~~Shahid~~ — Iranian-German cinema beyond patronym, beyond borders

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The film *Shahid* (2024, 84') documents the quest of director Narges ~~Shahid~~ Kalhor to rid herself of part of her last name, Shahid. Narges, played by Baharak Abdolifard, arrives at the *Kreisverwaltungsamt* (municipal administration authority) of her Munich neighbourhood to submit her application for a name change. As the official (Carin Huber) behind the glass lists the documents required, each term is superimposed on the screen until it fills entirely: proof of registration, registration of nationality, official photo ID, naturalisation certificate, proof of residence, criminal record, income certificate, detailed statement of the grounds for application and a psychological assessment of emotional distress – the latter of which Narges does not have. The frame breaks and actor and director confer on how to proceed. The viewer understands that a name change in Germany would require an entire parochial-patriarchal system to be satisfied or overthrown. The latter is precisely where *Shahid*'s inventive quest to exceed both German and Iranian genealogies of naming and descent sets in.

Shahid's establishing scene opens on a hand moving slowly, with shadows passing over it. Ambient drums underwrite a naked body's rise from sleep on the ground. Shapes move around the body and slowly crystallise into male dancers. This figuration of an individual's waking and rising – perhaps, coming into personhood – in the midst of a collective structures Shahid throughout. We cut to the outside of a building in Marktstraße, a generic street in a slightly distressed German town (a coincidentally available film set). On the street a man is posting a bill, and a mailman



Fig. 01
Film poster: Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.



is gathering up letters from the ground, as Narges steps out in red jacket and yellow hat to unlock her bicycle. The morning's ordinariness is interrupted by passersby walking backwards. Out of the building dances the troupe that had circled Narges's naked body earlier:

Amidst loss
Amongst that
Amongst this
At the centre's core,[1]

recites the group leader (Nima Nazarinia), whom we will later come to know as the ancestor responsible for the surname Shahid. Narges continues:

Awaiting slumber
From fate's outcome
Which amid layers of history
Is lost and found.

As Narges departs on her bicycle, the almost all-male dance troupe in long gowns follows in slow motion, continuing the song. The music picks up rhythm as Narges begins to sing:

Within wind's passage
Wind that is history
History that is wind
Personal

Fig. 02
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.

1 All text quoted from the film derives from the English subtitles translated by Nicholas Coleman and Roya Arab.



Collective history . . .
Within never-ending chaos
The path to alienation
The path to disconnection'.

As pedestrians walk backwards on the street, Narges continues:

My tomorrow
Their yesterday
Tomorrow, their yesterday
Beyond yesterdays
Beyond tomorrows
Awaiting slumber
From fate's outcome
Which amid layers of history
Is lost and found.

As Narges finishes, 'Tomorrow to certainty / Tomorrow to certainty / Tomorrow to certainty', the group comes to a stop in front of the *Kreisverwaltungsamt*.

How has Narges arrived at this point? The recitation tunes the viewer in to the intricate critical history that is to follow as *Shahid* asks, what drives history? What are its layers? In which direction is the 'wind that is history' blowing? How can 'my tomorrow' exceed 'their yesterday'? What adheres to existence post-refuge? How can one drive out that which is imposed? And why does director Kalhor need both the concrete and the poetic to express this?

Co-written by Aydin Alinejadsomeeh, *Shahid* has been called a hybrid film and was shown both in *documentary* festivals as

Fig. 03
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.

well as awarded a prize as best *feature* film (Hessian Film and Cinema Prize, 2024).[2] The 2024 Berlinale announced *Shahid* as: 'Ambiguous autofiction with visual arcs, songs and poems: a tragicomic, defiant act of self-empowerment in exile'. *Shahid*'s naming of that which it seeks to expel proceeds with harsh factual clarity on the one hand, while delving into fantasy on the other. The jury for the Hessian prize notes, '*Shahid* is more than a hybrid, it is a powerful miracle on screen!' The film becomes both all too concrete *and* deploys poetry, music, dance and painting to underwrite its critique. Irony, play and the aesthetics of the happenstance (or of relative scarcity) inform its approach to myth as well as to documentation. These components dismantle both Iranian genealogies that bear religious, colonial, and authoritarian elements as well as harmful German genealogies exemplified by a rigid name-change law with roots in Nazism.

Roughly nine minutes into the film, the process of applying for the name change starts all over again, as it will several more times. Accompanied by the dancers, Narges now also rides her bike to therapy sessions in the hope of acquiring the last required document. As she explains patiently to therapist Ribbentrop (Thomas Sprekelsen): 'A shahid is a martyr, someone who is willing to die for his faith'. But, she stresses, a 'shahid is someone who no longer exists. Someone who is dead'. In the scene that follows a hipster schoolmaster (Saleh Rozati) uses a painted storyboard to tell the story of Narges's great-grandfather, who fought for a liberal Islamic democracy in Persia. His death in 1907 at the hands of 'a terrorist while praying' bestowed the name Shahid on the family henceforth. In conversation with Ribbentrop, Narges dismisses the very idea of a *shahid* and proclaims: 'Diese Männer und ihre Geschichten sind mir scheißegal'. ('These men and their stories, I don't give a damn about them'.). Later she will add force to her rejection of masculinist history: 'I don't believe in your God. I don't believe in you. I don't believe in your heroism' and, in Persian, 'I believe neither in you, nor in your male God'.

