

جایی که خدا نیست

Where God is not

PRESS KIT



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SYNOPSIS

Taghi, Homa and Mazyar were arrested and interrogated by the Iranian regime.

All three testify with their bodies, with their gestures and tell what it means to resist, what it means to break.

Is there any hope that the torturer will one day reconnect with his conscience?

« Where God Is Not is a film based on the testimonials of those who have been brutally treated by the Iranian regime. It seeks to understand how the most repressive aspects of this totalitarian system rely on imprisonment and torture. What does the torturer do? What are his gestures and practices? How can a left-wing activist, under the pressure of a totalitarian regime, end up changing sides and participate under duress in such a repressive system? How can the fight be carried out? These are questions that have haunted me since the first feature film I made in Iran on the regime's militia. Once again, I am trying to understand power by looking at it from the perspective of those who have directly experienced the violence meted out by the Iranian regime. »

Mehran Tamadon

INTERVIEW WITH MEHRAN TAMADON

You made *Where God Is Not* at the same time as *My Worst Enemy*. The two films are different but at the same time there is a resonance between them. Did you have the idea of making two films from the start, or was it a decision you made along the way?

The idea for *My Worst Enemy* has obsessed me for seven years! I wrote it between 2015 and 2017, the writing was a complicated process in every respect. My producers then submitted it to funding committees and we soon managed to raise the money to make the film. But the way the film was structured was so twisted and complicated that it took me two years to dare to start shooting, which happened at the end of 2020. Then the editing was so laborious that I had to stop. It was during this interruption that I wrote, filmed, and edited *Where God Is Not*. This allowed me to better understand what I was looking for in *My Worst Enemy* and to finish editing that film.

The shooting of *Where God Is Not* shook me deeply. I was deeply moved by the stories of the people I was filming, by their humanity and strength. *Where God Is Not* is a relatively classic documentary in its form, but the experience of filming was necessary to allow the ideas I had begun to develop seven years earlier to mature. Chronologically, I filmed *My Worst Enemy* first and finished *Where God Is Not* first. I now consider *Where God Is Not* as chronologically preceding *My Worst Enemy*.

How did you meet the protagonists of *Where God Is Not*?

When I was preparing *My Worst Enemy*, I wanted to bring many exiled Iranians who were living in different European countries to Paris. But

COVID limited my choices to those living in France. Later, for *Where God Is Not*, the lockdown was over, but by then I had already chosen my protagonists. From the beginning, I had decided to film only Taghi Rahmani who lives in Paris, Homa Kalhori who lives in England and Mazyar Ebrahimi who lives in Germany. They each have different backgrounds and even if they are all opposed to the Islamic Republic, they do not necessarily share the same political convictions. They were also subjected to prison and torture in different periods of the Islamic regime. They reacted differently to the violence they were subjected to, each developing different survival strategies. Their stories, their ways of reacting to the camera, their way of appropriating the re-enactment process allowed me to build the narrative of the film.

What was it about their prison stories that appealed to you?

In my initial discussions with Mazyar Ebrahimi, he asked me to reconstruct the torture chamber. Having never seen a torture chamber, I didn't see how I could make it a reality in a documentary setting. So, I proposed to reconstruct it and to design it like a theatre set while filming it. Moreover, when I went to meet him in Germany to get to know him better and to suggest he take part in the film, I immediately realised that he would be a good film character. I got to know Homa Kalhori through her book in which she recounted her prison experience in the early 1980s. She was then part of the "Raheh Kargar" left-wing movement and was arrested at the same time as many of her comrades. A few years later, under torture, she gave in and recanted. It was this change in political affiliation that first

interested me in her story. I was looking for someone who could help me understand how one could change sides. As I was building the film's narrative other questions arose. A film is also based on emotions, not just discourses.

Finally, Taghi Rahmani brings real energy to the film. When we are at the end of our tether with Homa and Mazyar, Mr Rahmani shows us through his body language and his words how he tried to resist while in isolation. Taghi Rahmani, whom I had not met before making this film, has since become a close friend. He took my questions very seriously and answered them with great transparency and kindness. The passages where I ask him about the psychology of the torturer could have irritated him and he could have answered me disdainfully. But this was never the case, he always considered my questions thoughtfully and answered with humility, as if calling himself into question, without ever being scornful.

How did the cinematic stratagem you devised for the filming affect your protagonists?

