

Saeed Taji Farouky on finding your story



May 25, 2017 - Saeed Taji Farouky is a documentary filmmaker known for creating nonfiction films that celebrate human rights and raise uncomfortable questions regarding personal freedoms and the notion of social justice. His work often requires long periods of filming under dangerous conditions, as was the case with 2015's *Tell Spring Not to Come This Year*, which follows one unit of the Afghan National Army (ANA) over the course of their first year of fighting in Helmand without NATO support.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2753 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Adversity](#), [Focus](#).

What led you to make documentaries as opposed to narrative films?

I've always been obsessed with cinema, but mostly with fiction. I got into cinema through fiction films. I knew I wanted to make films—and I had always made films as a kid—but in university we put a club together and we got funding to make films, so that really started it. I didn't want to make documentaries until the situation presented itself.

I just got increasingly politicized at school. I think that came partly through just understanding my own family history, but also from trying to understand the world around me a bit more. After school I was living in Morocco and working as a tour guide, so I was showing people the beautiful parts of the country, but at the same time I was hearing a lot about the dark sides of Morocco. Being aware of that contrast, I started to think about how little we know about the country. Specifically, a lot of people were telling me about the undocumented immigration migration through Morocco into Europe. That became the first film I made. I was into photojournalism before that, but I hadn't thought of doing it as a film.



Still from *Tell Spring Not to Come This Year*, courtesy Saeed Taji Farouki

Documentary filmmaking is a different beast than narrative, fictional filmmaking. How do you begin? What do the

beginning stages of a project entail?

It depends on the type of documentaries you make. Documentaries are still narrative. Or they can be. It's often difficult when people say, "Oh, do you make documentaries or feature films?" because documentaries can also be features with a very clear narrative or story. Sometimes people will say, "Oh, do you make documentaries or real films?" That's my favorite.

So it depends on the types of docs that you want to make, really. If I was more of an investigative filmmaker, then I might know the thread of the story I'm trying to tell already. If you think of Laura Poitras and her film on Snowden, by the time she pitched the film, they knew what was happening already and how big the story was. The thing that tends to be the most popular right now is the biopic documentary, which means you know the trajectory of the story already because the person is probably dead or you already know their life story.

I tend to be a bit more experimental in my approach and my films are a lot more observational. So in that sense, sometimes you start with a very broad premise and then you find a way in by examining it and moving in closer. Your work involves meeting people and doing research. What often happens is that you hear a story or you come across an article and you know *that's* the topic that you want to make your film about.

But if your approach is open-ended and observational like mine, you need a lot of faith and confidence that you can put it together and it will all make sense. Also, funding these kinds of films is hard because there's so much uncertainty.

Making the kinds of documentaries that you make—which often require you to put yourself in dangerous situations—obviously requires a certain kind of tenacity. But aside from that, it also demands a specific kind of people skill. Knowing how to make people comfortable enough to let you into their world—that's a skill I'm not sure can be taught.

Yes. It's hugely psychological. People don't talk about that aspect enough, and I think they need to talk about it a lot more. The ethics of filmmaking and storytelling—particularly doc filmmaking, when you're working with vulnerable people—is hugely important, but it's generally a small consideration for the industry in general.



Still from *Tell Spring Not to Come This Year*, courtesy Saeed Taji Farouki

I spend a lot of my time kind of butting heads with people—other filmmakers and other people in the industry—

about issues of ethics. One of the amazing things about how fucked up the news media is these days, perhaps the weird positive, is that we're talking about the ethics of reporting news for the first time in a very long time. But typically those conversations are marginal and theoretical and nobody is interested in them. For me, they're paramount because you are dealing with real people's lives.

