

[VISIONS DU REEL 2009 – COMPETITION INTERNATIONALE]

[TORONTO IFF 2009 – REAL TO REEL]

Bassidji

A FILM BY MEHRAN TAMADON

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MEHRAN TAMADON • WITH THE COLLABORATION OF LAETITIA LEMERLE • CAMERA MAJID GORJIAN • EDITING ANDREE DAVANTURE RODOLPHE MOLLA • SOUND EDITING AND MIXING JEROME CUENDET • PRODUCED BY CDP CATHERINE DUSSART, INTERLAND FRANCK HULLIARD, BOX PRODUCTIONS ELENA TATTI ET THIERRY SPICHER, MEHRAN TAMADON • WITH THE SUPPORT OF FONDS SUD CINEMA MINISTERE DE LA CULTURE ET DE LA COMMUNICATION- CNC MINISTERE DES AFFAIRES ETRANGERES ET EUROPEENNES • REGION ILE-DE-FRANCE • MEDIA PLUS PROGRAMME OF THE EUROPEAN UNION CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINEMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMEE • TELEVISION SUISSE ROMANDE UNITE DES FILMS DOCUMENTAIRES

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SYNOPSIS

In a desert, on a hill, men and women in chadors and children are wandering in a vast open air "museum" dedicated to the memory of the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war. This is the Iranian new year, we are close to the Iraqi border. I'm following my guide. He's tall and charismatic. His name is Nader Malek-Kandi. For almost three years, I've decided to immerse myself in the very heart of the most extremist supporters of the Islamic republic of Iran (the bassidjis), to better understand their paradigms. We are from the same country, however everything divides us. I can only hurt their convictions being an atheist Iranian, living in France, and son of communist activists under the Shah's regime. Nevertheless, we engage in a dialog. But, between seduction and rhetoric games, moments of truth and the reality of the political and religious system they support, how far are we ready to give up some of our respective convictions to perceive and understand one another ?

MY PURPOSE

In 2000, 16 years after my arrival in France, I decided to go back to live in Iran for a while to better understand my country. By a combination of circumstances, I had the opportunity in 2002 to attend a ceremony of national mourning in honor of Imam Hussein, the third Shiite imam who died as a martyr at Karbala 1300 years ago. For several hours, I found myself under a tent with some bassidjis that had met for the ten nights of traditional mourning. The bassidjis are originally veterans of the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) who fought against the enemy while hoping to die as martyrs. All around the room were martyrs photos, battles reconstitution maps and a few possessions of dead soldiers.

I was at once surprised and upset : 14 years after the end of the war it was still omnipresent. It was found everywhere in official speeches and public spaces, for example on Iranian television or in the frescos of the martyrs in the streets of Tehran....

During the night, I had a long discussion with one of the bassidjis who was my age. I was intrigued and tried to get to learn more about the bassidjis' background. Within a few months, I developed a relationship with some of them. I visited them and they came to see me, and they had the opportunity to get to know my world and meet some of my friends.

I kept meeting with other bassidjis even more dedicated, more devoted to the cause of the Islamic republic, and I realized that no one can comprehend today's Iranian society without truly understanding who the bassidjis are.

The Bassidj is literally disseminated throughout the Iranian society. It is present in every part of the capital and provincial cities, especially around mosques and symbolizes the omnipresence of governmental authority which is profoundly reflected in everyday life. Its presence in the smallest neighborhoods of cities and its popular support is at the same time demonstrated and maintained. Through its global presence and perfect structure, the Bassidj is capable, for example, of vaccinating 100% of children less than 6 years old in one day. It can also intervene quickly and everywhere at the request of the government in order to suppress troubles or public contests and at the same time retrieve information from the base.

As outside looks are often radical, rigid and abstract, I chose to penetrate inside the world of bassidjis to better understand the paradigms which guide them. In order to achieve this, one must dare to listen to what the other has to say.

This film is an attempt to put together individuals who are totally different (the most radical elements of the Islamic Republic and myself, an Iranian of the diaspora, intellectual, atheist, and living in France) but belong to

the same society so that they can meet and exchange their ideas. This film is both a social and political project and at the same time my individual quest, which I hope to share with the viewer.

Despite my fears, I always forced myself to ask real questions, to give an honest point of view while responding to the questions asked. Despite a fundamental opposition and total disagreements, I truly tried to initiate a discussion which persons belonging to the same society should have if they do not want to consider themselves like beasts and if they care about the survival of their society, their culture and their world.

This way, I always avoided direct criticism for I was listening, while affirming my difference, and taking responsibility for whom I was and what I thought. I established a direct, frank and transparent dialog with people who commonly only express themselves within the limits of the official propaganda.

