

On the Path to Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time

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Abstract

In this text, Sarvestani reflects on the collaborative process of making the film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. He discusses how distance, time and confinement limited but also opened up other ways of working with Behrouz Boochani who was detained in Manus island's detention center at the time.

I was there, I was actually in the detention center on Manus island. Was I one of the detainees? Was I there for filming? What was going on? It was such a terrible place and I knew it like I had been there for a long time. I could recognize the looks in people's eyes. The hopelessness. I was walking around, it seemed like I was there for filming. Some guards saw me and started attacking me and then, then I woke up... I was drenched in sweat. I was in my house and my kids were sleeping nicely and quietly in their beds. I had to leave a voice message for Behrouz. Hours later Behrouz replied to me: "Hi Arash, of course you were here. You've been living in this place for quite some months. Naturally..., you should have had such a nightmare sooner. But you have it now. Now I hope the nightmare has a happy ending."

It was during the period when Behrouz and I almost finished making the film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. *Chauka* is about the currently closed Australian offshore detention center for boat refugees on Manus island. It is a film exclusively filmed using Behrouz Boochani's mobile phone, who was co-director with me. The film was made by sending shots and voice messages via WhatsApp. Both directors have thus far never met. Behrouz is one of the detainees in the center and had no experience in filming. In this article, I discuss the artistic process that led to the making of *Chauka* and how the difficulties we encountered on our way shaped the film. I start with the process that led to *Chauka* and continue with the making off.

A Student's Life

My journey out of Iran started in 2009; I was tired of the censorship in the country and applied for a bachelor's degree at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam while visiting my sister in the Netherlands. I was accepted and started studying there. I went from censoring myself to the extreme freedom of Amsterdam. It was there that I became interested in seeing the world through the eyes of objects. I had a lot of experience trying to give different objects "an eye". It was interesting to me how the world was "perceived" by objects that "see" everything happening but do not participate in the events themselves. I made my graduation film from objects' points of view, and this point of view would later play an important role in the making of *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*.

Some time passed: I graduated, had a daughter, and became a househusband, looking after her. In February 2015, I participated in a workshop led by late Iranian film maker Abbas Kiarostami in Barcelona. Besides close observation of Kiarostami's style of filmmaking, this event was a unique chance to get know about the late artist's character and his views on life and art. In Kiarostami's workshop, I made the film *Title of Essay: The Sea*. The idea was to show how a group of pupils living in a coastal city think and feel about the sea. Although very different, each of the students had their own beautiful story and feelings: the sea was a friend in their lives.

At the same time that those children thought so beautifully about the sea, refugees were on their way to Europe, crossing the Mediterranean Sea in small boats. Many of the refugees did not make it and died on the way. I was shocked by the situation and I started to think about how the children of refugees who made it to Europe might think about the sea. The life of these refugees was sharply divided into before and after the horrible experience of the sea crossing.

The question about how refugee children might think about the sea kept me busy and my thoughts turned far away from the Mediterranean Sea to the other side of the world. As an Iranian-born artist, I was aware of the tragedy happening to asylum seekers, many of whom are Iranian, risking their lives by sailing across the Indian Ocean to get to Australia. After surviving this ordeal, they were sent to detention centers in Nauru or Manus Island by the Australian government in an attempt to stop these movements.

My idea was to contact refugee families held in Nauru Island to make a film about the topic. I had very limited choice in gathering visual material and at the end the only viable option was to have one of the refugees take shots using a mobile phone. I was aware of the limited quality of footage shot on such devices, but it was the only option I had. However, I failed to gather much material partly because of very poor internet coverage there and also because families involved feared losing their asylum application cases.

I was fortunate enough though to know the real extent of the crisis and the depth of the problems the refugees had at those two camps. The idea of a film about the sea and child refugees was, and still is, important to me. Because of the severity of the situation in both camps I decided to work on Manus rather than Nauru. My plan was so obvious: I wanted to find someone and ask them to use their mobile phone to film the camp they were in. I personally didn't have a smartphone and I was not surrounded by much equipment. I had no idea about smartphones, I just knew that there are some kinds of mobile phones with a good quality camera.

