

# Looking for Chauka

Arash Kamali Sarvestani

**Abstract:** Arash Kamali Sarvestani codirected and produced *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (2017) while residing in the Netherlands and communicating with his codirector Behrouz Boochani through WhatsApp application. In this paper, Kamali Sarvestani explains his own journey as an artist living in diaspora and provides exclusive insight into the collaboration and consultation process with his exiled and incarcerated colleague. He details the influence of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, the guidance he gave Boochani (who had never directed a film until then), how the project transformed from its initial phases through to its distribution and reception, and the ongoing obstacles both directors face.

The vision was clear from the beginning. Behrouz Boochani had to film from within the prison camp; in order to make *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (Behrouz Boochani and Arash Kamali Sarvestani, 2017), the camera had to capture the constrained point of view of a refugee incarcerated on Manus Island. There was no need for me to be there to set up a camera. We tested different ways to shoot the film inside the prison and then we explored ways to direct the film together. Boochani and I searched for ways to create a film and invite spectators to see his environment, circumstances and life.

As an artist I am constantly searching for new perspectives; ways of looking at the world from unknown, neglected, unexpected and alternative points of view. I am constantly looking for new ways to experiment with perspective and develop different approaches in my films. Some of my experiments, particularly those I produced during my studies in the Netherlands, lead to filming from the point of view of a variety of different objects. And trying to see the world from this perspective often produces images that challenge audiences to see the world from unconventional angles. In some of my work, I try to create perspectives through the eyes of material nonliving objects that exist on the fringes of everyday experience, and then aim to construct new forms of social engagement. In other instances, I focus on humans that have been excluded or underrepresented and the stories that have shaped their perspectives. Since moving to the Netherlands from Iran, I make fewer abstract films and, instead, create more narratives that convey a stronger sense of humanity and capture the personal qualities of my characters. I am sensitive to the ways in which people are dehumanised. Nowadays, humans are often objectified by the news; this occurs through different TV channels, newspapers or via the Internet. Humans are used by different factions for their own interest. Many people's opinions are not of any value for the media; they are just part of the composition that builds the scenario. I am drawn to the marginalised and undermined points of view that seem to function like objects in the news. My aim is to take them out of the object role and challenge my public to see the world from their point of view. This is one of the reasons why I started working with children for some of my projects, in particular my 2015 film entitled *The Sea*, which I made at the end of a workshop with Abbas Kiarostami in Barcelona. Representing children who are in dangerous situations is difficult and making sure that they are safe and respected is important. As adults, we can learn a lot from children if we are careful with our approach, since we rarely

look at the world the way they do. Very often, they have their own unprejudiced perspective on a situation, which leads to surprising points of view.

In September 2004, I started to study in the Film Academy of Tehran. Soon after that I had to face the reality that there is almost no artistic freedom in that institution. I was too concerned with form and neglected narrative and important human elements. But, in general, I felt as though the academy discouraged students from finding their own voice when making films, whether they were working on narrative or more abstract films. I found it difficult to follow what they were instructing me to do and produce. I tried to build a bridge between my ideas and the dominant norms of the academy for more than three years. The result was a series of short movies I made in Iran. Eventually I found out that there was no way to reconcile these two apparently contradictory styles. I left the Film Academy of Tehran in my last year to join the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam in 2009. This was exactly what I needed because, in contrast to the rigid system in Iran, students were encouraged to find their own personal artistic style in Rietveld. I made more than twenty-five short videos at Rietveld. These videos advanced some of the themes I had tackled in a few experimental films in Iran, but also developed my style in a more radical way and introduced more dominant narrative features.

At the time, my mind was preoccupied with the question of why some objects and people are always unseen or unheard, or ignored, left in some corner. Why is it that nobody cares about what these people and objects have seen or what they have to say? I wanted to see the world from the point of view of a bike or an aquarium. What does a traffic light see every day? How about a clock or a mirror? My camera worked like an eye for those objects to see what was happening around them. As a result, those objects were no longer simply left in a corner; they came to life. Not only were the objects the centre of attention; their presence at that specific time and location also had a specific meaning. Using this approach, I developed a new visual form—something I had never used in my works before. After my graduation, my first child was born—I experienced a whole new world. I noticed the differences in a child's perception of the world and became more sensitive to the point of view of children, which I tried to incorporate in my work. Becoming a father made me more sensitive to news about the suffering of children. My shift in approach was also affected by the uprisings and brutal government crackdown in Iran after the 2009 elections, in which some of my friends were beaten and killed. The uprisings and crackdown led me to search for other ways to engage with the issues with which I was concerned.