So, yes, learning how to talk to people, how to put people at ease, to be respectful... I really don't think it can be taught. Now, that's not to say everybody does it the same way. I go into situations with a huge amount of sensitivity and sympathy and I work very slowly. Some people I know have a much bigger personality and are much more bold, and that also works. I think what ends up happening is that if I go into a situation and I'm very quiet, I will be attracted to other quiet people and quiet people will be interested in talking to me, so my films tend to be about quieter people or people with a public persona and a very private persona.

Someone with a bigger personality is going to attract different people and that will reflect in their films. They make films about really quirky, weird, characters with larger than life personalities. I find them fascinating, but I could never make that kind of film because it would be so awkward for me.

When making a fictional narrative film, people generally know what they are going to be doing on any given day—there is a shooting schedule and a timeline. With documentary filmmaking, you're often chasing after a story or a subject that you can't control. How do you keep from getting lost in that process? How do you keep your perspective?

Well, there's a few things I would say. One, your team is crucial. One of the people that I work with all the time is an editor and he's a great storyteller. I get really confused with timelines and footage, but I'm happy to just keep going and collecting material, material, material, having no idea where it's going. But that's because I know that the producer is looking at the story and an editor is looking at the story, so I'm always bouncing ideas off these people and showing them what I have and narrowing things down a little more as it goes along.

The chaos of it doesn't bother me so much because that's how I see the world. For some reason, I find that my experience of the every day is quite fractured, quite episodic. I have a really bad memory in terms of dates and timelines in my own life, so it's almost like the films are reflecting how I see the world anyway, which is how it should be.



Still from *Tell Spring Not to Come This Year*, courtesy Saeed Taji Farouki

Having the right people around you must be just as important as finding the right story to tell.

Of course. Though, to be honest, I'm not a huge believer in story. Most of my films don't start with a story, they start with a person. So, I'm not a slave to narrative. You can make an incredible film about incredible people that has no plot and is still an amazing film.

So for me the story doesn't necessarily take precedence. It's more about what you can see there, how you can form this disparate collection of images into something that's coherent. It doesn't necessarily have to be a typical linear narrative. But what you are saying about having the right people around you is true. I don't think any real, good filmmaker could honestly say, "I'm a singular genius and I don't need anyone else around me."

Have you ever had to abandon a project?

Yeah. I've never really gone too far down a route, but yes. There's quite a few that I started. Most of them were very small and, thankfully, pretty far in the past. It hasn't happened recently, only because I'm getting a bit better at figuring out what will work and what won't work.

And how did you know when it just wasn't working?

Well, I'm very tenacious so things transform a lot. The only time I would really call it quits is when it's just impossible. I mean, I can tell you a story about that. There was a Scottish guy on death row in America for years, called Kenny Richey. He was a dual citizen, and he was on death row in Ohio. I'm very anti death penalty and I was interested in his story. Eventually he was released and he came back to the UK. I wanted to do a documentary about him coming back into ordinary life, particularly because as soon as he was released he started doing interviews with a lot of British TV shows and he was really angry and bitter, as you would be if you'd spent 20 years on death row and were innocent. At a certain point the media really turned on him. They were talking about this bitter, angry man who was rude to people. He wasn't acting like the grateful kind of ex-convict that they expected him to be. I thought that was deeply unfair because it was just unrealistic.

So I got in touch with people in hopes I could make a film about him, only to find that he'd already signed with a PR firm and they wouldn't give anyone access to him other than tabloid newspapers. So in that sense it was legally impossible to make the film, but what I ended up doing was taking all of my research and writing a play about a guy coming home after being released from death row. So, it transformed.

A lot of your work has involved being in places where there is a lot of violence, places where it is not easy to film. Why do you think you are drawn to these kinds of places? And how do you negotiate them?

I have this conversation a lot and it's always a weird one. I'm not drawn to violence or war in the way that some people think or the way that some other people are. It's not that I find it exciting or thrilling. I'm fascinated by it because I find it so repellent and I want to understand it. That's one reason why I get attracted to those stories. I also just have the ability to tolerate those kind of situations. So, if you combine those two, I think it means that I can make those films and I feel like if I can make them, I should make them.

