

Presskit

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muezzin

A film by Sebastian Brameshuber

Since the time of the Prophet Mohammed, faithful Muslims have heeded the muezzin's call to prayer five times a day.

A more recent phenomenon is the Turkish call to prayer contests. Each year the country's muezzins compete, and their powerful expressivity proves that muezzins are a special kind of artists.

»muezzin« follows the dramatic progress of the competition and investigates the phenomenon of individuality within Islamic culture.

Synopsis

"It is impossible to reach the same emotionality at the competition as in the minaret." Although he knows that, Halit Aslan, muezzin of the historic Fatih Mosque in Istanbul, decides to measure up against his colleagues at the national Call to Prayer Competition. He easily qualifies for the Istanbul finals and knows that his reputation as a muezzin of the famous Fatih Mosque would suffer if he performed badly.

His teacher is Habil Öndes, an imam and master of the call to prayer who received his musical education at the Istanbul Conservatory, not to become a musician, but rather to carry his musical knowledge into the mosque. "You will be among the top three, if God wants it," he encourages his student Halit, who shares the love of the musical details of the call to prayer with him. His opinion is weighty, as several of his students were among the All-Turkey winners over the last years. What's more: He is a jury member of the Call to Prayer Competition.

It appears as if advancing to the national finals is merely a formality for Halit. However, no one reckoned with Isa Aydin, a devout imam from a small suburban mosque, who knows how to convince the ears of the jury with his high voice. His artistic pretense takes a back seat to his pragmatism: "The more people I can attract to the mosque with my voice, the more successful I am."

With this formula in his suitcase, Isa Aydin travels to Edirne, at the western edge of Turkey, where he represents Istanbul at the national finals against 9 other muezzins from Anatolia. The pressure is big, as the winners of the previous two years were also from Istanbul: "If you are not among the top three, how could you dare to return to Istanbul?" says Mustafa Yaman, the previous year's winner, bringing it to the point.

Director's Statement

In numerous films, one hears the call to prayer in order to establish a Muslim, resp., Oriental setting. However, the source of the chant, the muezzin, is never shown. His face almost always remains hidden. Therewith, the call to prayer is reduced to a sound effect and serves as a mystical sound that can unfold its effect exactly through the visual absence of the muezzin and, at the same time, through the acoustic omnipresence. »muezzin« is an attempt to contribute towards the deconstruction of this myth, which for me is symptomatic for the reception of Islam in the West.

I have experienced my protagonists as very pragmatic men who indeed pursue their work with passion, but rather refer to the musical than spiritual aspects. I wanted to show that the extended term of "artist" is thoroughly applicable to the muezzin. An individual style and a portion of vanity are part of the decorum, and that in a society in which individualism is very quickly interpreted as religiously condemnable egoism.

»muezzin« moves hermetically within this scene of religious "musicians" whose ethics regarding "money & fame" amazingly approximate very closely to the "underground" attitude found in different Western music scenes – particularly in hip hop. The explication of these similarities meant a lot to me. Likewise, it was important for me to illustrate a slice of the protagonists' biographical background in order to ostensibly show that origin, tradition and education were primary factors in choosing this profession, and that questions of faith were secondary.

The Call to Prayer Competition serves the film as a narrative thread, but does not attain a significant meaning beyond that. I avoided major plots and worked primarily with allusions. I did not want to let myself be carried away to any conclusions, but rather impartially made a portrait of a scene and its members. The protagonists should receive space and time to express their realities, views and passions, and thereby speak solely for themselves.

Festivals

SANFIC International Filmfestival
Santiago de Chile, 17.08.-23.08.2010

TRT Documentary Days
Istanbul, 17.05.-21.05.2010

Aljazeera Documentary International Filmfestival
Doha, 19.04.-22.04.2010

Minneapolis / St. Paul International Filmfestival
Minneapolis, 15.04.-30.04.2010

Hamburg Documentary International
Filmfestival (opening film)
Hamburg, 14.04.-18.04.2010

