

Samira Makhmalbaf addresses Cannes Film Festival forum

# "The Digital Revolution and the Future of Cinema"

28 June 2000

*The World Socialist Web Site, as part of its ongoing efforts to develop discussion on a broad range of political, historical and artistic questions, is presenting here a recent speech on the future of cinema by talented young Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf. The internationally acclaimed 20-year-old filmmaker, who directed The Apple (1998) and shared this year's Cannes Film Festival Jury Prize for Blackboard, a film dealing with the plight of Iranian Kurds, delivered the speech on May 9 to a special forum at Cannes.*

*Whilst the WSWWS does not necessarily share all of the ideas discussed by Makhmalbaf, her presentation grapples with some of the problems confronting filmmakers today. She argues that simplification of filmmaking and new opportunities for distribution created by the digital revolution and the Internet offer new ways of challenging the dominance of the market over the creative process.*

*We encourage all those who regularly read the WSWWS to submit their comments on the issues raised. Makhmalbaf's address has been slightly abridged for reasons of space.*

Cinema has always been at the mercy of political power, particularly in the East, financial capital, particularly in the West, and the concentration of means of production, anywhere in the world. The individual creativity of artists throughout the twentieth century has much suffered from the whimsical practices of this odd combination of forces. The situation at the threshold of the twenty-first century seems to have altered radically. With astonishing technological innovations now coming to fruition, artists no longer seem to be totally vulnerable to these impediments.

In the near future, the camera could very well turn into the simulacrum of a pen, comfortably put at the disposal of the artist, right in the palm of her hand. If, as it has been suggested, "the wheel is the advancement of the human feet," then we might also say that camera is the advancement of the creative eye of the filmmaker.

Earlier in the twentieth century, because of the overwhelming weight of the camera, the difficulty of operating it, and the need for technical support, this eye was cast like a heavy burden on the thoughts and emotions of the filmmaker. But today, following the digital revolution, I can very easily imagine a camera as light and small as a pair of eyeglasses, or even a pair of soft-lenses comfortably and unnoticeably placed inside the eye and on the cornea.

Three modes of external control have historically stifled the creative process for a filmmaker: political, financial and technological. Today with the digital revolution, the camera will bypass all such controls and be placed squarely at the disposal of the artist. The genuine birth of the author cinema is yet to be celebrated after the invention of the "camera-pen," for we will then be at the dawn of a whole new history in our profession. As filmmaking becomes as inexpensive as writing, the centrality of capital in creative process will be radically diminished.

The distribution of our work will of course continue to be at the mercy

of capital. Equally compromised will be governmental control and censorship, because we will be able to "screen" our film on the Internet and have it watched by millions around the globe in the privacy of their own living rooms. But that will not be the end of censorship because self-censorship for fear of persecution by religious fanaticism and terror will continue to thwart the creative imagination.

If the camera is turned into a pen, the filmmaker into an author, and the intervening harassment of power, capital and the means of production are all eliminated, or at least radically compromised, are we not then at the threshold of a whole new technological change in the very essence of cinema as a public media? I tend to believe that because of the increasingly individual nature of cinematic production, as well as spectatorship, the cinema of the twentieth century will become the literature of the twenty-first century.

Are we then attending an historical moment when cinema is being in effect eulogised? Is cinema about to die? François Truffaut made a film about the death of literature with the appearance of cinema. If Truffaut were alive today, would he not be tempted to try it again and make a film about the death of cinema at the hand of author digital? Or would he not imagine the granddaughter of Tarkovsky or Ford preserving the films of their grandfather somewhere in the North Pole?

