

Iranian Kurdish filmmaker Fariborz Kamkari tries to describe the Middle East to the West through the cinema. The family is a central element in his films, as he attributes most of the problems to the rigid patriarchal culture,

# My cinema is a bridge to the Middle East

ARTS&WORKS 1

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a reflection of the country's profound contradictions. Among the many issues he tackles are the identity denied to Kurds, censorship, child warriors, the feminist movement and the schools for future soldiers of God

“I want to tell the West about the Middle East and the family makes it possible for me to do so, because everyone has a family”. Young Iranian Kurdish filmmaker Fariborz Kamkari often repeats this phrase because he is convinced that spreading awareness among Westerners can help to change his country's situation. The cinema is his instrument of choice to tell the story of people in the Middle East, the generational conflict within society and the lives of children orphaned by war. He asks Western democracies to enforce respect for basic human rights. Kamkari divides his time between the Middle East and Europe. Born in Iran, he moved to the Netherlands to study cinema after an early approach to the theatre and photography. On his return to his country, he shot several short films and his first feature film, *Black Tape*, which was shown in 2002 at the Venice Film Festival and has won international awards.

## What is the situation in Kurdistan?

There are 30 million Kurds divided among five countries (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria and Armenia). It is the largest stateless population. The division has also caused differences for over 80 years because each group has been influenced by the country of which it forms

part. There has always been the desire not to allow the Kurds to strengthen their common identity: for example, by forbidding the use of their mother tongue, which is a very strong uniting element. On the one hand this situation has enriched the Kurds culturally, but on the other, not being able to freely use one's mother tongue is terrible violence.

## To what extent are Kurds required to negate their identity?

In Turkey, for example, Kurdish children must say “I am Turkish and proud of it” during the morning prayer. There is the well-known case of the child who said “I am Kurdish” instead and they arrested and held him until he was forced to say that he was Turkish. Until a few years ago people totally denied the existence of Kurds in Turkey, a situation that changed after the intervention of the European Union. Even today, however, we keep hearing news of the abuse of power against the minorities. This is why the EU must insist on respect for human rights before Turkey becomes a member.

## How much of this do you talk about in your films?

It is hard to talk about the problems there



\_ Fariborz Kamkari, the Iranian Kurdish filmmaker, has directed many films including *Forbidden Chapter*, which deals with religious fanaticism and is based on a true story: images from the film on the following pages

are in a 90-minute film, but my task and desire is to spread knowledge of the Middle East in the West.

I try to find a universal dramatic language in the projects on which I work and I try to give an image of Middle Eastern culture by telling family-related stories because it is simpler to find analogies between the Western and Middle Eastern worlds by talking, for example, about a father-son relationship or the relationship between brothers. Most of the Middle East's problems originate, in my opinion, in the rigid patriarchal culture. There is a dictator in each family, represented by the father figure, who decides what is right or wrong without any room for discussion. It is a situation that reflects what happens in many countries in the region.

#### **What is family life like?**

There is a profound conflict between parents and children. It is impossible for the father-son relationship in the average Middle

Eastern family to be based on dialogue; even I don't remember ever having had a discussion on any issue with my father, although he is very open-minded and liberal. I tackle this issue in my latest screenplay, titled *The Traitor*. It is the story of a son who decides to rebel against the wishes of his father for the first time after the death of his mother. Nothing will really change until such time as there is a culture of God equals King equals father and our submission to them.

#### **What are the main reasons for the differences between the old and new generations?**

In general, the model for the younger generations is the West, which they are aware of because of the spread of new technologies: satellite television, the Internet, mobile phones. Everyone has a satellite even in villages in the countryside and they manage to watch television programmes from around the world. It is difficult to combine these models and this information with the social and family traditions that do not envisage any kind of evolution, but only rigid repetition.

#### **What is daily life like?**

In Iran, where I grew up, for example, you come up against continuous prohibitions. It is forbidden for a man to sit in a bar with a woman, because if you're not married or engaged, the police can intervene with a fine, a prison sentence or by using violence. Then there's the censorship. You can't watch YouTube on the Internet and it is impossible to look up news websites and research certain subjects. For example, if you type the word "woman", the filters block your access to the news. Iran is also the first Middle Eastern country to have shut down the largest number of daily newspapers and magazines. After the revolution, the Ayatollahs gave orders to have children and for a few years there was a real baby boom; today, about 70 per cent of Iranians are less than 30-years-old. How can the State control everything? It's impossible. In Iran, however, State control is very strong and, in reaction, many people act in a way that is contrary to the rules laid down by Islamic law. People lead a double life in Iranian society: inside and outside the house. Inside homes, the lifestyle is very similar to the West; for example, women happily wear miniskirts, but then when they go out they are totally covered and unrecognisable. Children live in a

state of confusion until they are about 7 or 8 years because they don't understand why their mothers change. One socio-economic consequence of all this is that houses in Iran are very expensive: they are a space, a personal refuge where people can be free.