BAFICI International Filmfestival
Buenos Aires, 07.04.-18.04.2010

Istanbul International Filmfestival
Istanbul, 03.04.-18.04.2010

Beldocs International Filmfestival
Belgrade, 13.04.-20.04.2010

Interforum Filmfestival Turkey/Germany
Nürnberg, 04.03.-14.03.2010

Tiburón International Filmfestival
Tiburón, 18.03.-26.03.2010

Diagonale International Filmfestival
Graz, 16.03.-21.03.2010

Documentary Edge International Filmfestival
Auckland, New Zealand, 27.02.-14.03.2010
Wellington, New Zealand, 13.03.-28.03.2010

Sarajevo International Filmfestival
Sarajevo, 12.08.-20.08.09

Dokufest Prizren International Filmfestival
Prizren, 03.08.-09.08.09

Karlovy Vary International Filmfestival
Karlsbad, 03.07.-11.07.09

Crossing Europe International Filmfestival
(opening film; work in progresse)
Linz, 20.04.-26.04.09

Notes on »muezzin«

by Claudia Siefen

»muezzin« is, first of all, the portrait of a profession that has provided for controversy, if not evoked fears in the Christian-Western world through the political events of the past several years. Mosques in Germany? The muezzin's call to prayer as an acoustic threat on the part of a religion that the West could arrogantly and successfully shut out up to now. Brameshuber lets the images speak here – pure cinema aesthetic without the pointed finger.

Curiosity and respect run through the whole film like a red thread without becoming awestruck, showing the soulfulness of practicing a faith that has been distorted into ignorance by the media. Brameshuber doesn't want to and cannot straighten out this image, but he succeeds in sketching a religion with his cinematic handwriting without evaluating or judging.

In his portraits, Brameshuber gives the voice from the minaret a face. What makes a difference in his film, however, is the little bit of distance that produces a powerful closeness at the same time. Small gestures and glances at unexpected moments are cinematically bunched together, uncovering the relationships in a documentary style that is not obtrusive, does not feign any nearness, and is characterized at brief moments by deep, warming feelings. With colors and tones, Brameshuber lays out a cinematic template for attempting to explain a deeply human basic need: a mental and emotional context in daily cooperation, including human vanities.

Whoever calls people to prayer feels drawn himself, and not only gives the calling to common prayer, but also sees himself in his way of life as called to act as a role model in daily life. The muezzin has to learn techniques and train his voice for the chant. Measuring himself up against others is a basic need of a human being and Brameshuber succeeds in stylistically and contentually translating the work of the muezzin into the modern: Religious conviction as well as a little bit of "pop star" allure equally stand side by side.

Ostensible statements construct an arc of tension with small gestures and movements that Brameshuber combines into a completely distinct documentary language. The observation of something foreign: What remains foreign is only that without a face, and the voice of each of the muezzins portrayed here obtains a body, a home, a private life. Brameshuber listens and looks, and also captures the stillness: The belt has to fit to the shoes, and a handkerchief wipes the sweat of nervousness from the forehead. And in the end, it also wipes the foreignness out of people's minds.

Interview

with Sebastian Brameshuber / conducted by Claudia Siefen

How did the idea for this film develop?

"I was and am a huge hip hop fan. As many American hip hop artists like Mos Def, Brand Nubian or Jurassic Five are devout Muslims, one again and again finds brief intros reciting from the Quran on their records. Sometimes it is a complete call to prayer. Brand Nubian, for instance, uses a looped 'Allahu Akbar' refrain on their track of the same name. For me it was the first encounter with the sound of the muezzin. That was before 9/11 and I accordingly faced it in an unbiased way. During a school trip to arch-Catholic Malta, we made a joke of playing a call to prayer at full volume out of our hotel window to the Maltese at 5 in the morning after boozing all night: It didn't take a minute until someone began cursing us.

Several years later, during my first trip to Istanbul, I had the opportunity to get to know a muezzin. I asked him if he was specially trained or if he had to pass an audition. On this occasion, the subject of the competition also came up. Muezzin, competition, Istanbul ... I didn't have to think much longer about WHETHER I should make this film. The question was merely HOW. That was in September 2005."

How did the first contact to those portrayed take place?

