Singapore International Film Festival

"Some films can change the fate of their characters"

Mohsen Makhmalbaf speaks to WSWS

Richard Phillips
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Mohsen Makhmalbaf is one of Iran's most well-known and influential film directors. Born in 1957 in a poor working class district in Tehran, Makhmalbaf left school and began working at the age of 15 in order to support his family. In 1974, at the age of 17, he joined one of the many radical organisations that sprang up to fight the Shah's regime. He was jailed and sentenced to death after the organisation attacked a police station. Makhmalbaf escaped the death penalty and was released in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution after serving five years jail. He began writing plays, essays, short stories and then film scripts declaring that he planned to devote his life to art as a force for social change.

He directed his first feature film in 1982, Nassouh's Repentance *at the age of 25, and followed this with* Two Sightless Eyes *(1983),* Fleeing from Evil to God *(1984)* Boycott *(1985),* The Peddler *(1987),* The Cyclist *(1989) and* Marriage of the Blessed *(1989). In the 1990s Makhmalbaf wrote and directed nine films—*Deedeh Ban *(1990),* Time of Love *(1990),* The Nights in Zayandeh Roud *(1991),* Once Upon a Time Cinema *(1992),* The Actor *(1993),* Images from the Ghajar Dynasty *(1993),* Salaam Cinema *(1995)* Gabbeh *(1996)* A Moment of Innocence *(1996),* The Silence *(1998) and* The Door *(1999).*

These internationally acclaimed films differ in style and content—some deal with the plight of the urban poor, his personal experiences in jail, satires on the Iranian monarchy and the media, dramatic works and comedies. Makhmalbaf, whose work has received many prestigious international film prizes, was a member of the Singapore International Film Festival's Silver Screen Awards jury. He spoke to Richard Phillips about the role of cinema, the artistic and cultural environment in Iran and problems facing filmmakers internationally.

Richard Phillips: Is it true that *The Silence* has not yet been screened in Iran?

Mohsen Makhmalbaf: That's right. *The Silence* was shot in Tajikistan and I did the post-production in Iran but when I wanted to send it out of the country the government censored a sequence of the film. They actually did the cuts on the negative so I was forced to take the negative to France and reedit the film there. The

film authorities then told me that they could not give me a screening permit because I might have put the sequence they cut back in the film. So on that basis they banned the film in Iran.

But this is not the only film of mine that has been banned in Iran, there are two more—making it three altogether. One of these is *The Nights in Zayandeh Roud*, which was made nine or ten years ago. Actually in this movie I expressed some of the things that are now being said by the reformists, especially the new president, Khatami. Although Khatami and the reformists are saying these things about Iran and society, my film is still banned. The third banned movie of mine is called *Time of Love*.

RP: What did they object to?

MM: *Time of Love* deals with violence and how this violence is rooted in our culture and how it has influenced our culture. The film criticises all aspects of violence, both in the opposition and within the state.

RP: In *The Silence* Khorshid, the young boy, faces an extremely difficult situation. The family is poor, he is about to lose his job, and yet he is almost impervious to these pressures. He is intoxicated by life and the sounds around him. Why have you made such an optimistic film about someone in such harsh economic and circumstances?

MM *:* Actually this film shows the conditions that are necessary for the creation of art, and how, even though it may not be possible to solve one's financial problems, it is still possible to create great art. Iranian cinema is another example of how great movies can emerge from difficult pressures—from war and all sorts of economic problems.

It is possible to say that *Gabbeh* is one side of the coin and *The Silence* is another. *Gabbeh* is dealing with the image; *The Silence* deals with sound. Both films though are dealing with the process of art creation. And in *The Silence* you can see that music is a kind of explosion out of all these problems.

I cannot say whether this film is optimistic or pessimistic but I can say that it shows how art comes of out harsh conditions. In Iran it is said that I am pessimistic person. This is the first time I've been told that I'm optimistic.

