

Could you please briefly tell us something about the history of Afghan Films?

Afghan Films, which is the second unit in the Ministry of Information and Culture, was set up, equipped and started operating in 1968 with the assistance of USAID. This institution was founded as a laboratory for the purpose of producing black-and-white documentary films including different sections (news and documentary). But after a number of years, due to the lack of a film production studio, several artistic narrative films were produced with non-professional machines. These films have a low quality in terms of sound and image. Currently, the rich archive of this institute contains more than two thousand reels of news films, more than four hundred programmes of documentary films and fifty programmes of artistic narrative films.

The reason to set up Afghan Films was to record the important and historical events and incidences that had taken place or were taking place in the country. This need was also identified because of the emergence of the film industry in the country. The aim was also to keep people in rural areas informed about current events and incidences in the country through mobile cinemas. This process continued systematically until 1992 and was stopped because of civil wars and the destruction of the equipment.

How is Afghan Films structured?

Afghan Films consists of three departments which are each headed by one person.

1. Production and Technical Department
2. Department of maintenance and sustainability of cinemas
3. Administration Department

How has Afghan Films changed from the beginning until the present time?

During 1973, besides the production of documentary films, Afghan Films started producing a limited number of artistic narrative films. It collaborated with private film companies and was responsible for controlling the cinemas. Afghan Films had the highest production in the 1980s when it created the best pieces of work. But in the 1990s, because of the changing situation and the emigration of many cinema professionals, Afghan Films could only make one narrative film named *Oruj* (Ascent). During the Taliban regime, all cultural centres, including Afghan Films were closed and there was no activity in Afghan Films till 2001. With the emergence of new political changes in the country, Afghan Films started producing digital works. But there have been no changes in the administration structure of Afghan Films.

What role does Afghan Films play in today's Afghan cinema?

Before 2001, Afghan Films as a state cinema centre, was responsible for and controlled all cinematic activities in the country. Since 2001, following changes in the country's laws, more than 160 cinematic institutions have been granted work permissions. Afghan Films is the organiser of national and international film festivals and seminars, as well as training workshops and courses throughout the country. Additionally, it organises tasks and activities for foreign producers who want to make films in Afghanistan. It is also a source of support for domestic filmmakers who are in need of technical equipment and experience. Afghan Films attempts to strengthen national cinema with a national identity and wants to work seriously and practically for this purpose. Afghan Films, as a mother institution in Afghanistan, offers guidance and support to all of the country's filmmakers. Nevertheless, Afghan Films is active in the artistic production of documentary and

feature films. It tries to pay attention and makes efforts to establish a good and valuable cinema for Afghanistan. The current problem of Afghan Films, as an active institution in the past, is that it now deals with financial problems.

How does Afghan Films find itself in the state management?

Currently, from the perspective of state management, Afghan Films finds itself as the responsible body for Afghanistan's cinema. This is due to the fact that it deals with the cinematic organisations, is involved in cinematic collaborations and tries to establish good relationships with international cinemas. Afghan Films paves the way for those who are new in this area and opens the door to international cinema for them. It sends their works to international festivals and takes advantage of the state's power to support and help Afghanistan's cinema.

You have recently mentioned the privatisation of Afghan Films. Do you think it is still possible?

To privatise Afghan Films is a precise and suitable measure, because the state cannot produce films, and state bureaucracy can never take on the task of filmmaking. The state should only be in the position of supporting filmmaking and filmmakers and, like in other countries, contribute to investment in films in order to be able to take part in the process of the film industry, which actually shows an appreciation of culture. Cinema is pride, identity and a worthwhile treasure of the country and much attention should be paid to that.

It is worth mentioning that some parts of Afghan Films are connected with the Ministry of Information and Culture, which is Afghan Films archive. The control of cinemas and all relations with organisations located outside the country should be exercised by the government. Only production should be privatised and supported.

How do private and state television broadcasters differ?

Although the way this question is posed implies something else, I would say that it differs according to the ruling regime in each country. A state TV mainly expresses the voice of the government and its tribune works to assert the state's aims and objectives. It is like a TV that works from the state's perspective and point of view rather than in the name of the public's demands and expectations. But a free TV mainly points to the weak points and needs of reform of social, political and cultural aspects of society. It's like a bridge between the public and the government, and by providing a picture of the current situation, it achieves the very original aim of journalism. It focuses its work mainly on what the public wants and demands and raises people's awareness of what they are not aware of or cannot see. And it also produces its programmes based on the public's taste and view.

How many and what kinds of cinemas exist and where are they located?

Before the civil war, 23 cinemas were operating actively in Kabul. But because of the civil war, this number was reduced to seven active cinemas, which do not have good facilities. These cinemas are: Cinema Park, Cinema Temour, Cinema Khair Khana, Cinema Ariana, Cinema Baharistan, Cinema Pamir and Cinema Shahi.