#### **How does the younger generation react?**

There is a strong trend towards the emigration of young people because they want to study, work and have fun. In general women are more determined; 60 per cent of university students are girls and there are many working women. According to the Islamic law that is imposed in Iran, they are supposed to wear very ample clothing and be totally covered, but they are gradually reducing the length of the veil they wear on their heads on their own initiative. Every summer there is a police campaign during which the more freely dressed women are arrested, and fines and increasingly restrictive laws are applied, but women are not discouraged despite the policy of terror.

#### **The heroine of your first film, *Black Tape*, is a young Kurdish woman. What does the film talk about?**

The film reflects the history of the Kurds. It tells the story of a love-hate relationship between a 60-year-old husband and his wife, who has just turned 18. It is a very complicated relationship because the man, an Iranian, tries to ignore and negate the woman's Kurdish identity by not accepting her language and forcing her to change her name. It is love based on non-acceptance and the cancellation of the other's personality, which inevitably comes to a dramatic conclusion. It is also an experimental film because, as the subtitle, *The videotape Fariborz Kamkari found in the garbage*, indicates, it is told through the recordings of a video camera that the couple uses to film moments of their life together, and that I, the director, have found in the garbage.

#### **The film begins with the phrase "In the name of God". What does it mean?**

Faith is an obligation in Iran; everything is done in the name of religion and even a film cannot start without first invoking God's help. Religion appears in every activity: there is Islamic propaganda in children's programmes and Islamic slogans are read in schools. It is a

genuine method used to get individuals to conform, but in the end it has sparked the opposite reaction. The younger generation is less religious and, above all, they want to be free to choose. Unfortunately there are also a lot of people who accept the situation so as not to clash with the fundamentalist government. My second film, *The Forbidden Chapter*, deals with religious fanaticism and is based on a true story. A killer from a Koranic school kills 27 prostitutes to "clean up society". Events of this kind are not unusual in Iran, unfortunately, and killers of this kind are often considered to be heroes; when they are arrested, they have no problems confessing their crime and they say: "Yes, it's true. I've killed and I'm proud of what I have done". The victims are often women who sell their bodies because they have no other choice, and it is mainly the many widows and female war orphans who come up against a closed society.

#### **What was the reaction to the film?**

The film was censored, but in Iran it is impossible to make films without being subjected to revisions. If directors want to work, they must accept these conditions. Each film is controlled at least thrice by a body set up for this purpose: the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The authorities first read the screenplay to decide what changes to make, then further cuts are made at the editing stage, but sometimes you can also have controls on the set while filming. Finally, before releasing the permit for the film to be distributed and screened in public, the authorities watch the whole film and can still ask for changes. The last stage of censorship actually occurs after the first screenings: if the *ulemas* do not like the reaction of spectators, they can withdraw the film. However, these continual limitations have increased the desire and curiosity for culture, so a Tarkoski film can actually have a bigger audience in Teheran than in Paris.

#### **Is the experience of the recent wars in Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq still very present in people's lives?**

Some Afghan children told me that one day, while they were playing with guns, they killed a friend of theirs by mistake. They told the victim's mother that they had found him dead in the street and the woman resignedly went to retrieve her son's body, without asking any further questions. For Afghan children in



particular, war is the only thing they know. A 20-year-old Afghan has seen only battles since he was born; he is unaware of any other possibilities. In my short film *Born to be soldiers*, I tell the true story of two young cousins who fight in two opposed factions because it is the only alternative to poverty. The war has also become a means to survive, a business, big or small. Where do the weapons come from? Until a few years ago, the world gave Saddam weapons for free. In my film *The Forbidden Chapter*, the Afghan mullah who educates the young “soldiers of God” quips: “I’m confused. Until a few years ago the Americans were friends; how come they’ve become enemies?” – a question to which it is still complicated to reply today. After 9/11, we realised that the concept of “faraway” no longer exists; the attack on the heart of the world came directly from far-off, chaotic Afghanistan and we became aware of the nearness of this forgotten country and the impossibility of ignoring its social disasters. Terrorism can arrive anywhere and its soldiers are often war orphans, children seeking to survive, who are taken into religious schools at 5 or 6 and subjected to brainwashing until the age of 17 or 18, when they become potential soldiers of God.