The next stage of development in my career happened when I attended a workshop by Kiarostami in Barcelona in 2015. I was inspired by his ideas about life, children, human beings and their relations. This reinforced the need to incorporate life itself, to make human beings and children the main topic of my videos. We were asked to make a video about the sea by the end of the workshop. Instead of making a storytelling movie about the sea, I was curious to know how children think about this topic. I came across a school building by the sea and one of the teachers agreed to participate in my video with her pupils. The students' diverse views reinforced my awareness of the importance of viewing and understanding the world from the point of view of a child. Studying the art and character of Kiarostami played an important role in my collaboration with Boochani and taught me something very special: to interpret obstacles as gifts during the filmmaking process.

After the workshop, I started working on a new project when I saw a news report about the Australian government keeping the asylum seekers who try to reach Australia without documents in offshore island prisons. They were being held in detention centres in Nauru and

Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. I wondered what the kids in those centres thought about the sea. Is the sea like a big prison for them? I was distressed that so few people knew about the situation on Manus Island and Nauru; I thought about the children there when I looked at my daughter and considered her point of view.

A bit later, the number of displaced people arriving in Europe from North Africa and the Middle East increased and the mainstream media began disseminating a cycle of damaging xenophobic reporting. The role of the sea in this situation was extremely significant; the lives of the refugees were divided into the time before they crossed the sea and, for those who were rescued, the time after they crossed. Their crossing to Europe is a life-endangering undertaking and many of them do not survive. I wanted to pay attention to the way the refugee children look at the world, what they feel is important in this world, and how this situation has affected their views. I wanted to place those children at the centre of attention, not by approaching them as a news item or a storyteller, but by showing their opinion about a topic as simple, beautiful and dangerous as the sea.

I was shocked by the fact that access to people detained on Nauru was so difficult and that journalists were banned. I switched my focus to Manus Island, but the methods and vision from my earlier plans proved to be important. Point of view was crucial. The camera had to be situated inside the prison camps and the shots had to be from the perspective of the imprisoned refugees. It was not important that I be there to film or direct. But in order to achieve this perspective, I had to search for the right person, someone who understood my approach and was suited to this particular project. I was looking for someone who could transform their perspective of the environment, life and society into a film.

It is important to mention how Kiarostami's films, artistic vision and legacy played a significant role in the creation of this film. As mentioned, my studies under the renowned filmmaker had helped to shape my approach and thinking about this particular project while the ideas were still forming. I will address this shortly, focusing especially on issues pertaining to collaboration when making this film. A month after the death of Kiarostami (4 July 2016) my efforts were successful and I found the right person. I found a number of articles written by Boochani; I could not believe that there was someone writing about the prison camp from the inside. It had just been a few months since Boochani had begun publishing under his real name. My family commitments around that particular time were extremely constraining and, as a result, I stopped researching and did not follow the news in Australia for a number of months. But after the death of Kiarostami I resumed the project and found Boochani right away.

I remember my first message to Boochani: "My name is Arash, I am a filmmaker living in Holland and a student of Abbas Kiarostami. I would like to make a film about the detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru. Would you be in a position to help me with this project?" Boochani replied immediately: "Yes, I would be very happy to work with you. I am not a filmmaker but I am an admirer of Kiarostami's cinema." The fact that we both loved Kiarostami's films was extremely important in the making of *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. It was Kiarostami's artistic practice and his personal traits that created the initial bond between us and discussions about his films helped shape and guide the collaboration. This is represented in the film and also in the many interviews we have conducted since its release. Kiarostami's death was the impetus for me to return to my research about what later became *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, and the mutual respect and interest in Kiarostami's work provided Boochani and I with the theoretical and aesthetic common ground and inspiration necessary to communicate and interpret each other's contributions.