What added to my determination to make a film about the camps after the initial difficulties was derived from my work on filming from the objects' points of view as a student. What I noticed in all the news about refugees in both Europe and Australia was that they seemed like objects in their own stories. Things were just happening to them and nobody seemed to care about their point of view. They seemed like "objectified" humans caught in the turmoil of their time. That is why I really wanted to make a film with them at the center. In the past, I was used to working seeing everything from the perspective of an object, adding no emotions to the story. Now I wanted to do something similar but achieve the opposite; I wanted to shift the position of the refugees from their position as objects in the news to that of real human beings with feelings, a history, a family, and dreams for their futures.

As a househusband I had many other duties: sometimes I did a lot of research to try and find someone in the camp and when I could not I went back to my life as a househusband, until I read an article by Behrouz Boochani in *the Guardian*. I was busy with my new-born baby for several months and that was exactly when writing by Behrouz Boochani, using his real name, started to appear in the media. When I read his article I decided to contact him. I found him on Facebook and sent him a message: I explained to him why I wanted to make a film

about Manus. I also mentioned I was a student of Abbas Kiarostami and that I wanted to make the film in his style. He soon wrote back to me, stating he was also interested in making a film about the camp. He said that he really liked Abbas Kiarostami's work. He explained to me that to communicate with each other we needed to work with WhatsApp. The film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* was made within six months from more than 10,000 minutes of voice messages that we sent to each other.

About the Film: A Short Storyline

In the Manus camp, a young detainee tries to gather information for an Australian journalist to publish an article in the press about what has happened in the camp. The focus of his investigation is a solitary confinement center called Chauka, which is like a prison inside the prison. Some of the detainees speak to him about their horrific experiences in the camp, especially on Chauka.

At the same time, the Australian journalist is trying to find out what Chauka means for the local Manusians. It appears that Chauka is the name of a bird that can only be found in Manus and is the symbol of the island, decorating its flag. She speaks to some of the locals. The refugee and she look at different aspects of the situation. We come across with some first-hand experiences of what life inside the camp means, how it is governed, the political games between Australia and Papua New Guinea on this matter, how Manusians are treated by Australians, and how locals think about the existence of the camp on their island.

The process of the making of *Chauka* was a rather unique process, because of several extraordinary circumstances: the film was made by detainees in the camp and I was coaching from a distance. Behrouz and I could not meet in person, nor could we talk via telephone or Skype. This taught us to really listen to each other, so we turned it into a strength. There were many more challenges: Behrouz and I started working together when we were strangers, Behrouz did not know about filmmaking, the actors in the film were detained in the camp and it was hard for them to work in this situation without hope. In addition, the speed of the Internet inside the camp was very slow, no proper camera was available to film with, and we were in different time zones.

What I had in mind to cope with the challenges that we were facing throughout the production, was a sentence from Kiarostami, who has once said "When you face an unexpected challenge think about how to turn it into a strength." I decided to fully embrace all the challenges of this film as opportunities rather than weaknesses. I should say that some of these numerous challenges could block any attempt of making a film. However, we made the film *using* those tough challenges rather than *despite* them. Below are some examples.

To start, there was the issue of trust between strangers: how could Behrouz and I work with someone we didn't know and couldn't meet? How could we trust each other? Behrouz is a journalist and great writer, but at that moment he didn't know anything about filmmaking and I didn't know anything about life inside the camp. How could we transfer all this information to each other in a way that wouldn't harm the other person's self-confidence? To get to know and work with each other we had just one solution, which was to send voice messages to each other via WhatsApp. Sometimes the very low Internet speed made even this really difficult. Sometimes I had to wait for a long time to get a one-minute of voice message from Behrouz. I have to confess that at those moments, I would look at those voice messages coming in as if they were a piece of gold. I believe Behrouz had the same feeling about my voice messages. We both had to wait so long to get some information, which made that information so valuable. This way of communicating established our relation in a way, because we had to listen to each other very carefully.

When you listen with great attention to someone I believe you understand the person much better. A lot of misunderstandings in relations come from the fact that people don't listen to each other very well. The lack of Internet speed helped us to listen to each other. This built the trust between us. If the Internet speed would have been good enough for us to have had a live conversation, we would not have been able to make this movie.

Another challenge we faced with respect to the slow Internet, was the transfer of the video footage from Behrouz to me. If the Internet speed in the camp was so slow that sometimes even sending one text message meant we had to wait for a long time, how could Behrouz and I manage to send lots of voice messages to each other? Also how could he send me the footage? It surprised both of us when we found out that WhatsApp can transfer even video footages via that really slow Internet speed. The quality of those files was low but it was so important to have snippets of footage coming in one by one here in the Netherlands and talk about them to Behrouz from early on in the project.