RP: You've said in an interview about *The Apple*, your daughter

Samira's film, that the camera and the movie created the conditions to change the characters, the actors and society. Could you explain?

MM: Although this is Samira's film as her father I will explain something about this. As you know, *The Apple* is about two girls imprisoned in their home for 11 years by their father. When we made this film the newspapers started criticising the father for imprisoning the girls. However, it was not his fault but the culture he believed in. I believe that the positive thing about *The Apple* is that it never judges or actually criticises the father but makes clear that it is the culture that is responsible.

Sometimes we make films in order to show reality but often these films can actually change the fate of its characters. After making, and then showing *The Apple*, the father imprisoned the two girls again and the mother died. But the film created the conditions to change the lives of the girls. It led to another family adopting the two girls and they are now quite OK. In fact, nobody can actually recognise them as they were. They are now good students and have a natural life. If we had not made this movie their lives would not have changed.

RP: Is this an example of the special role that cinema, as opposed to other art forms, can play in society?

MM: This film is a specific example of what we have already discussed. In general Iranian cinema has created this role for itself and the Iranian people. It has acted as a mirror so that the people could see themselves and at last start to make corrections in their lives and in society.

RP: Could you comment on the artistic and cultural environment in Iran today and whether it has changed in the last 10 years?

MM: Actually the revolution was a social experience for our people. There was historical hope in everybody's dream for Iran during the revolution. Now, 20 years after this event, they have come to realise it was not that important. It was the experience that they had that was important, not the revolution.

Over the last year the Iranian government, the Iranian state, and the opposition have grown more intellectual. Ordinary people have also grown more intellectual and you can see this in the last election result. For example the former Iranian president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was nominated for the parliamentary elections in February, had great difficulty getting into parliament. He was the very, very last one elected.

Today there are deeper discussions in the Iranian media than there were 20 years ago. At that time people would say 'we do not want the Shah anymore'. Now there are more analytical articles appearing and the people say what they are looking for, not just what they are against.

RP: What is your opinion of the rapprochement now under way between the Iranian government and the United States?

MM: There are two important factors being discussed by the Iranian intellectuals today. The first is that there should be no more violence in our society, and the second is that Iran should establish relations with the rest of the world, including the United States. I agree with this and think we have to establish relations with all countries and peoples.

RP: Could you comment on some of the problems facing independent filmmakers and the domination of cinema by Hollywood-style blockbuster movies?

MM: Hollywood cinema has dominated the whole world, excluding perhaps a few territories like Iran, but the world has many cultures and so I believe that there should be various national cinemas. Of course when I speak about the defence of national cinema I do not mean that this kind of cinema should be limited to the country that it comes from.

Nevertheless there is a problem because international film festivals are the only places showing this kind of film—movies that deal with different cultural experiences. For instance, in Singapore when there is a film festival, Iranian movies are very well received but Iranian films are not screened here in the normal cinemas or broadcast on television. Another example is in France, the country where the cinema was created. Fewer French films are screened in the cinemas there and apart from American movies there are hardly any films screened from other countries.

But I also believe that there is another danger now emerging, which is new kind of Hollywood cinema that is trying to dominate. This is indicated by some of the European countries joining together to produce such movies. The same motives that brought Europe together against the United States in trade and business is now bringing them together to produce the same sort of films that Hollywood produces.

I've met many European film producers who believe that it is necessary to fight Hollywood cinema, and I agree, but they propose to do this by employing their own style of cinema and trying to make films that compete with Hollywood. Of course when I speak about Hollywood cinema I am not dealing with a physical phenomenon but a style, a way of making films that is dangerous for everybody, whether they be in the United States, Europe or anywhere else.

Any cinema, even national film, that dominates or takes over everything I consider the same as Hollywood-style movies. It is not just a state or a government but something that considers itself as the only voice and which prevents other voices being heard. And this sort of cinema, wherever it is produced, is a danger for all serious filmmakers.