"The Turkish central government maintains the bureaucracy that the Ottoman Empire left to it with devotion. Correspondingly were the bureaucratic obstacles as well. A simple bit of information, namely if and when the competition would take place, had to first be signed by the mufti before it was passed on to me. Although Turkey is a secular country, religious matters are regulated by a state executive committee, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, in Ankara. I also had to go there in order to receive permission from the highest body for this film project.

From the Diyanet branch office in Istanbul – the Müftülük – I was given the name of a muezzin who should have been the previous year's winner of the Call to Prayer Competition. He wasn't the one, but through him we got to the true winner of the previous year, and through him to the winner of the year before that, and through him finally to Habil Öndes! Before the first meeting with him, our Turkish research assistant, who is a non-religious Turk, said: "An old imam, a master of religious music and the call to prayer. You have to conduct yourselves extremely respectfully." The Turkish people in the crew were non-religious Turks who were even farther removed from this theme than I was.

I was quite amazed and relieved about how normally we could deal with the protagonists, above all with Habil Öndes, because in Istanbul he stands at the center of religious music."

How did the individual film shootings proceed?

“We had two concentrated shooting blocks, one lasted ten weeks, the other two weeks, afterwards we had several shorter ones. The first images were shot in February 2007 and the last ones in May 2009. Because I was living most of the time in Istanbul, as was the cameraman Govinda Van Maele, we were fairly flexible. At this time, Gökce Ince was still a film student at Bilgi University, and therefore had a lot of time as well. Mostly all three of us were on the road, whereas I also additionally did the sound recordings. Today, I would dare to question whether it was the best method of operation. The lack of experience had to be compensated in some form; that worked at best by spending more time on it. It also had a positive effect on the relationships to our protagonists.

For the most part, our protagonists didn't want to pose for scenes, so we mostly had to adjust to their tempos. All the calls to prayer are 'real' calls to prayer – there were no dry runs in front of the camera. I think that something like this makes itself positively felt in the film.”

How much material was shot?

“Much too much! An estimated 150 hours, perhaps even more. Editing was very tedious. Unfortunately, our Turkish editor got sick and dropped out. We had already been working a few months, but there was still no preliminary result we could build upon. With that much material in a foreign language, its exact processing and organization were most important, because ultimately every snippet was holy to me, particularly at the beginning.

In order to find my way through this jungle of material as well as possible, I had to organize everything again and start anew. Together with Gökce Ince, who had already been a part of the crew as an assistant director and who had conducted the interviews, one year of editing was then called for: First in Vienna, then in Istanbul, because Gökce had problems with the visa, then in the winter at my mother's house in my hometown of Gmunden. My missing distance to the material was really the biggest problem, because after my editor had dropped out, I didn't want to let the project out of my hands anymore. Towards the end, Thomas Woschitz came along as an editing consultant. That was very important; without him we wouldn't have come to a final version.”

Was it already a foregone conclusion that you would leave out the posed questions in the film?

“Yes, leaving out the questions was planned. On one hand, for artistic reasons, because it creates a noticeable distance to the protagonists. It was clear to me that the film cannot lay a claim to being really close to the characters. I found that it was no mistake to feel that we were foreign, without having to stress it even further. But also for pragmatic reasons. Because I hardly speak any Turkish, there naturally was a language barrier between me and the protagonists: In the case of an interposed question, I had to first wait for the translation. Needless to say, this never proceeds fluently and had to be edited. Gökce conducted the interviews for the most part alone; we first started doing the translations afterwards.”

You have refrained from making any kind of judgment regarding the portrayal of the family and especially of women.

“I don’t like it when a film attempts to be politically correct and wants to somehow handle every intruding theme. In most cases, I perceive it as a waste of time and an unpleasant digression from the actual topic. Everyone knows about the equality problems in a strongly paternalistically organized Muslim society. There are many films that deal in depth with this issue.”

Is »muezzin« a music film?

“Yes and no. It was never thought as such, but it has elements of one. However, it went in a totally different direction content-wise as well as dramaturgically. One can say that music and competition are the hooks. My film happens in between.”

In which reference does this film stand to your previous experimental works?

“My experimental work always has to do with the relationship between image and sound. The sound should always be equal to the image in terms of its importance. In »muezzin«, I wanted to approach this ideal as well; however, it didn’t always function, because the narrative also had to be taken into consideration. But the good will existed, so to speak!