I tend to think that the digital revolution is really the latest achievement of technological knowledge and not the summation of what artists still have to say. It is as if this revolution has been launched against certain cinema-related professions, and not against cinema itself. We will continue to have the centrality of scenario, creative editing, mis-en-scene, decoupage and acting. Perhaps the most affected aspects of the digital revolution will be the actual act of filming, light, sound and post-production laboratory works. But certainly not cinema itself.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the unbalanced relation between the artist and the technician had reached a critical point that could have very well resulted in the death of cinema. Today, though, the relation is reversed and the technological advancements of the instruments of production may in fact result in the death of cinema as an industry and once again give the priority to cinema as an art. The digital revolution will reduce the technical aspect of filmmaking to a minimum and will, instead, maximise the centrality of the filmmaker. Thus, once again the centrality of the human aspect of cinema will overcome the intermediary function of its instruments, and film as an art form will reclaim its original posture.

It seems to me that with the priority of cinema over technique, we will begin to witness the birth of real auteur filmmakers. We still lack the presence of artists, philosophers, sociologists or poets among the filmmakers. Cinema is still in the hands of technicians. Most film schools throughout the world teach the technical rather than the creative aspects of filmmaking. Of course the question will always remain whether or not the creative aspects of filmmaking can really be taught. Whatever the case

may be, cinema is today by and large limited to those who have access to expensive cameras. For about six billion inhabitants of the world, today we produce something around 3,000 films every year. Not more than 1,000 cameras are the instruments of this sum of annual cinematic production. When the demographic number of digital cameras improves dramatically, a massive number of camera-less authors will have an unprecedented opportunity to express their virgin ideas. Under the emerging technological democracy, political and financial hurdles can no longer thwart the effervescence of this thriving art.

Let's imagine a world in which painting a picture would be as difficult as making a film and that the ideas of Dali, Van Gogh or Picasso were to be implemented by a group of technicians. The digital revolution is like giving the potential equivalents of Van Gogh and Picasso a brush for the first time. If PhotoShop or Windows 98 software programs can render Monet, Manet, Pissaro, Cézanne or Matisse redundant, then the digital camera can also make Truffaut, Ray, and Bergman redundant. The digital camera is the death of Hollywood production and not the death of cinema.... But would an astronomical increase in the number of auteurs not result in the death of the very idea of the auteur?

The ease with which just about anyone can become a filmmaker will undoubtedly result in an astronomical increase in the annual and per capita film production in every society. The increase in the supply of films will result in a decrease in demand. This will lead to an aggressive competition to overcome the generated noise that levels everything. The competition among the producers will be translated into competition among filmmakers and the potential audience will soon find itself in a huge supermarket, incapable of choosing a favourite product. By the end of the twentieth century, the filmmakers were in a position of power and choice. Would the digital revolution and its ancillary consequence of a massive increase in film production result in a stalemate where there are more people to make films than those who are willing to sit quiet in a dark room for a sustained period of time and actually watch a film? What if buying and operating a camera is as easy as buying a pen and writing with it? Certainly there have never been as many great creative writers as there have been pens in the world. Nor would the inexpensive availability of digital camera mean the disappearance of the creative filmmaker. But cinema as an art will certainly lose its multitudinous audience. The general appeal of cinema may thus be fractured into more specific attractions, and a division of labour and market may take place in world cinema. Gradually, in fact, the audience, as consumers, may begin to dictate the terms of its expectations, and cinematic narrative may begin to be deeply affected by the expectations of its viewers.

In its technological growth, the camera gradually metamorphosed into a monster that in order to register the reality that faced it first had to kill that reality. Remember the scene where the camera and the band of technicians behind it are all gathered to register a close-up of an actor, while the director was trying to convince the actor that she was alone and had no hope of meeting anyone for the longest time. The wretched actor was put in the unenviable position of trying to ignore the platoon of people behind the camera. But now the smaller the camera gets the less it will impose its distorting presence on the nature of reality facing it. The observation of reality will become more direct, more intimate, to the point that the camera can now be literally considered as the very eye of the filmmaker.