Most of the cinemas in other provinces of the country were destroyed and currently these provinces do not have any cinemas. For instance, Herat, Jalalabad, Khost, Ghazni

and so on. Only in Mazar-e-Sharif is there one destroyed cinema and an active one. Except for Kabul, screening films is only possible by means of video and projector. As the number of spectators is not high, cinematic film producers have been facing financial problems.

How is the situation of cinema nowadays?

Before the civil war, cinema was in a good situation in Kabul and other provinces. This means that people used to go to cinema from all walks of life. Films were produced for different tastes and audiences. And each cinema had its own audience that could watch their favourite films. After the global digital revolution, the adverse impact of this phenomenon not only damaged cinema in Afghanistan, but also throughout the world. And in some countries, cinemas even turned into warehouses. Later on, films with new high technology took a better approach, and audiences returned to the cinemas.

In Afghanistan, besides the digital revolution, other disappointing factors set in and affected our cinemas adversely. During the civil war, these factors could be the explosion of bombs in cinemas and the death of hundreds of spectators, people's fear of going to a gathering point like the cinema, the prevention of women and girls from going to cinema, the prevention of two friends or fiancés from going to cinema by the Mujahedin, and above all the categorisation of audiences by saying who should go to cinema. Naturally, unemployed and idle people go to cinema to spend their time and not for the purpose of interpreting the films they see.

Besides this, the situation of cinema is not like it was before. Because of the absence of air conditioners for cooling the cinema in the summer or heating it in the winter, it all depends on the income of a cinema. If they have few spectators they benefit the landlord less. Another issue is that cinemas belong to internal tenants and less attention is paid to the necessary costs.

What cinematographic influences are significant for your work?

If you mean the works of which director I prefer and who influenced me, I would say films that have a good content and something important to express and are meaningful. These kinds of film open new channels of thought in the mind and they are very useful. I cannot name any specific director. I just say that I prefer and accept any director who works in this way.

Whose films were important for you?

If you mean world cinema films, yes. I like those films that have sustained in world cinema and are valuable artistically. The film *Titanic* had a special impact on me and is unforgettable. The fact is that each film is a cinematic work, but not all films are artistic works.

How do you finance your films?

This is the most difficult question in the world of cinema. Before 1992, when it was only Afghan Films that did production, the governments at that time used to provide a considerable budget for filmmaking and practical opportunities for filmmakers. And if there was any need for postproduction to be undertaken outside the country, they would provide the possibilities to do so. Currently, because of the changes in the country's regime and the new government, the Ministry of Finance and international donors do not want to invest in cinema or in culture in general.

For seven years now, Afghan Films has not produced artistic narrative films in the form of celluloid reels. Only recently, has the Ministry of Information and Culture, through Afghan Films, started a valuable work about Mawlana Balkhi Rumi with a small budget, and this film might be completed with the assistance of the Turkish government.

Since 2001, Afghan Films, by using digital equipment purchased with the help of several aid countries, has done some ordered filmmaking on health, mine clearance and education, but no artistic and outstanding work.

In regard to private film companies, whose budgets for film production range from 2,000 to 30,000 US dollars, their films cannot represent the identity of Afghan cinema. They only reflect the personal view of young filmmakers who spend their personal budget, and most of these movies are actually copies of Bollywood movies. On the other hand, there are some films that Afghanistan is very proud of and sends to international film festivals. These films have an excellent content and good quality and are intellectual. Just a few young filmmakers have made them and they have not received funding from any source whatsoever.

With whom do you cooperate in production?

If you mean the help of Afghan Films, Afghan Films collaborates equally with all private companies. The support and assistance offered by Afghan Films is in the form of required consultation in case they contact Afghan Films and seek help. Upon request, Afghan Films provides camera equipment with respect to Afghan Films' rule, as well as help and support by technical personnel. Additionally, Afghan Films is involved in introducing Afghan cinematic works to festivals, organising premières of films in Kabul and providing the necessary facilities to screen the films in urban cinemas.

Unfortunately, there are hardly any people who collaborate with Afghan Films because of the current situation. Only in 2002 were we provided with some digital equipment from the French organisation AINA as well as with eight mobile cinema units in Kabul which also include 3 sets of PD 170-150 cameras and one computer. Afghan Films then received a PD6 sound system, the Pro tools system and a MAC G5 computer from Germany. After that, the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) in France helped us with the digitalisation system of archives which was unfortunately stopped after a short time because of technical problems. But unfortunately, for years there was no such assistance or help to improve the film production of Afghan Films.