My numerous trips back and forth to Iran, my countless meetings, the temporary confiscation of my first tapes by the Intelligence Service, the intense dialogs, and the moments of shared celebration transformed this film into a personal project, a path, just as important as the film itself.

WHO ARE THE BASSIDJIS ?

In Persian *bassidji* means to be mobilized to defend a cause.

This image becomes important after the revolution and even more so during the war against Iraq. In the schools and mosques, hundreds of thousands of young men were encouraged to go to war and called *the bassidjis*.

After several years, this movement was structured and became officially the Bassidj Resistant force. After the war, it continued to exist and drew a population of young religious men. At the same time, the Bassidj is a military organization, a structure of political militancy and a place of citizen and social activities. As such, it is the principal pillar of popular support for the Islamic republic. It wishes also to be the defender of a virtuous Islamic society : aid to the poor, general mobilization in time of crisis (war, public health catastrophe, earthquake, etc), promotion of religious values.

As guardian of morals, the Bassidj is seen as an efficient organization of repression against the population which does not identify as part of the religious system put in place after the Revolution. For these Iranians, i.e. the opponents and the non religious, bassidjis became a synonym of repression and intolerance. They are often perceived as young fanatics, as little dictators carrying raids in the streets to control young unmarried couples or to enforce the strict wearing of veils.

The system of organization of the Bassidj, present all over the country, is very decentralized and hierarchical. The grid pattern of a city like Tehran for example, is structured around several Bassidj Departments which control the Bassidj Centers, which in their turn control dozens of Bassidj "Bases of resistance". These bases are the smallest organizational unit of the Bassidj at the level of a neighborhood. They are for the most part located inside or next to a mosque, in universities, in public offices, etc. The Bassidj is present everywhere and therefore at the very core of the Iranian society.

We can understand it is a complex organization when we learn that the Bassidj Bases and Departments report not only to the army but also to the ministry they belong to, depending on their location. For example, the Bassidj of the Tehran airport is attached to the ministry of transportation and the Bassidj of the university to the ministry of higher education. This double system of reporting shows the coexistence of power which characterizes the Iranian political regime.

THE PRINCIPAL PROTAGONISTS OF THE FILM

Among the numerous persons whom I met and among those who agreed to be in the film, two have played a particularly important role in my comprehension of the world of the bassidjis. It is around them and our relationship that the film is structured.

Nader Malek-kandi, 46 years old

He was seventeen at the time of the Revolution and was part of those who followed the path of Khomeini. At the beginning of the war, Nader left for the battlefield followed shortly thereafter by his brother. He once told me : " In eight years, I never feared death. But God did not choose me. I remain and my brother is gone. God has only rewarded me with a few wounds".

Even though he is not an official member of the Bassidj, he considers himself as such. The official rhetoric says that anyone who is devoted to the cause of God and the Islamic republic is a bassidji. To be a bassidji is therefore more a mentality, a state of mind of one who is devoted to a cause and who is not afraid to die.

Today, Nader Malek-Kandi manages a publishing house for religious propaganda books. He publishes the speeches of Khamenei, texts of historic propaganda, manuals of religious practice etc.

I met him in Tehran during the traditional mourning ceremony. He appreciated me and agreed to participate in the film.

Mohammad Pourkarim, 28 years old

A young bassidji born after the Revolution who comes from a family of veterans. He has a great admiration for war martyrs and idealizes the values of the original Bassidjis. As an active militant, he spends a lot of time in the Bassidj of his district talking to the people and debating religious questions, the war etc.

Feeling responsible for the risks of the evolution of society towards non religious values, he has taken over the direction of the Bassidj base of Nasr, one of the fancy neighborhoods of Tehran.

I met him at the frontier during the Iranian new year annual pilgrimage to the war battle sites.

TECHNICAL LIST

Documentary, 114 minutes – Digibeta – original version farsi, subtitles french and english

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THE FILMAKER – MEHRAN TAMADON

Iranian architect and filmmaker, Mehran Tamadon arrives in France at the age of 12, in 1984. He attends the school of Architecture of Paris-La Villette, and receives his diploma in 2000.

In 1999, he participates in the creation of the review *L'Arrosoir* devoted to issues of city and land usage. In the year 2000, he returns to Iran for four years and works as an architect, realizing a house and a building in Tehran.

Since 2002, he has given his career a distinctly artistic orientation. During an exhibit of conceptual art at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, he showed an artistic installation called "From the eyes of a stroller". He also published two essays in Persian (*Moments of agony*, 2003 and *Friendship*, 2005). Then, in 2004 he realized his first medium-length documentary, *Behesht Zahra, Mothers of Martyrs*, presented in numerous international festivals. *Bassidji* (2009), about the defenders of the Islamic republic of Iran, is his first long documentary.

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