#### **Did you get to know the Taliban?**

“Taliban” means *student*. Before I wrote the screenplay for *The Forbidden Chapter*, I lived in a religious school for a few weeks and realised how easy it is to believe that if you commit suicide you go straight to paradise, where you can fulfil all your desires. They tell the story that, when a soldier dies, he falls into

the arms of 40 angels, very beautiful women. We imagine the Taliban to be monsters, but most of them are children from families that are poor, both economically and culturally, who have had no other choice. I once happened to witness the transformation of an 18-year-old boy who had lived in a religious school since he was 8, sent there by his family because this way he would be one mouth less to feed. He had reached the final level before becoming a mullah and looked like a typical Taliban, with a long beard and a disturbing gaze. During the filming, I chose him to play the role of a student. After a lot of hesitation he came on the set and fell in love with the experience. The next month he had changed totally; he had left the school and started dressing like the other boys. He is now studying cinema.

#### **So he experienced another possibility. Can that suffice?**

Experiencing other possibilities is very important in these rigid cultures and these tragic situations. Western democracies could influence the state of things, for example by trying to guarantee the basic human rights. Instead, many Western and Middle Eastern governments use people’s ignorance to conduct their big business deals undisturbed; there are many economic interests, while the safeguarding of the basic rights of individuals is not convenient for anyone. In Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, there are thousands of explosive mines and the worst were given – not sold – by an Italian factory. These are plastic mines, meaning that they are much more resistant than metal ones, and they can be launched directly from a helicopter. Every day we see children lose a leg or farmers whose heads are blown off as they work. So let’s avoid having factories give anti-human mines as gifts. Many people in the Middle East continue to experience these contradictory situations and cannot believe in the promises made by America and the West in general.

#### **What does the Middle Eastern middle class really want, in your opinion?**

Democracy. Most of them are against Islamic radicalism and, at the same time, they do not believe that war or the intervention of the American soldiers will resolve things. Criticising the situation in one’s country does not mean automatically backing American

foreign policy, as far as I am concerned; while things are often seen in black and white, my task, and that of other Middle Eastern intellectuals, is to remind people that a third possibility, grey, does exist. Ben Laden has become a hero with the rationale of black and white because he represents a demonstration against the system and uses hate and the feeling of weakness inherent to many Middle Eastern families to recruit people to be transformed into soldiers and obtain a generic consensus. From a media-related point of view, Ben Laden has won because he is seen on television and uses the media to spread his propaganda. In the Afghan school I visited to carry out research for my film, they were very happy that I was there because in some way I represented a form of promotion.

**How well is the Middle East known in the West and particularly in Italy?**

Unfortunately Italians don't know much, even though there is a very old tradition between Italy and the Middle East. Italy is also the only European country of which people in the Middle East do not have negative memories, unlike France and England. Italy could benefit from this and cause benefit. A simple example: in Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, which is a very safe autonomous region compared to the rest of Iraq with rapid economic growth; there is a demand for typical Italian products, building materials, furnishings, design and wine, but Italian entrepreneurs do not seem in the least interested in exploring this new market, even though the government offers significant incentives. There is also a growing market for Italian cinema, which is very popular here, as everywhere else in the Middle East. One of my projects is to build a small Cinecittà in the city of Suleimania.

**What exactly is the project?**

Film production in the region is growing substantially. Iran produces 60 to 90 films a year and the autonomous region of Kurdistan alone will have produced 12 films in 2007. This is also the case in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Gulf States, Turkey and Central Asia. The problem is post-production; in fact, for the post-filming stages the film has to be sent to Europe, generally London or Paris. Our project is precisely to set up a post-production centre to knock down costs; besides, with a dubbing



room we could increase the number of foreign films being distributed, especially Italian films. The Iraqi government, the Kurdistan regional government and some Italian investors back the idea. Unfortunately, Italy lacks co-production agreements with practically all the Middle Eastern countries and in this way it is losing out on the opportunity to expand in a large and vibrant market such as the Middle East.

**What is the theme of your next film?**

A love story that takes place during the last Kurdish genocide in Iraq in 1988, told through the story of a girl who follows the boy she loves to the town of Kirkuk and witnesses the massacre. 180,000 Kurds died, 70 per cent of them women and children and 40,000 villages were destroyed. They poisoned the wells, cut down the trees and killed the animals. Even today, no one can go back to live in the area. One of the world's biggest oil fields is located in Kirkuk, in the northern part of the country, and during the genocide thousands of Kurdish families were transferred to the southern part of the country and replaced by Arab settlers. One of the tactics used to control Kurdistan has been to block its economic development and leave the people in poverty. There are about 30,000 Kurds without identity papers in Syria who cannot have a house; in other words, they do not exist. But I am convinced that there is a third possibility and that one day it will be possible to reunite the Kurdish minorities under the common banner of a democratic way of life.