

Singapore International Film Festival

The Silence and The Door, two films by Mohsen Makhmalbaf

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A highlight of the Singapore International Film Festival was the large selection—15 in total—of recent Iranian features and documentaries. This included: *The Wind Will Carry Us* by Abbas Kiarostami (see link to previous review below), *Willow and Wind* by Mohammad Ali Talebi, from a script by Kiarostami, *The Cart* by Golan Reza Ramezani, *Birth of a Butterfly* by Motjaba Raie and *Sweet Agony* by Ali-Reza Davudnezhad.

There were also two movies by Mohsen Makhmalbaf—*The Silence* and *The Door*—and films by his daughters—*The Apple*, an outstanding work previously reviewed by WSWs (see link below), by 21-year-old Samira Makhmalbaf; and *The Day The Aunt Fell Ill*, a short film by 11-year-old Hanna.

To fully appreciate Iranian films it is necessary to have some understanding of the difficult conditions in which they have been produced. In Iran virtually every aspect of film production and distribution is under government control and has been for most of the industry's history. The first decrees outlawing political films were issued in 1950 and under Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who came to power in a CIA-organised military coup in 1953, films critical of the regime or those with explicit references to poverty and the disadvantaged were censored or banned outright.

Following the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic regime tightened censorship and imposed strict religious control over film content. Islamic fanatics torched many cinemas, 2,000 films were cut or banned outright and some filmmakers were indicted on charges of "corrupting the public".

Under current law, films cannot directly criticise the government or make political exposures of social conditions. Men and women cannot touch each other in movies unless married or related and women must observe Islamic dress codes. The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance approves all scripts and scrutinises cast and crew before issuing a production permit for a film. On completion, the film must be submitted to the censors and then, if it is approved, with or without cuts, the film is subjected to a rating system that determines when and where it can be shown. The government also has monopoly control on film stock and equipment.

In the face of these harsh conditions, however, the most talented Iranian filmmakers—Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf in particular—have maintained their artistic integrity and forged a sophisticated cinematic style. These directors have challenged many commonly held conceptions about cinema and, drawing on neo-realist cinematic traditions, highlighted some of the social and political contradictions of Iranian society today. Their work can be deeply

symbolic or, on other occasions, deceptively simple films dealing with children.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf is one of the most popular and influential filmmakers in Iran today. Born in Teheran in 1957, Makhmalbaf directed his first film, *Nassouh's Repentance*, in 1982 and has maintained a steady stream of movies averaging almost one a year for almost two decades. These films have differed in content and style—dealing with the plight of the urban poor, his experiences in jail, satires on the Iranian monarchy and the media, and several ground breaking documentaries. Three of his films have been banned in Iran: *Time of Love* (1990), *Nights in Zayandeh Roud* (1991) and *The Silence* (1998).

His latest film, *The Door*, which was released in 1999, was one of three short films screened at the Singapore Film Festival showcased under the title *Tales of Kish*. *The Greek Ship* by Nasser Taghavi, and *The Ring* by Abolfazl Jalili are the other two films in this provocative collection of new cinema from Iran.

Originally conceived as a collection of six films with additional contributions by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Bahram Beizai and veteran director Dariush Mehrjui, last year's Cannes Film Festival Committee were so impressed by the first three films that they decided to put them together as a competition entry for their festival.

Tales of Kish, which has little dialogue, explores poverty and isolation. Although the directors worked independently two of the films have a common theme—that traditional methods of living for many are being replaced by scavenging for survival amongst the waste products of the global economy.

The first in the series, *The Greek Ship*, tells the story of two men who collect cardboard containers—mainly video, sound system and television set boxes—washed up on the island's shore, near a beached ship. Hundreds of years ago the inhabitants of Kish, which is 15 kilometres off the coast of Iran in the Persian Gulf, profited from trading ships passing between Asia and Europe. Today the sea provides discarded cardboard boxes.

The men dry out the boxes and use them to repair their meagre shacks. The containers seem to offer a way out of the poverty afflicting the small settlement. But this apparent good fortune is dashed when the wife of one of the men is suddenly struck down by a strange psychological illness that the village medicine man blames on the boxes. The woman is cured after an exorcism, and an instruction is issued that the men must stop collecting the flootsam. Her illness recurs, however, when the sea brings forward a new harvest—this time hundreds of plastic bottles.

The Greek Ship has the pace and tone of an ancient fable. The film provides no answers and it is not judgmental. But it evokes real sympathy for those poor or primitive communities whose only connection with modern civilisation is the debris washed up on the shore.

