

Journeying into Metaphorical Dark Corners

An Interview with Director Alireza Khatami

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Iranian director Alireza Khatami's Turkish language mystery-thriller, *The Things You Kill* (*Öldürdüğün Şeyler* 2025), an international co-production between Canada, Türkiye, Poland and France in addition to being Canada's submission for the 98th Academy Awards, is a deceptively playful film. It sits in the tradition of film that surprises its audience by taking unexpected narrative detours, even fracturing the rules that ground its world.

The story revolves around Ali (Ekin Koç), a university professor whose strained relationship with his father reaches a breaking point after the suspicious death of his mother. Soliciting his gardener, Reza (Erkan Kolçak Köstendil), to enact his revenge against his father, sets up a straight-forward though emotionally complex story, narratively at least. However, Khatami takes the film in an unexpected direction that will be compared to narrative detours in films like David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), but Khatami's twist explores the psychoanalyst Carl Jung's ideas about the confrontation with our shadow side, the antisocial side of our persona. Jung suggests being morally authentic and

whole requires the individual to confront their shadow.

Khatami builds on the themes of his previous films, including his first feature, *Oblivion Verses* (*los versos del olvido* 2017), about an aging man who works as a caretaker at the morgue. When he comes across the body of a woman who died during a protest, he sets out to offer her a fitting burial. Khatami's sophomore feature *Terrestrial Verses* (2023) was a collaboration with Iranian filmmaker Ali Asgari. The series of vignettes conveyed the shared experiences of individuals summoning the resilience to confront and survive adversity. *The Things You Kill* is the director's third feature.

Speaking with *MSJ*, Khatami discussed the unpredictability of life, the reason that filmmaking continues to excite him, and his frustrations with how the cinematic form is not pushing its boundaries. Khatami also reflected on the need to risk losing or alienating one's audience, how *The Things You Kill* has been critiqued through more of a Western lens and yet, rejects Western thought, as well as the Jungian aspects of his mystery-thriller.



Fig. 1 | Photo of Alireza Khatami at *The Things You Kill* Premiere during the 2025 Diversity and Inclusion Film Festival, Indiewire, 2025.

PAUL RISKER: Why filmmaking as a means of creative expression? Was there an inspirational or defining moment for you personally?

ALIREZA KHATAMI: It was accidental. I was an 18-year-old writing poetry and winning some competitions. I'm from a very small town, and I'd loan any poetry book the library had. One day, there was this old woman there who was quite grumpy with me because I had been there so many times. She said, "Okay, there are a pile of books over there that are not registered. Go quickly and pick some books; I have to close." I didn't even look at the books. I just picked two and took them home. One book was a collection of scripts by filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and the other one was a book on the films of director and writer Miklos Jancsó. So, it was quite random.

I had only been to the cinema four times in my life, and I became bored reading the one book, but when I read the scripts, I realized how close to poetry it was. Then, I started reading the works of Jancsó. I had no idea what a dolly shot was, but there I was reading about this guy who made the longest dolly shots of his time. I realized there's a poetic way of expressing a feeling through the camera. That became my accidental entry into cinema, and I just fell in love with how films told stories. Then, quite randomly, I ended up pursuing it.

PR: To talk specifically about a film's cinematography, which piqued your interest early on, I'm thinking about *Terrestrial Verses* as well as *The Things You Kill*, where you exercise a cinematographic restraint. It's important to realize that stillness can communicate and provoke as much as technical flourish. Ultimately, we need to keep asking questions about what cinema is and what cinema can be, and cinematography plays an important role in this.

AK: For me, it's not just about moving the camera. It's about how the camera can be used in a way that can both provoke the audience and speak for itself. In *Terrestrial Verses*, we didn't show the interrogator—the camera is from his point of view. It's locked, and the fact that the camera cannot move was part of the storytelling. Then, in *The Things You Kill*, whenever we are with Ali, the camera is static or its movements more controlled, whereas with Reza, it is always handheld. But once Ali overcomes Reza, the camera can then move fluidly and adopt the handheld style.