There's also something for me that's pretty exciting about being able to challenge regimes. A lot of my work is done, if not undercover, at least without permission, without a press card. There's something really satisfying about going into a country, challenging that regime by showing things they don't want to be seen, and being able to show other people. It's like a fuck you, and I find that very satisfying.



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What advice do you have for young filmmakers looking to do this kind of work?

Are these people who need to make a living, or can actually afford to not make a living? There are a lot of models that can work. You can make 10 films that are 3 minutes each and sell them for \$1000 each, or you can make one film for \$10,000 and it takes you half a year. It really depends on how you operate and what kind of world you want to work in, and what kind of films you want to make. The practical conversation is maybe not the most interesting one. I guess for me, because film is so accessible now and there's so many people who can make films and so many films being made, what's going to distinguish you is a bold vision.

If I try and make a news piece that 10,000 other people could have made, it's not going to be very easy for me to make a career out of that. I want to make a piece that only I can make. Each individual has their own really valuable approach. I'm very aesthetic in the sense that I like my films to look really good, but I have friends who don't know shit about cameras and they just run around pointing at anything, but they make great films because that's their character. They come at it in a completely different way. So I don't need to teach them the technical approach. It's how to make a work that resonates with your character, and I think that's what people appreciate. And it's also what people pay for.

We're in a very interesting time now with documentaries because people are really looking for weird things. Weird approaches. Non-traditional approaches. Experimental approaches. I think of the recent [Q.J. Simpson documentary](#), which is 8 hours long. It's just phenomenal to me because that's an art piece. That film is basically an experimental art installation, and it was released theatrically and it won a frigging Oscar. I mean, that's insane. For people like me who are into weird films, that's a really bright shining light.

You mentioned not always being so obsessed with stories, but for people trying to do this work, maybe it depends on what your definition "story." Maybe the story is not necessarily a narrative, but rather just speaks to the big picture. Maybe the "story" is just what your film is ultimately trying to say?

That's very important. I think understanding what your film is about is crucial. I guess by "story" I really mean plot. Too many films are sold on plot, especially documentaries. And that's not always the most interesting thing,

for me at least. I think of it sort of like this—what’s more interesting about you, is it your biography, or is it your personality? I’m assuming it’s your personality. I don’t necessarily want to spend three years working on a film where I’m recounting the story of someone’s life, which feels like going from A to B to C. But if there’s a person who I find intriguing and a bit misunderstood and I kind of get along with them, but I’m not sure what motivates them, *that* is interesting. That’s something I want to explore. That’s someone I want to spend three years of my life with.

Saeed Taji Farouky recommends:

Heirs To The Past by Driss Chraïbi. A beautiful novel that I return to again and again. Whenever I need inspiration on characters, structure and story, I read it. I often carry it with me when I’m travelling. Dig deep.

Iraq in Fragments, directed by James Longley. One of the best documentaries of the past 20 years. I’ve re-watched this many, many times, and I always assign it to my students. I think it’s an excellent example of the dedication needed to make a great documentary, rather than just a “good” documentary.

The 6 Bach cello suites, performed by Pau Casals. I like to listen to music when I work, but I can’t listen to anything with words because it distracts me. I also tend to find something I like and listen to it over and over and over again. This is currently my favourite. All 6 of Bach’s cello suites recorded on a pretty basic setup in 1936, but they still sound incredible, raw, moving and intimate.

Studio Practice, Hashem El Madani. A Lebanese photographer who made it his life’s mission to photograph everyone in his city. His work is a beautiful, subversive, illuminating view of an Arab World we rarely see in mainstream media.

Blasted, Sarah Kane. Brutal. Heartbreaking. She wrote theatre in its rawest form, and she understood how to tell radical, transgressive stories.

Name

Saeed Taji Farouky

Vocation

Documentary Filmmaker

Fact

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Dan Milnor