# Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian challenges space elitism with her innovative art and film



Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian’s creative spirit bursts forth in her eclectic London office—a converted tube carriage on a rooftop, suffused with art and vibrant colour. Within this vibrant space, her admiration for pioneering figures like Marie Curie is evident, as she keeps a photo of Curie close at hand. “When a project is difficult, I think, ‘What would Marie Curie have done?’” she muses, illustrating her belief in the power of historical role models to inspire current and future generations.

As a multifaceted artist, activist, and filmmaker, Ben Hayoun-Stépanian has collaborated with notable entities such as NASA, Porsche, and LEGO. Her propensity for what she calls “designing experiences” led her to create a “cosmic playground” in London's West End earlier this year. This installation featured asteroid-shaped rocks and inflatable Schrödinger’s cats, captivating onlookers and sparking curiosity about quantum physics. Her ambition extends beyond mere spectacle; she aims to redefine the discourse around space exploration and challenge entrenched power structures within it.

Throughout her career, Ben Hayoun-Stépanian has showcased a remarkable ability to integrate art and science, as evidenced by her co-founding the International Space Orchestra in 2012. This innovative ensemble allows scientists at NASA to step into unexpected roles, thereby fostering a ‘counterculture’ within the agency and encouraging dialogue about the complexities of space exploration. “The orchestra created a counterculture in NASA,” she asserts, epitomising her mission to provoke thought and spark discussions around the rationales behind space ventures.

Education, too, has been a focus for Ben Hayoun-Stépanian. Frustrated by conventional learning frameworks, she founded the University of the Underground in 2017, a non-tuition-fee university operating from the basements of nightclubs, where a diverse range of speakers—including Pussy Riot and Noam Chomsky—share their thoughts with students. Her latest film, Doppelgängers³, set to premiere at the South by Southwest festival, serves as a continuation of this ethos. In the film, which critiques the rising neoliberal influence in space, she confronts the visions of billionaires like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, whom she claims embody a problematic approach to space colonisation. “These visions are lack original thought,” she argues, highlighting a growing concern that the exploration of the cosmos is becoming a privilege of the wealthy elite.

Doppelgängers³ also daringly interweaves complex themes of identity and representation within its narrative. The film features an 'analogue mission' that sees Ben Hayoun-Stépanian and her doppelgangers—Lucia and Myriam—simulating a space expedition in a cave. This choice serves not only a practical purpose but fuels her inquiry into intergenerational trauma influenced by colonial legacies—a subject she deeply understands given her Armenian and Algerian heritage. The project aims to spark broader dialogues about how our history shapes our future, especially as colonisation expands into new frontiers.

The film's ambitious scope is complemented by its engaging style. Mixing humour with critical discourse, Ben Hayoun-Stépanian’s approach invites audiences to reconsider the narratives surrounding space travel. She converses with a spectrum of experts, from astronomers to quantum physicists, the authentic exchanges underscoring the chaotic—yet enlightening—journey of exploring the unknown. Illustrating the organic nature of her filmmaking, she remarks, “Nothing is scripted... I know when it’s time to leave.”

Reflecting on her rich heritage and the amalgamation of voices in her work, she insists that reimagining space exploration must also include diverse perspectives. In addressing contemporary societal issues, she notes the detrimental impacts of recent political decisions that have sought to undermine inclusivity in institutions like NASA. “You can’t just think of people as minorities,” she states emphatically, advocating for the necessity of varied voices in shaping not just space missions, but our collective future on Earth.

In her interactions with prominent figures such as Nadya Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot, she is reminded of courage amidst resistance. Ben Hayoun-Stépanian's path is not without conflict—arriving at institutions like NASA in her bold, distinctive style often invites scrutiny. Yet, she embraces this challenge, viewing conflict as integral to the process of change.

As she approaches her 40th birthday, Ben Hayoun-Stépanian’s creative journey appears poised for greater heights. With a keen eye on what lies ahead, she exudes optimism and readiness for her next cinematic adventure, continuing to push boundaries and inspire future generations to dream beyond the stars.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian), [[4]](https://www.itsnicethat.com/news/nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian-doppelgangers3-film-080224), [[6]](https://www.thequeerreview.com/2024/11/25/mqff34-review-doppelgangers/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.wired.com/story/doppelgangers-3-documentary-space-colonization/), [[5]](https://montalvoarts.org/artist/nelly-ben-hayoun/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian), [[3]](https://www.wired.com/story/doppelgangers-3-documentary-space-colonization/)
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* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian), [[4]](https://www.itsnicethat.com/news/nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian-doppelgangers3-film-080224)
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* Paragraph 10 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian), [[4]](https://www.itsnicethat.com/news/nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian-doppelgangers3-film-080224)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/space-travel-bezos-musk-macho-fantasies-nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian> - An article from The Guardian featuring an interview with Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian, a London-based designer, artist, and filmmaker of Armenian and Algerian descent. The piece discusses her latest film, 'Doppelgängers³', which critiques the commercialization of space travel by billionaires like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. The film explores themes of colonialism, representation, and the need for diverse voices in space exploration. The article also highlights Ben Hayoun-Stépanian's previous works, including the International Space Orchestra and her role as Designer of Experiences at the SETI Institute.
3. <https://www.wired.com/story/doppelgangers-3-documentary-space-colonization/> - A WIRED article providing an in-depth look at Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian's documentary 'Doppelgängers³'. The piece details the film's exploration of the pitfalls of colonizing space, emphasizing the importance of including diverse perspectives in discussions about humanity's future in space. It also covers the film's production process, including the use of doppelgängers to represent different facets of identity and the challenges faced during the analog space mission conducted in a cave in Spain.
4. <https://www.itsnicethat.com/news/nelly-ben-hayoun-stepanian-doppelgangers3-film-080224> - An article from It's Nice That offering an exclusive first look at Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian's film 'Doppelgängers³'. The piece discusses the film's focus on challenging the commercialization of space travel and its exploration of queer, ecofeminist futures. It also highlights the film's innovative approach, including interviews with a diverse range of experts and the use of an analog space mission to simulate life on the moon.
5. <https://montalvoarts.org/artist/nelly-ben-hayoun/> - A profile of Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian from the Montalvo Arts Center. The profile details her background as a London-based designer, artist, and filmmaker of Armenian and Algerian descent. It highlights her role as Designer of Experiences at the SETI Institute, her creation of the International Space Orchestra, and her collaborations with various artists and organizations. The profile also mentions her awards and recognitions, including the WIRED Innovation Fellowship and the Karman Fellowship.
6. <https://www.thequeerreview.com/2024/11/25/mqff34-review-doppelgangers/> - A review from The Queer Review of Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian's documentary 'Doppelgängers³'. The review discusses the film's experimental approach to exploring themes of space colonization, identity, and representation. It highlights the film's use of humor and its critique of traditional narratives surrounding space exploration. The review also mentions the film's world premiere at SXSW and its nomination for Best Documentary at Frameline.
7. <https://www.spacesafetymagazine.com/space-hazards/asteroid-hitting-earth/disaster-playground-edge-space-fiction-nelly-ben-hayoun/> - An article from Space Safety Magazine discussing Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian's documentary 'Disaster Playground'. The piece explores the film's focus on the real-world challenges of protecting Earth from near-Earth objects (NEOs) and asteroid impacts. It contrasts the film's realistic portrayal of space disaster response with the fictionalized depiction in the film 'Armageddon'. The article also delves into the film's exploration of the human aspects of space disaster management.