Particularly in the opening scene of »muezzin«, I believe it succeeded. In places the sound actually stands in the foreground. In the daily life of a muezzin, his voice is more important than his face. In this respect, the film corrects reality a little bit.

How should the film be received by the viewers?

“Every viewer has an individual film running in his/her head at the same time, sometimes several of them running complementary to the one being shown on the screen.

However, I especially wanted to undermine the cliché which divides Turkey into ‘modern and secular’ and ‘backwards and religious.’

This cliché imputes to every Turkish Muslim that he wouldn't be modern and would have an anti-secular attitude. This is also the picture that the old Kemalist elite of Turkey want to draw.

Ultimately, it is also an image that is widespread in Europe.

Therefore, there are no modern Turks, respectively, only modern Turks in my film. Certainly, this is a pointed emphasis and simplification, and, as such, a political statement.

You live in Vienna and Istanbul?

“I've mainly lived in Istanbul for the last 2 1/2 years for the making of this film. I wanted to make this film, because the figure of the muezzin as a phenomenon tremendously fascinated me. After having dealt with this for such a long time, this fascination has not faded away yet. On the contrary, I could probably still make a second film.

Someone gets up at four o'clock in the morning and, hidden in the minaret and for no one to see, calls those who are sleeping to prayer. Then there is also the unbelievable number of repetitions of the call to prayer's formula, which, theoretically, never abate. The time for it is determined by the sunrise; an hour after Istanbul, for example, it would be Vienna's turn, and every minute in between another place. A sound cloud that spans the whole globe. Quite cleverly devised!”

At the end of the film the choir of muezzins sings a certain song.

“It is an ‘Ilahi,’ a song from the repertoire of so-called ‘Tasavvuf music.’ It is religious music that was sung at the assemblies of the Sufi brotherhoods. These brotherhoods were forbidden by Atatürk when the Republic was founded, and now only exist in a modified form. This particular song is about the hardship of further initiation to reach the next spiritual level: That it's hard for a person to turn away from material life. The refrain goes: ‘Demedim mi? Didn't we tell you (that you are not going to stand this life) ?’”

Interview by Claudia Siefen / June 2009

Bio/Filmo

Sebastian Brameshuber

Born in 1981, studied Media Art at the University of Applied Sciences, Salzburg, before he switched to the University of Applied Arts in Vienna in Fall 2003. Since 2004, short, experimental video works have been produced, most of them under the pseudonym »Fordbrothers« (in cooperation with the artist Thomas Draschan), and have been screened at numerous international film and video art festivals as well as art exhibitions. With »Preserving Cultural Traditions in a Period of Instability« which was shown at the Viennale, London, Hong Kong, Max-Ophüls, EMAF and New York Underground film festivals, among others, the »Fordbrothers« made a highly regarded contribution to Austrian avant-garde film. Sebastian Brameshuber lives and works in Vienna and Istanbul.

Selected Films

»Everything's gone green«

2007 / DV / 3 min / Music video for New Order, UK

»Keynote«

2006 / DV / 4 min / Experimental video

»Bloodsample«

2005 / DV / 4 min / Music video for Losoul, Germany

- Nominated for the "Best German Music Video" award at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival 2005

»Preserving Cultural Traditions in a Period of Instability«

2004 / DV / 3 min / Experimental video

- No-Budget-Award at the Short Film Festival Hamburg 2005
- Honorable Mention at the Media City Festival 11, Ontario, Canada
- Part of the Impakt Utrecht 04 Highlights Tour
- Part of the Best of Media Art Friesland 2004

Crew

Written & directed by:

Sebastian Brameshuber

Cinematography:

Govinda Van Maele

Interviews:

Gökce Ince

Sound:

Marco Zinz

Editing:

Sebastian Brameshuber

Gökce Ince

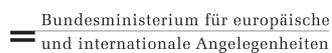
Produced by:

Sebastian Brameshuber

Gabriele Kranzelbinder

David Bohun

Supported by:



Technical Info

Austria 2009 / 85min / HD Cam / Color / Dolby stereo / Turkish with English Subtitles

also available: 35mm / Dolby SRD

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