They each reacted differently. Mazyar Ebrahimi had been blindfolded when he was tortured. He therefore was unable to see his surroundings at the time, which was frightening. By reconstructing the place, he finally got the impression that he was seeing what had happened at the time. He told me about a feeling of fear that was leaving him at last. However, early in the morning when we arrived at the location, he had a very bad headache and was nauseous. It was after a few hours, when he had made the bed and hung the chain, that he finally felt he understood what had happened at the time. The re-enactment calmed him down.

It was the same with Homa Kalhori. Even though she had already published a book in which she had revealed her feelings, written about

her shame, and explained why she had given in, it seems to me that making the film was also a cathartic experience for her. Because telling the story in front of the camera, something which scared her very much, was different from telling it in writing, in a book. It even seems to me that, for Homa, the process of making the film did not end with the actual shooting of it. She was finally acknowledging publicly, openly, what happened at the time and this burden she had carried since then.

For Taghi Rahmani, it was quite different. Prison is not ancient history for him. He is still a political activist. He has served fourteen years in prison. He is still considering going back to Iran, although he knows that if he goes back, he will be imprisoned. Pacing in front of my camera in a cell for him is all about what could happen to him tomorrow. His wife is still in Iran, she is currently in detention over there, as are many of his friends. For him, replaying these scenes was not therapeutic. Him acting out these gestures is a form of militant action, he is denouncing them, but he is also in suffering.

We see in the film that Homa Kalhori resisted against re-enacting certain scenes, as did Mazyar Ebrahimi, who was somewhat upset to see you lying on the bed. Did you hesitate to ask them to re-enact the scenes?

It's true that what I'm proposing is delicate and the question is raised in the film. In my films, I always try to put into perspective the ethical questions raised by my filming approach. With Mazyar Ebrahimi, we progressed gradually. There were frequent pauses during which he would tell me whether he wanted to stop or to go on. I kept one of these moments in the editing.

I rather had the impression that what disturbed them most were the unspoken words, the silences, the things imagined. It seemed to me

that telling, showing, replaying helped them to better cope with the traumas. The people I filmed live constantly with the memory of these scenes, with these experiences. I hope that I have helped them in some way to express emotions that were locked inside their bodies, in their souls.

What effect do you think *My Worst Enemy* and *Where God Is Not* might have on the agents working for the regime in the current situation? Would they understand the reflective dimension of these films?

Mazyar Ebrahimi says that the interrogators and torturers will see the films, especially after the exposure offered by the Berlin Festival, and I am also convinced of this. I would say that today, in the current context and given the degree of violence and repression, I don't think it is possible for them to understand the reflective dimension that these two films offer. But maybe it will be possible in six months, or later, who knows? Films can tell us one thing today and something else tomorrow. In any case, I made these two films so that those who defend the regime through violence would see them. I constantly imagined the torturers alone in front of a screen, watching these films. Many of the questions I ask my characters in the film concerning the torturers' consciences are addressed directly to the latter. And my hope is that they will be somewhat shaken, frightened by themselves. Maybe the day after the screening they will get up and go back to work as if nothing had happened. Or maybe this will sow a seed that will germ later. I can only speculate. We all make assumptions based on our perception of humankind, our optimism, our belief in the power of images and cinema. The viewers will have their own answer. An answer that also speaks about each one of us and not just about the torturer.



MEHRAN TAMADON



Graduated as an architect, Mehran Tamadon directed *Behesht Zahra, Mothers of Martyrs* in 2004, then *Bassidji* in 2010, in which he attempted to dialogue with the defenders of the Iranian regime. He continued this approach with *Iranian*, where he convinced supporters of the regime to live in cohabitation with him. His new films, *My Worst Enemy* and *Where God Is Not*, presented at the Berlinale in 2023, deal with the violence of interrogation and detention in Iran.

Filmography (director)

2023 *My Worst Enemy - Switzerland, France, 82'*

Selection Berlinale Encounters 2023

Where God is Not - Switzerland, France, 112'

Selection Berlinale Forum 2023

2014 *Iranian - Switzerland, France, 105'*

Mehran Tamadon has persuaded those who defend the Iranian regime to come and spend a few days, living with him in a house, to discuss a fundamental issue: how, in practical terms, could we find a way to co-exist? How can public space in Iran be shared by atheists like himself as well as by the religious, who have the monopoly of power?