Related to this was also the fact we could only film with a mobile phone. During my study at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam, I tried to install my camera within different objects to see how those objects "see" the world. For those experiences, I needed to work with small cameras. At that time, the idea of seeing the world via an object's point of view was much more interesting than the quality of the images: when I realized there was no way of going to those camps and film there myself, I decided to use someone else's smartphone's camera to film. For Behrouz, his smartphone didn't have the same value as it has for others. For him, his smartphone was always like a weapon with which he could record the life in those camps and the people inside it. So, he was ready to do that.

Soon after our collaboration started, Behrouz asked me if I could explain to him the "rules" of filmmaking. I asked him to not think about the rules of filmmaking, because I believed that when you know the academic rules of filmmaking, you may lose your self-confidence. I tried to see if I could tell him how he could shoot the footage without telling him the rules. Fortunately, how we were able to communicate helped us a lot to establish a specific and special way of filmmaking which I believe is a first in the history of filmmaking. I asked Behrouz if he could send me a couple of shots from the buildings to see how he works with the camera. When I saw the first sets of footage I realized he is a person who is very brave. When he has the camera in his hand, his camera does not shake, but I had to share with him couple of points before recording the new shots. I asked him to record new footage in such a way that he tried to look at the shot as if it were a painting; I asked him to consciously think about the frame he wanted to record. I asked him to think more about each element in the frame. Why an element should be in this part of the frame and not in the other part.

I remember when he sent the first footage, I could see a building half in the frame and half outside it. I suggested that for new shots he should think more about his frame and consider why something should be in the frame, and also to have more patience while recording. I told him that having a longer shot is better than a short shot. We would have more information, which we could use for our story. We discussed some stories and several characters. The day after that Behrouz filmed some of the footage we discussed and the result was extraordinary: he had taken on board all the points we talked about. Then I made a two-to-three-minute edit from those shots and sent it to him via a private link in Vimeo. When he watched that version, he was amazed. He said: "I took this shot today and the other shot the other day but in the edit they cut to each other and the audience thinks they are happening right after each other." Then he got the point of editing and this gave him lots of ideas about improving the story, using the camera and working with actors. During the six months of filmmaking, I sent him more than 40 versions of edits of two to three minutes, where the last version was 90 minutes. I tried to teach him the rules of filmmaking in a reverse way and I believe it worked.

Over a period of six months, Behrouz Boochani and I transferred thousands of voice messages to each other and hours of video footage. These videos were taken in one of the most mysterious refugee detention centers in the world. Behrouz had to record all these shots in such a way that guards and staff from the camp didn't realize he was filming in the camp. Maybe this was the biggest challenge we had during making this movie. Unlimited stay in these camps has changed the meaning of time for these refugees. They have no hope and when there is no hope, motivating people to participate in a film project is almost impossible.

I am a free man in the Netherlands while Behrouz at the time was a detainee in a detention center in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. When we started to talk with each other via WhatsApp Behrouz explained to me the history of the Manus detention center. I slowly learned more of the horrific story of that camp. Then he started to send video messages to me so I could visually see the architecture of the camp and the nature of the island, which was very important to get closer to his feelings as a prisoner. But I still needed more to understand him better, to realize how they are suffering with *time*. The time difference between the Netherlands and Papua New Guinea was one of the biggest problem for us during making *Chauka*. The best time Behrouz could send voice messages to me was early in the morning, which was around midnight for me. We usually sent voice messages to each other between midnight and 3 am, after which I could have two to three hours of sleep and then I had to take care of my kids for the whole day. We worked with this way of communicating for around three months. After a couple of weeks I became physically weaker, and I was also mentally affected by all those horrible stories. After a month I started to feel as if I was one of the detainees. The sense of time had changed in my mind: I often had nightmares about being one of the detainees. And I believe this helped me very much to have a better understanding of the feelings of detainees.

The making of *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* for me was a long artistic process, which started years ago when I moved from Iran to Amsterdam. I was lucky to have all the experiences I had because they helped to make this film. In conclusion, I hope that *Chauka* is a good example of how two strangers can make an important film or artwork about an important issue with almost no budget, with many challenges, without direct contact. I hope Behrouz and I will be able to show to other filmmakers and artists how to use the cheapest equipment when no other possibilities are available and use it like a weapon to defend human rights.