Halfway into the film, the long segment 'Behind Shahid', reveals Narges Kalhor's own story, combined inventively with behind-the-scenes footage of the making of *Shahid*. In 2009, while visiting a film festival in Nuremberg from Iran, Narges was suddenly unable to return home and had to seek asylum in Germany. Newspaper articles in German, English and French recounting this event ('Daughter of Ahmadinejad Adviser Seeks Asylum in Germany') accumulate on the screen. 'Behind Shahid' also includes original, dispiriting footage from the Zirndorf refugee camp in Bavaria

2 *Shahid* was Kalhor's first feature film. Premiering in Berlin in 2024, it received the Caligari Film Prize and CICAE Arthouse Cinema Award. The film's languages include German, English, Farsi and Hebrew. It was produced by Michael Kalb and ZDF. Notable earlier and other works of Kalhor's include *Shoot Me* (2013), *In the Name of Scheherazade* (2019), *Sensitive Content* (2023), and *Love Your Nails* (Berlinale 2026). See Narges Kalhor, 'Narges Kalhor: Filmmaker & Video Artist', *Narges Kalhor*, 2026, accessed 22 February 2026, https://nargeskalhor.de/.



where Narges was housed. The director, however, accompanies the history of her exile from Iran with relentless self-critique: 'Not everyone gets asylum in three months, as I did'. Only once in the film does Narges centre her own traumatic experience. In this scene, the director appears as herself, listening in on a recorded conversation between her actors Baharak and Nima. In this recording her actors critique her as a 'rich kid' making films in Germany ('The best business is now "DIVERSITY"!'), while they are still waiting for their asylum hearings. Upon listening to this dialogue, director Kalhor says: 'I understand Baharak's and this man's [a fellow refugee who had appeared earlier] frustration. Because of my family name, I got out of the camp quickly. I understand this anger. He was probably not doing well. . .' But then she continues, 'I was also fucked. I was not doing well either. I am not doing well either . . .' Tears stream down Narges's face and the film again breaks the frame as team members discuss how to proceed with the shoot. In a post-screening Q & A at the Iranian Film Festival Munich 2024, Kalhor recounts that she had in fact scripted the scene.

Shahid's final segment, 'The Illusion of Shahid', undertakes a feminist deposing of the ancestor. This time the story of the name *Shahid* is told as that of Narges's great-grandmother. Throughout the film, storyboards have apprised us of the director's calibration of the history of the ancestor (and that of therapist Ribbentrop's name!). This time the storyboard even becomes animated as the great-grandmother moves her lips in a forceful dismissal of previous interpretations of the story of the *shahid*. Throughout *Shahid* irreverent improvisation on Persian cultural elements serves to reclaim traditions currently occupied by conservative forces. From its use of verse and a version of Persian painting to its deployment

Fig. 04
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.



Fig. 05
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.

of Revolutionary posters and footage, such defamiliarisation aids in rewriting both Narges's and Iranian history.

'The Illusion of Shahid' moreover uses double exposure to layer the action and multiply the actors beyond the actor-director double that has appeared throughout. As screenwriter Aydin Alinejadsomeeh recounts, this technique of doubling helped alleviate the production's dearth of actors due to budgetary constraints. But doubling in this segment also produces depth for psychic dimensions and for a story neither only of the past nor only about Iran. Narges concludes: 'My issue is not about my grandfather, nor about my name, nor about his revolutionary ideals, nor about his faith, nor about his wife. My concern is to end this vicious circle'.

Instead of the original dance troupe, it is now her therapist, the municipal official and other white Germans who dance around Narges and, finally, around an empty space. At this point Narges has left the house and is walking determinedly through a landscape composed of iconic scenes from world history. She is carrying a gun and her mission is to kill the *shahid*. When she finally faces the *shahid*, however, she cannot pull the trigger and ultimately lowers the gun. Instead Baharak-Narges (the actor) is embraced by her double, director-Narges.

While pernicious genealogical ties may not have been severed and the ancestral name not expunged after all, *Shahid* has performed a rigorous critique of Iranian and German patriarchal genealogies and shown the near-impossibility of their revision. The film has undertaken a feminist recalibration of history in both countries. More importantly *Shahid* has held out as an aspiration an existence beyond the patronymic in both national contexts.



Shahid embarks on thorough self-critique, while revealing the cost of such political rigor and of life in exile, partially privileged as it may be. The film externalises this self-critique in scripted dialog and its continuous breaking of its own frame. Narges Kalhor-Baharak Abdolifard is 'Acting to Play [Her]self'; at the same time, she is playing out entire histories as well as their overcoming.[3] At the end of the film, she has not killed the *shahid*. Still, the ancestral *shahid* who had pursued her so tenaciously throughout the story has faded. There are no heroes and no martyrs. Narges has neither sacrificed herself nor her principles.

In May 2025 I met director Narges Kalhor at a Munich street festival. When I asked whether her name change had in fact succeeded, she recounted the following story. After *Shahid* was awarded numerous prizes, the Film University of Babelsberg invited her to teach as a visiting professor. The school's website, however, announced Narges's classes as being taught by 'Mrs. Shahid'. She laughed and spoke of the necessity of a *Shahid 2*. Narges Kalhor may not have expunged the traces of the *shahid* or of that which enchains us, but she has nevertheless taken her viewers beyond patronym and beyond borders of nation and self.

Bibliography

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3 Thomas Waugh, 'Acting to Play Oneself: Performance in Documentary (1990)', in *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Fig. 06
Narges Kalhor. *Shahid*. Germany: ZDF, 2024. Film. Cinematographer: Felix Pflieger.