmmaker and an immigrant, one subject position that can be available is that of the “cultural expert”. This role means to produce film where “others” are reproduced in stereotypical ways. One way of approaching this would be to see film as any product, the production as any type of work. Just like my father went to construction sites, building houses and bridges, I could go to the film set, producing stories about honor killing, gangsters, religious extremism and the suffering of refugees. Like any job, I would receive my pay and the result would not be more or less an extension of my identity than a building, a car, a package of sugar or any other object produced within any other work. With this view, I might as well have remained in the Islamic Republic, producing film about the virtue of modest dressing or something else that I don’t believe in. I didn’t choose to work with film because of my love for the technicalities of the production. I want to tell stories. Hence, I am not keen on any production for the sake of the production. To make film per se is not my interest.

I have committed to an active attempt not self-stereotype, neither in the images I produce about immigrants nor about Iran or Iranians. One of the difficulties with this is that consciously or unconsciously, also my imagination is shaped by the previous configurations, the single stories. One strategy that I learned from the experience of making the short film *Stand up Sit down* (not mentioned in this artistic research) is that research, to watch other films on similar themes, can create awareness about the clichés. In this case, we wanted to make a film about an activist that was going to stop a deportation. When the film crew consisting of myself as director, the script-writer, producer etc, watched a film on the same theme, the discussion that followed resulted in crucial changes. Instead of a film about how bad deportations are, this became a film about privilege and

dilemmas on when to speak up and when to remain silent. Bringing the experience to this discussion on self-stereotypization, a strategy in film productions where the topic relates to any given minority can be such practice of norm-critical dialogue. What image is produced and how does it relate to pre-existing images of this figure? How can the image and the narrative be modified to increase complexities and reduce the cementation of stereotypes?

A second challenge is to create a space for alternative visions, when the condition for my presence in the film industry is self-stereotypization? My mother-in-law, a retired school teacher, always says we as immigrants must work twice as hard to be accepted in any given position in Sweden. This is the experience of many from that generation. I can relate to this experience, although I cannot differentiate this from “ordinary” perfectionism that artists often tend to have. In film, previous generations of immigrant filmmakers tended to create their own networks and platforms to support one and other. On this topic, I have not managed to reach a very firm conclusion or to define a strategy. In theory, it would be fruitful to have a network of other immigrant filmmakers, to share experiences and in order to feel “normal” as a change from the constant experience of exclusion and othering. However, my personal experience has been that while I enjoy working together with fellow immigrant filmmakers, this alone cannot constitute the base of our work-relation. Furthermore, my personal experience is that many second generation Iranians in the field of culture tend to distance themselves from persons like myself. Our interests in terms of stories are also different, because I am more grounded in experiences in Iran after the revolution, while they are more interested in experiences of identity and belonging in a Swedish context and/or nostalgic images of Iran before their migration. While all these perspectives are valid and necessary, I have not experienced situations where the construction of a separate immigrant network has seemed constructive or appealing.

Translation of language and experiences

Experiences from Iran do not necessarily make sense in Sweden, especially if they are not in the shape that fits the institutionalized expectations. Much of the everyday life in Iran after the Islamic revolution is normalized absurdities that don't even make sense within its own spatial and temporal context. I have argued that the role of the immigrant filmmaker or has a duality of producing art for the sake of the art and of translating experiences from one context to another. In the latter, the process of production has the audience in mind, whereas art is made as a mode of self-expression, the role of the receiver is irrelevant. This contradiction in relation to the receiver is articulated both in the relation of film-maker and audience and in the relation of film-maker and funding institution. I have already made clear the objective to make the hyper-absurdities of the Islamic Republic penetrable for an audience on the "outside". The question is to what extent this assumed outside perspective should interfere with the artistic process. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, I have concluded that the ambition to make the work accessible to the audience should not be over-emphasized in the process of translation - hence while working on a movie, the discussion over how much the content makes sense or not to a certain audience should not be of concern (Benjamin & Rendall 2021).