I would try to think, 'Why am I using the camera in this way? Why am I moving it?' Or 'Why is it out of focus? Did I pull the focus? Did the actor(s) move out of focus?' I'd also think about the ethics of doing this, and this is why cinema is still exciting for me.

Cinema is less than 200 years old, and lots of people act like it is long dead. Filmmakers aren't pushing the medium anywhere. Instead, everyone acts like there are these written rules and this is how it has to be. I understand there's money and studio involvement, but there's still a lot we can do as filmmakers. I like to push the audience towards the moment they are ready to stand up and leave. So, I push it all the way to that edge, but because I want them to sit until the end, I don't push it as far as an experimental piece could go. I do love to experiment, but it is a fine balance.

PR: So, the film's twist, where it suddenly transforms into a different kind of film, is motivated by this?

AK: There are two reasons for it. When I was younger, I noticed that Korean filmmakers were good at shifting tones, moving from tragedy to comedy to drama. Then, as I got a bit older, I realized that's life, which doesn't play like one genre. Life is so fluid. It moves from one moment to another and even moves between

these things. So, that was one reason. The second reason is that there's an expectation from me, as an "Iranian" filmmaker, to be like directors Jafar Panahi or Asghar Farhadi, where I'm only good to talk about "human rights."

Form is not an opportunity I'm afforded. So, I thought, 'Okay, I need to make sure they [the audience] settle in, and then, halfway through, pull the rug out [from under them]. By then, it'll be too late for them to walk out.'

Everybody comes in thinking they know this movie, and you don't expect what happens. I have seen some folks pissed off about it, because, hey, I'm not Norwegian with blue eyes. I get it, but those people that don't have that prejudice find it a pleasant surprise, because this is a place they haven't been to before. And I love taking audiences to places they have not been to.

At the end of this film, there are people that have no idea whether they like or dislike it, and I think that's brilliant. What still excites me about this art is you can go places that are unknown. Of course, there is risk, and you could completely lose the audience, but there is no fun in it if we don't take risks.

PR: Picking up on your point about the Korean influence, western critics are likely to draw comparisons between *The Things You Kill* and the films of David Lynch, specifically *Lost Highway*, for example. Are there any films or filmmakers, beyond Korean cinema that have influenced your creative voice?

AK: Lynch has been a huge inspiration for me because he taught me to embrace my demons and shadows and play with them. My first two films were compared to the work of Abbas Kiarostami, which I found humbling. But this movie, *The Things You Kill*, is the first time the critics finally allowed themselves to mention Western figures, too. It's the first time they mentioned Lynch or Brian De Palma. Some people even mentioned John Woo and Luis Buñuel. But that's mostly because of the [narrative] shift, which Lynch did in *Lost Highway*. But I'm in collaboration with all of these filmmakers. I stand on their shoulders; I borrow from them, and I'll hopefully pass the torch to someone else. If you're doing your work properly, then it's never just one person you're in constant conversation with.

PR: In an interview with Karan Khandari, the director of *Sister Midnight* (2024), he suggested cinema lacks mystery. Have we reached a place where we're more comfortable when everything is explained or are we too accepting of being told we're content with a lack of mystery and uncertainty? Can we get back to a place where mystery is restored?

AK: I would love to get to that place. Those are the movies that excite me, and that's why in the film one of the characters says, "kill the light," because not everything has to be seen in the light. This belief is very much a Western issue, because the culture is all about enlightenment and bringing forth the light. In the East, they're very comfortable being in the dark, and that's why the monster in western horror movies is in the shadows. In *The Things You Kill*, it's okay to be in the dark, because not everything can come to the fore. To know yourself, you sometimes have to sit in the dark, right? This is very important, and it's a cornerstone of my philosophy as a thinker and as a filmmaker.



Fig. 2 | Director David Lynch and actress Patricia Arquette on the set of *Lost Highway* (1997), Deadline, 2025.