It has been four years ago now that the Cultural Centre of France and the Goethe Institute and, this year, the Embassy of the Great Britain started fundraising for organising international festivals. And with the collaboration of Afghan Films, Afghanistan's Cinema Professionals Union and several other institutions are organising the Kabul International Film Festival. Some donors donated around 5,000 US dollars to private institutions. This happens maybe once a year after the results of the scenario competition are released.

What role do international aid organisations play in the film production sector?

In this case, international organisations do not help due to their strategies. We tried to get in touch with them but have not received any positive answer yet.

Which conditions are connected to cooperating with them? What role do private production firms play?

There are two kinds of collaborations. Firstly, because of the situation in Afghanistan, Afghan cinema needs help and it should be provided by donors. Considerable funding is needed for a planned and certain period of time, so that Afghan cinema can get out of this situation.

Secondly, for the purpose of improving Afghan cinema, joint production should take place, but there are some issues that must be taken into consideration if we want to enter into a joint production:

1. Inequality of financial resources for a joint partnership.
2. In general, our inability to do partnership work.
3. Uncertainty among producers because of the current situation of cinema professionals and Afghan cinema.
4. Absence of an insurance system for equipment and the life of artists upon entering Afghanistan.

There are only a few well-known filmmakers that some external producers trust and provide with money to make films. I think we should build on this and empower our filmmakers and cinema professionals so that they can attract the attention of producers.

What are the cooperations with national and international television broadcasters like?

National and private TV broadcasters in Afghanistan have not yet managed to meet international standards and pay no attention to domestic productions, which means they are more reliant on foreign productions, for which they do not have to reserve the rights of screening. That is why the audiences are detached from their national values and instead become familiar with foreign cultures. Regarding the broadcasting of Afghan films, even the filmmaker has to pay for his film to be shown and no filmmaker has ever been able to cover the costs of filmmaking by broadcasting it. There are a number of reasons why these kinds of films cannot be marketed outside the country:

1. Inappropriateness of the film's subject for a foreign audience.
2. Not undertaking a professional work, as the private film companies make feature films with very basic equipment.
3. Low sound and picture quality.

Because of the reasons mentioned above, most international TV broadcasters are reluctant to accept Afghan private products because they do not meet international standards.

For whom do you make your films?

Of course a film is made for an audience, no matter if the audience is national or international. But a film should be made in a way that can communicate and build a relation with any kind of audience and have an impact on them. For this, a cinema professional must be cinema-literate and should have a good insight and be able to deliver it in order to create an outstanding piece of work and attract audiences.

Where are your films shown?

Most of our films are shown inside the country. But those films that are very valuable cinematically -in terms of subject, picture, cinematographic techniques- will be screened

in foreign cinemas and at international festivals. As most of the films are made digitally, they cannot be shown in cinemas. The reason is that these digital films cannot be shown by cinema projector unless they are turned into celluloid reels. Because of this, those films that have a relatively high quality and a good subject are shown on TV in exchange for a very low amount of money. Some films are even shown just because some TV advertisements are going to be broadcast in between. Most of the films can be accessed by the public, by families and film clubs after having been turned into DVD.

How does the audience react?

In the past, when Afghan cinematic works were created academically, resulting in films containing cinematic value, people not only reacted to but also admired these works and the filmmakers, whose films lived up to cinematic values and principles. But now that everything can be done digitally, any amateur who has no idea about cinema tries to make films and just satisfy himself. Such filmmaking has a negative impact on cinema and audiences alike. A boundary has been created, unfortunately, between the cinema of Afghanistan and the audience, and even the good films have been scarified by this childish demand. In this situation, audiences are disappointed with Afghan films and question them.

What were the differences in reception in various contexts?

In a society like Afghanistan, which suffers from a low level of literacy and where there are also differences in taste and interpretation, those spectators whose minds -based on their capacity- can accept and are familiar with Hollywood and Bollywood movies, can to some extent like Afghan films. But those who are familiar with cinema and film differ from these kinds of spectators. These people criticise such films and only accept and admire films with a good content.

The audience's interpretation mainly depends on the subject of the film. They accept films that are closer to their life and more understandable.

What is the difference between the national and international market?

Very few world cinemas are reliant on national markets in terms of profit-making. They cannot cover the costs of film production unless they enter the international market. Any kind of film can be shown in the national market, but this is not the case in the international market. It is because most of the films are made based on the existing complexities and norms working inter-connectedly in a society, and which are specific to that society. Only those films can enter the international market that were made academically and contain special cinematic values and concepts, films that were made with cinematic techniques and have easily understandable concepts. Most Afghan films have managed to attain some position in the international market for the reason that they have a very strong content, deal with issues very carefully and simply and address the issues from the audience's point of view. The international market is very valuable. Entering into this market and sales in this market are very important for a country's cinema and play a crucial role. The international market has knowledge of the selected work's content, production and film techniques, as well as knowledge of the cinema professionals and their works in the area of filmmaking and cinema.