My short documentary *Fragments* relate to historic events in Iran that Iranians are assumed to be familiar with, while they are not included in the Swedish curriculum in history or social science. A strategy that I adopted while working with the narrative in this film, was to resist the urge to explain the events more than the interview subjects did. Such over-explanation would turn the film into a school book, alienating it from its own artistic format.

In *A weekend in Tehran*, I applied a different strategy in my approach to translating experiences. Although the institutional response was that the film lacked dramaturgy, I consider this the core idea. Drawing on the the bag-theory, the very notion that there must be a hero, action and a clear-cut ending to a story, can be challenged. In this story, the dramaturgy builds on events gathered in a

bag, no character being the hero, the ending opening up to a new story about the next generation of rock'n roll kids in Tehran. This way to challenge exceptions on dramaturgy goes beyond the process of translating experiences and address the very idea of what a story can be. As a strategy, it is perhaps not always relevant to apply - sometimes the story about hunting a mammoth should be told, sometimes that of gathering seeds. The important task for the filmmaker is to distinguish which story is relevant to tell with which format and how it changes the whole story depending on what choice that is made.

Collective memory work

I don't have a formal network of immigrant filmmakers, but I do have two friends here in Stockholm that are Iranian, filmmakers and with the experience of immigration as adults after the 2009 green movement. Routinely, I check my conclusions and experiences with them. Am I becoming bitter? Paranoid? Am I over-sensitive? At some point, they said to me that although they agree that the Swedish gaze demands our misery, I have become overtly positive. Iran in the 50's is not all drinking beer at café Naderi, just like the 2000's was not all about dudes playing guitars and growling un-hearable nonsense. By focusing on these everyday experiences of middle class subjects in Tehran, am I oblivious to the political and social realities that fall outside of the scope of these particular narratives? I said to my friends that for sure, one film cannot tell the fullness of a nations experience - no such complete and all-encompassing product can ever exist, because there are always contingencies, all the micro-events and contradictions of life. With one film, a short-movie on 15 minutes, I do not make any such claims. One could argue that I should use these 15 minutes to shed light on something more important. At times I agree. At the moment, I am engaged in a documentary about the situation for women in Iran following the Woman Life Freedom protests. I do see the urgency of human rights and that this film is relevant in a different way than *Fragments* and *A Weekend in Tehran*. However, I

refuse to reduce my work to only such topics. Like in the lyrics of Shervin Hajipours *Baraaye*, I share the longing after and ordinary life. By this, I do not mean a life stripped of atrocities and absurdities - rather, I mean the life that continues despite all of this and under the shadow of both the Islamic regime, the border regimes and all other political and social restrains. To portray the ordinary is thus not necessarily less urgent. It is a strategy in order to re-humanize subjects that during hundreds of years have been marginalized through colonial practices and an orientalist gaze.

The discussions I have with my friends are important, not only as an intellectual practice, but as a way to achieve self-reflexive ethical standpoints. We share a similar history, but not identical. Our collective memory work can form a small drop in the sea of the diasporic efforts among Iranians, to create archives and documentation over our past and present experiences. The collectivity of such experiences is crucial, because we all risk becoming that what we criticize, the “expert” or the immigrant film-maker that accepts the premises and produces whatever is expected and acceptable. Furthermore, collectivity is crucial when positioned in diaspora and making claims about Iran. In this ongoing project, I have solved this by working with persons located in Iran - or inside - as Swedish producers often say. This is not in order to access an insiders perspective. As argued above, my ambition is to de-construct the dichotomy of insider-outsider. To include collaborations with Iranian filmmakers and subjects is not because of their unique perspective as an alibi or attestation of my work. This choice has to do with privilege. While I, in a Swedish context, can experience discrimination or lack of interest for my projects due to the Swedish gaze and how I am reduced to an “immigrant filmmaker”, in a transnational context I am a privileged with my European freedom of expression, with a Swedish production company providing resources and a contract with a well-established media platform to share the final result. I reached this position because I, as a smuggler of stories, could access “the other side”. It is an ethical question to share this privilege with those who have earned it in terms of experiences - even if it means that I have to back down on behalf of somebody else. The final strategy suggested is hence to work in

transnational collaborations, both economically and in terms of ownership over the narrative.

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