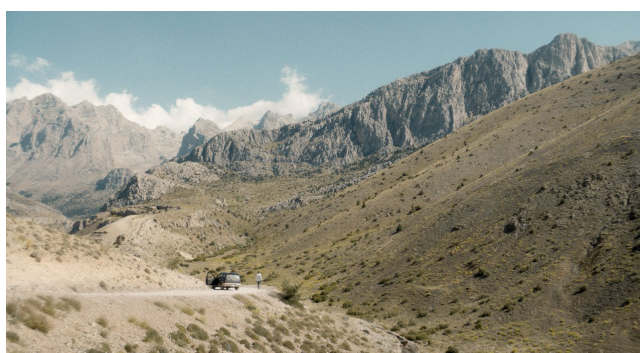


Fig. 3 | After visiting Ali's family, where family truths are revealed, Reza momentarily pauses his journey and stares out at the vast and empty landscape in *The Things You Kill*, 01:30:26, Fulgrance, Remora Films, Lava Films, Tell Tall Tale Band With Pictures, and Sineaktif, 2025.

Life is a mystery, and you're not going to know everything from the glimpse of your time living on this planet. And what a privilege it is to hold this mystery. And movies with [a sense of] mystery continue to live on in you. For example, what does the ending of Lee Chang-dong's *Secret Sunshine* (2007) mean when [Mr. Kim] holds up the mirror? And what's the metaphor of *Burning* (2018)? So, yes, we should go towards mystery.

PR: In *The Things You Kill*, the space and places are meticulously used to open up the layers of the story. To be able to understand the film, we must understand the context of how the spatial is being used to help express the film's themes and ideas, as well as the identity of the characters.

AK: One of the most important stages of filmmaking for me is location scouting. I absolutely enjoy it and I almost drive my team mad until we find the right places. I believe once I have a great location, then half of my job is done. I then give the location to the actors and magic happens.

Now, one of the main philosophies for this movie was self-negotiation. When we talk about this, especially in the language of western cinema, it is usually a confined space, like a dark corner you go into to reflect. I wanted to break away from this, so I thought, where can I put him? I wanted this landscape under the sun where there's no place to hide. You're on your

own, with only yourself, right? And then I contrasted that with the spaces of the home, which is always framed within frames—through the mirror, doors, and windows. There’s always some confinement in these spaces and the character is under constant pressure. So, when he goes out, there is a chance to meet and negotiate with himself and then come back to these personal spaces and find a new way of functioning. The homes play a critical role in the film’s storytelling.

Reza is a character secure in his own sense of self, and as the film unfolds, his identity becomes murkier. *The Things You Kill* is about identity and the importance of being self-aware to navigate the difficulties of the human experience. It also strikes me that the film is in part Jungian.

Let me talk about just one aspect of it. In today’s world, we are constantly pushed to identify with certain things and also to constantly simplify things, or to know everything. We are uncomfortable with not knowing, so we simplify things. To put it simply, we have become naïve and judgmental. But life is filled with complexities, right? And the quick and easy answer

is always violent. So, it’s difficult to live a complex life and one’s identity is going to come apart. But as Reza’s sister says, it’s very easy to preach from afar.

For me, the film is a self-negotiation. That’s why we first see Reza in front of the mirror, and then we descend into the mirror where the entire film unfolds. And only when he is finally willing to acknowledge these [different and competing] identities are not working for him, and he has been unwilling to accept the mysteries of life, do we come out of the mirror. He went inward, he negotiated, and now he can face the world. We can definitely describe it as a Jungian philosophy because he wrote about the shadow. In Persian literature, the question of self is an important one, and it is always talked about with the metaphor of the mirror. One great anecdote is that the mirror is filled with dust, and you have to go inside to clean or to polish it, so that it becomes a mirror. [...] In the Jungian language this is facing the shadow, right? And in the film, I use both the mirror and the shadow. ■

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