



### **CELLULOID UNDERGROUND (12A)**

Director: Ehsan Khoshbakht

UK/Iran, 2023, 1 hour 20 minutes, English/Persian + English subtitles

Splicing together fragments of memory amid the architectures of state violence, *Celluloid Underground* documents the intertwined stories of two cinephiles working across generational divides to preserve and share 35mm film prints in Iran. Speaking in voice over is filmmaker Ehsan Khoshbakht. His passion for cinema and attempts to screen movies while at university lead him to the door of Ahmad, a radical exhibitor and archivist who stored a 5,000-strong collection of banned films beneath the streets of Tehran to preserve them from destruction. The documentary explores what the loss of film culture meant to both men (the state closed theatres and banned possession of film after the 1979 Revolution) by way of interviews, found footage, archive clips, and an unshakable belief in the power of cinematic storytelling.

The two men's relationships with moving images – and perhaps to a lesser extent, with one another – provide personal narratives from which political histories of resistance spin out. Even when recounting his imprisonment and torture for refusing to give up his film collection, Ahmad remains committed to the vitality of the filmic form; his precious reels "were more precious to me than my life," he says. Ahmad's dedication to the archive is matched only by that of Khoshbakht, who joins the underground endeavour to keep alive a collection that is always at risk of both discovery and the natural processes of decay.

Ehsan Khoshbakht is an Iranian filmmaker, curator and author, based in London. His debut feature *Filmfarsi* (2019), about the lost Iranian cinema of the Shah's era, was released in the US by Gunpowder/Criterion, and screened at over 50 film festivals and cinematheques around the world, including at Borderlines in 2020. He has also made several archive documentaries for BBC Persian, including *Duke Ellington in Esfahan*, which was selected for Telluride. Ehsan is co-director of *Il Cinema Ritrovato* in Bologna, the world's premier festival for film history and restoration. He regularly programmes seasons around the world, most recently at Cinematheque Francaise in Paris, Cinemateca Portuguesa in Lisbon, MoMA in New York, the Viennale in Vienna, Cinemateket in Copenhagen, and Filmoteca Catalunya in Barcelona. He is the author and editor of several books about cinema, jazz and architecture.

Notes compiled by Leah Johnson

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