There are a number of crucial points worth mentioning here regarding the film and the qualities that make it distinct. First, the film was made by transferring information using smartphone technology and WhatsApp Messenger. Second, a personal relationship was formed between two individuals residing in different parts of the world, living in totally different conditions, both with the same goal and using the same new technology. Third, a range of problems with determining the direction of the film had to be overcome (such as Internet connection, film quality, time differences and the vicissitudes and precarity of prison life). Fourth, we had to develop a filmic language with its own aesthetics, narrative and images. Given these unique qualities, it is important to contemplate whether making a film like *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* will be possible in the future, and whether today's world needs more films like ours that challenge traditional aesthetic structures and forms, and that give voice to disempowered subjects.

I will elaborate on the first two points and my reflections will also inform some aspects of the other issues. Clearly, the transfer of information using a smartphone was vital to the making of *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. The thousands of applications associated with smartphones have a major influence on the lives of many and subject people to forms of control. Before meeting Boochani, I had avoided using a smartphone and was not under the influence of the many distractions associated with this technology. Luckily, Boochani only used his smartphone as a powerful weapon, a necessary means of communicating the plight of thousands of innocent people with the world outside the prison. He used the smartphone to write a book, make a film and conduct many other projects. Boochani and I used the smartphone for very specific purposes only and were never preoccupied with the many functions that influence most users. From the beginning we knew what the goal was—we knew exactly what we wanted to do and how. I knew the one application I needed to install was WhatsApp, which was necessary for engaging in this collaborative project together with someone I had never met.

One of the most important moments in the creation of *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* was the first time I sent information from Holland over an extremely long distance to a remote island prison that has been successfully kept hidden from most of the world. Boochani and I began communicating with each other and this amounted to approximately 10,000 minutes of voice messages over six months. The volume of information transferred was only made possible by recent technology; the communication tools we used allowed for the transfer of voice messages and images. We were lucky with how technology created the possibilities for making *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*; we were particularly fortunate regarding the transfer of images. In addition to the conversations via WhatsApp, the back-and-forth exchange of images was key.

For the first few days we only engaged in dialogue. It was at this point that I realised Boochani was a master storyteller as he informed me about many important features of the prison camp. But we needed to move forward in our creative planning and images were vital. After struggling with many reception and quality issues, we began working on creating images. It took an extremely long time, but eventually we were able to transfer shots. Sending these low-quality shots was a great achievement; at least now we were actually able to see the story we were trying to construct, and were beginning to see some results after our long period of planning. It was a significant moment for us when the abstract became visible. As a result, I was able to share my experience and knowledge of working with a camera with Boochani, and he was able to show me what he was, until then, simply describing. Once I was able to edit some of Boochani's shots and send them back to him the project advanced quickly; his reaction

to the edited clip of images was fascinating. He realised the power and potential in editing and actually saw the movement of thoughts to voice, and then voice to moving image. This was an amazing realisation for both of us and when I describe this process to experts and enthusiasts at festivals and seminars, for instance, I am often told that this aspect is the most fascinating part of the whole project. It seems that the way the information was transferred, and the impact that this particular process had on the making of the film, was unprecedented.

It was here that Boochani began using his camera as a storytelling device and together we began shaping the narrative. Boochani learned how to become a filmmaker during this process. Knowledge of the editing process had a strong influence on his creative process. Boochani could now film without being inhibited by the thought of linear or chronological time—he started imagining the shots distinct from any form of predetermined order. Doing the camera work for *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* was his cinema training; at the same time that Boochani was learning the art of filmmaking, a work of art emerged.

It is also crucial to acknowledge the potential to store information using this new technology. The nature of the early conversations between us, the recording of voice messages, the viewing of images and files as a series, and the discussions about the development of the edited shots need to be interpreted in the context of memory and filing; that is, the capacity of WhatsApp (downloaded onto a handheld smartphone) to function as a storage device. *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* is essentially a narrative told and archived by WhatsApp. This technology has the ability to help transform people into journalists and filmmakers. It was Boochani's smartphone and WhatsApp application that documented and filed this story; it was by virtue of this factor that we could then create a film about innocent people incarcerated without charge on Manus Island.

*Translated by Omid Tofighian*

## References

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**Arash Kamali Sarvestani** is an Iranian filmmaker and video artist. He studied cinema at the University of Art, Tehran and video art at Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. Kamali Sarvestani's first feature is the codirected (with Behrouz Boochani) film, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (2017).