The Ring is about a young Kurdish man who has come to the island of Kish seeking work. The young man has been accepted to study at university but is unable to attend because his family cannot afford the fees. One day his sister writes to tell him that she needs money for a ring. The young man, who lives alone in a shack on the side of the road near the coast, does not have a job but is determined to earn the necessary money for her. The simple film, which has virtually no dialogue or plot, documents his uncomplaining efforts to raise the money as he sifts through the debris of modern civilisation. Daily life involves selling a few fish to passing cars, collecting the mercury or lead from expired batteries and scavenging whatever he can to keep body and soul together—and pay for the ring.

The concluding film in the collection is Makhmalbaf's *The Door*. It tells the story of an old man's attempt to put society and civilisation behind him. The man wanders across the barren island carrying his only possession, the front door of his house, on his back. Straggling along behind him is his veiled daughter and her stubborn baby goat, and a postman attempting to deliver mail to the door. The old man is crossing the island to meet someone who has promised to buy the door. It is not exactly clear why he has decided to take this course of action: perhaps he hopes that by dispensing with all his worldly possessions he may achieve peace and happiness. But when he arrives at the agreed destination, the buyer, who has arrived by boat, refuses to purchase it. The film ends with the old man walking into the sea unable to get rid of his last possession.

This is a poetic film with striking cinematography as the characters cross the desert sands like participants in a tightly choreographed contemporary dance piece. As the old man attempts to escape civilisation he still carries part of it on his back. The door is not just a piece of wood but an address, somewhere to deliver mail, and a focus for other social activities the old man wants to leave behind. *The Door* has a timeless quality and makes clear that one cannot escape society, something of its laws and social values will always remain.

The second Makhmalbaf film screened at Singapore was *The Silence* (1998). This is an interesting film and like much of his previous work combines symbolic imagery and social commentary with complex and often dreamlike transitions between documentary reality and dramatic fiction. The film, which is memorable for its intriguing story and audacious visual beauty, is similar to *Gabbeh*, his 1996 film about nomadic tribe of carpetweavers from southeastern Iran.

Set in Tajikistan, *The Silence* is about a 10-year-old blind boy, Khorshid (Tahmineh Normatova), who works as a tuner of traditional musical instruments. Hard times have fallen on the family: Khorshid's father has moved to Russia and his mother, who attempts to sustain the family through fishing, depends on the boy's salary to pay the rent. The landlord has threatened to evict the family from their home unless the rent is paid within a few days. Khorshid's mother tells the boy to ask for an advance on his salary to pay the landlord, but like most children of his age, Khorshid is easily distracted, often late for work and forgets to ask for the advance.

Khorshid, whose name means sun, possesses an incredible capacity to shrug off all problems. He is different to other children in that his blindness has sensitised him to sound and other simple sensations of everyday life. In fact, each new sound or sensation—the smell of fresh

bread, the texture of apples and cherries, the sound of a bee, the music in a doorknock or a coppersmith's hammer—intoxicates him. Life for him is a musical adventure.

As pressure mounts from the landlord and his mother Khorshid becomes more and more preoccupied with the sounds around him. The landlord's knock is transformed into the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Khorshid begins to mentally incorporate all the other sounds he encounters in daily life—at the bazaar, the musical instrument shop and the coppersmiths—into a complex musical piece. As he passes the coppersmith he tells the young workers they should beat the copper pots to the same rhythm as the opening of Beethoven's great work. The film concludes with Khorshid, although sacked from his job and facing real difficulties, standing in the middle of the town bazaar conducting these sounds and those who produce them.

Khorshid's musical abilities and tremendous artistic imagination—his decision to bring together others making music in the bazaar—is one of the film's most evocative and inspiring moments. It points, not to a passive acceptance of the incredible difficulties he confronts but a determination to rise above this and create something that will change his life and future for the better.

The Silence does not explain the fate of the young boy or his family and this may indicate a somewhat uncritical approach by Makhmalbaf to his subject. Although Makhmalbaf seems to be directing our attention to a wider question—that serious difficulties will create a determination to overcome these problems and release tremendous human resources—he does not go beyond this general truth. Its interpretation is left completely open.

The strength of the film lies in Makhmalbaf's exploration, done with real sensitivity and warmth, of the creative imagination and amazing potential of the 10-year-old boy—a child who has been forced to work and therefore denied a real childhood.

The Silence is another important contribution to Makhmalbaf's unique and provocative body of work and further evidence that he is amongst the more thoughtful filmmakers in the world today. The next article from the Singapore International Film Festival will be an interview with Mohsen Makhmalbaf.



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