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Performing Beauty: A Filmmaker's Journey with Nasta’liq

Good afternoon.

Thank you very much for being here. It is an honor to be among my fellow panelists.

I should say at the beginning that I come to this subject not as a historian of calligraphy, nor as a calligrapher, but as a filmmaker. What I would like to offer today is not a scholarly argument about the full history of Nastaʿlīq, but I would like to briefly explain why I made this film, what happened when I tried to make *Performing Beauty*, and what it takes to communicate Nastaʿlīq to people who know nothing about it. I think the same applies to almost any subject about Persian/Iranian art, culture, and even history.

When I began working in the film industry in Iran as my career in 1991, I noticed that Persian art and culture were not represented internationally in the same way as many other civilizations. There were books, articles, museum exhibitions, and academic research, but very few documentary films made primarily for non-Iranian audiences.

I also noticed that many films about Persian/Iranian art and culture were naturally made for Iranian audiences. I wanted to take a different path. I set a goal to make films that someone with little or no knowledge of Persian culture could watch, while at the same time making films that Iranians would also find interesting and hopefully learn something new in a respectful and authentic way.

Over the years, I imagined a long-term project built around seven areas of Persian art and culture: painting, carpets, architecture, music, calligraphy, cuisine, and literature. *Performing Beauty* became the second film in that journey.

The title of this talk is *A Filmmaker's Journey with Nastaʿlīq*, and I think the word "journey" is important.

Looking back, I realized that I knew what I didn't want in this film long before I knew what I wanted.

I didn't want a documentary built around narration. I wanted the film itself to communicate through images, sound, poetry, music, and the voices of the people who are experts in

calligraphy and Nastaʿlīq. Narration can be useful, but it can also guide the audience toward one interpretation. I preferred to trust the audience and let them experience the film before a narrator explains anything.

I also didn't want a documentary made mostly of talking-head interviews connected by information. I wanted something that felt more cinematic, where the interviews became only one part of a larger picture, experience.

Another important decision was structure.

At first, I imagined building the film around one master calligrapher who would connect different parts of the film and guide the audience from beginning to end. As production continued, that idea slowly changed. I now think it was one of the most important changes in the film. Instead of one person becoming the thread of the film, Nastaʿlīq itself gradually became the protagonist. Every interviewee then became another voice and witness, helping the audience understand one aspect of this remarkable art.

I cannot honestly say that I planned all of this from the beginning.

Much of it emerged during editing.

Sometimes an idea simply didn't feel right. I tried different approaches. Some worked for a while and then disappeared. Others slowly found their place. The film was teaching me how it wanted to be made.

One example is the overall structure. Originally, I had six main subjects that I wanted to cover. But for reasons that probably have as much to do with Persian culture as with my own instincts, I wanted the film to have seven movements. The first movement became an overture, a preface, introducing the audience to the world they were about to enter and quietly preparing them for the six movements that followed.

The same thing happened with poetry. Instead of one poem running throughout the film, each movement begins with a different poem. Each one hints at what the following movement is about. I thought of each poem like a preface, quietly preparing the audience for what comes next.

Music also became more than atmosphere. Different instruments gradually found their own place. The setar often accompanies moments of contemplation. The tar brings the atmosphere of the Qajar period. The ney suggests spirituality. Tombak appears when the discussion becomes technical, almost mathematical.

These decisions came from trying, listening, and asking myself three questions at three different moments in the creative process:

Before making the film:
What experience do I want to create?

While editing:
What does the film need next?

For every creative decision:
Does this feel right?

For much of the production, I wasn't confident that I was making the right decisions. In fact, I think I trusted my instincts less than I should have because I was afraid of making mistakes.

Only after the film was finished, and after it began screening, did I begin seeing the film differently. Conversations with audiences, scholars, artists, and colleagues helped me recognize things in the film that I had not consciously thought about while I was making it.

One artist told me that the film explains beauty with beauty.

Another viewer described it as a meditation on beauty as a civilizational value.

Those observations were meaningful to me because they described something I had felt while making the film but had never put into words.

If there is one lesson I take away from making *Performing Beauty*, it is this:

Sometimes a filmmaker does not completely discover the film while making it. Sometimes the film continues to reveal itself afterward.

Sometimes I still ask my wife and filmmaking partner, Helen, whether we really made a different and good film.

Thank you.