Selections Berlinale Forum 2014 | Cinéma du Réel Paris 2014 | Visions du Réel Nyon 2014 | Edinburgh Film Festival 2014 | Melbourne Film Festival 2014 | États généraux du film documentaire Lussas 2014 | Vancouver Film Festival 2014 | NIFF Namur 2014 | Mostra del Cinema Sao Paulo 2014 | CPH:DOX Copenhagen 2014 | IDFA Amsterdam 2014 | Torino Film Festival 2014 | Entrevues-Festival Belfort 2014 | Festival des 3 Continents Nantes 2014 | Göteborg Film Festival 2015 | Zagreb Dox 2015 | Beldocs Documentary Film Festival 2015 | Festival dei Popoli Firenze 2015

Awards Visions du Réel 2014, Bueynes-Chagaoll Award | Cinéma du Réel 2014, Best Film | Documenta Madrid 2014, Jury Special Award

2009 *Bassidji - Switzerland, France, 114'*

During close to three years, Mehran Tamadon encountered the most extreme defenders of the Islamic Republic of Iran (the bassidjis) to try and better understand them. As an Iranian living in France, atheist and the son of communist activists, the director had everything to offend the beliefs of the people who respect the regime's dogmas. However, a dialogue was established. But in between the games of seduction rhetoric, the moments of truth and the reality of the religious and political Iranian system, how far will they go to understand one another?

Selections Visions du Réel 2009 | États généraux du film documentaire Lussas 2009 | TIFF Toronto 2009 | Doclisboa 2009 | Leipziger Festival für Dokumentar- und Animationsfilm 2009 | Festival dei Popoli Firenze 2009 | Black Nights Tallinn 2009 | One World Human Rights Film Festival Prague 2010 | Rio de Janeiro Film Festival 2010 | Mostra de Cinema Sao Paulo 2010 | Ronda Film Festival 2011

Award Jilhava International Film Festival 2009, Best documentary



PRODUCERS' NOTE

My Worst Enemy and *Where God Is Not* are the result of a renewed collaboration between filmmaker Mehran Tamadon and the two co-producing companies, Box Productions and L'atelier documentaire who, for more than fifteen years have shown their support and commitment to the filmmaker who has lived in France since his teenage years. In his films, Mehran Tamadon addresses the question of his country and its governance with relevance by seeking to dialogue with supporters of the regime (*Bassidji, Iranien*) or by focusing on the repression of the Iranian people exercised by the State. With *My Worst Enemy* and *Where God Is Not*, he pursues his cinematographic and documentary work signing two complementary documentary films that were coproduced and directed simultaneously and which refer to one another.

The filming of Mehran Tamadon's previous film, *Iranien*, was ended abruptly with his arrest and the confiscation of his Iranian and French passports by the Islamic Republic's Intelligence Services. When he was finally released, he was "advised" not to return to Iran. This experience inspired his next film, *My Worst Enemy*, a filmed re-enactment of an interrogation which seeks to challenge the authorities regarding their practices. The interviews he organised during the preparation of *My Worst Enemy* prompted him to go further and make a second film,

Where God Is Not, in which he gives a platform to those who have been interrogated for them to recount their experience by recreating the conditions of their interrogations and their detentions. With these two films, Mehran Tamadon raises two key questions:

How can we continue to make ourselves heard by our "enemies" even when they have complete power over us and refuse to listen to us? How can we continue to face up to them and resist? Is there still any sense in holding up a mirror to them so they may experience doubt question themselves?

The director's posture shows courage and sincerity. The need for us to support his work seems evident to us. It is a necessary form of action that enables discussion, challenges preconceived views, brings about new ideas, and seeks to understand and unveils the mechanisms of a repressive regime.

Elena Tatti, Box Productions (Suisse)

Raphaël Pillosio, l'atelier documentaire (France)



CREDITS

With	Taghi Rahmani Homa Kalhori Mazyar Ebrahimi	France-Switzerland coproduction	l'atelier documentaire Box Productions
Written and directed by	Mehran Tamadon	Producers	Raphaël Pillosio Elena Tatti
Director of photography	Patrick Tresch	Associate producers	Fabrice Marache Emeline Bonardet Thierry Spicher
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Sound editing	Simon Gendrot		
Mixing	Philippe Grivel		
Color editing	Robin Erard		

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