If despite all its democratic intentions, Italian neo-realism could not surpass the technical limitations of cinema and witness the daily, routine realities, today such movements as Dogma 95 take full advantage of such technological advancements and reach for what Italian neo-realism could not achieve. We may very soon reach a point when a visual journalism will be possible, and cinema, just like journalism, may be able to perform its critical function in safeguarding democracy. An event may take place on a Saturday, on the basis of which a film may be made on Sunday, screened on Monday and thus have an immediate effect on the daily

making of history.

Will the digital revolution result in a situation where cinema becomes an increasingly individual form of art? If feature films can now be produced with a small digital camera and then watched on the Internet on a personal computer, will that technological marvel result in the elimination of the very idea of a collective audience as the defining moment of a cinematic experience?

Imagine state-of-the-art home audio-visual equipment with screens as big as a wall of a living room. In such cases one may think of cinema, just like literature, to become an individual form of art and lose its social function. If the concentration of the means of production in the past had thwarted the creative imagination, cinema still had a particularly social function because of the communal nature of its spectatorship. Any artist, at the moment of creation, imagines herself in front of an audience. That is constitutional to the creative act. If imagining this collective audience is denied the artist then the result will have a catalytic effect on the creative process. On the part of the audience the effect is equally detrimental. If we deny the audience the pleasure of watching a film in the presence of others, cinema will lose one of its distinct and defining characters.

I believe that cinema has much benefited from the social nature of humanity and will not abandon it easily, neither will technological advancement so swiftly change our communal character. Today, most French people have coffee and coffeemakers at home. Why is it that street-side cafes are so full of people? It is the same urge that will bring people to movie houses. Cannes is yet another good example. Although cinema is still a very social event, the need to be part of an even larger crowd brings us together here at Cannes. The pleasure of watching a film here at Cannes is incomparably higher than watching the same film in a smaller festival, in a more modest theatre, and in the company of only a few people. Thus whatever the status of technological innovations, private screening, production and spectatorship, this collective urge will continue to guarantee the social function of cinema as an art form. The social nature of creative imagination will prevent the radical individualisation of cinema even beyond the privatisation of the means of production and spectatorship. The creative act has a vested interest in its remaining social, because eliminating the audience from the mind of an artist will thwart the creative process.

Art is ultimately intended and targeted towards its audience. In this respect art is very much like religious practices. Believing individuals can practice their piety in the privacy of their homes. But the social function of religion inevitably brings people out to communal practices. If from performing one's religious rituals to drinking a cup of coffee continue to be social acts despite the abundant possibility of their privatisation then the collective need to watch movies in the presence of a crowd will also persist. The irony of this whole development is that in its historical growth cinema gradually found itself in a predicament that like architecture every aspect of its execution was contingent on something else. With the digital revolution, cinema can now retrieve its own status as an art form and yet by virtue of the same development it sees its own social function endangered.

What would be the relationship of the digital revolution to the civil function of imagination and the possibility of a more democratic cinema?

By far the most significant event in the digital revolution is the reversal of the political control in some countries (particularly in the East), and of financial control in others (particularly in the West).

There is another, equally important, consequence to the digital revolution. People in the less prosperous parts of the world have so far been at the receiving end of cinema as an art form. The history of cinema begins with wealthy and powerful nations making film not just about themselves but also about others. This is a slanted relation of power.

Today, one hundred years into the history of cinema, this undemocratic and unjust relation of power shows itself by the fact that not a single film

is shown from the entire African continent in Cannes this year. Does Africa have nothing to say? Are Africans incapable of expressing themselves in visual terms? Or is it the unjust distribution of the means of production that has denied African artists this possibility. Another example in the unjust distribution of the means of production is comparing my own family with a nation-state like Syria. During the last year, Syria has produced only one film, and my family two and a half feature films!

With the same logic that the per capita production of film in my family was increased by my father sharing his knowledge and facilities with the rest of the family, the digital revolution will put such knowledge and facilities at the disposal of a larger community of artists. Imagine new, more diversified, and far more democratic sections of the Cannes Film Festival in the year 2010, all occasioned by the digital revolution.

Another crucial consequence of the digital revolution is that cinema will lose its monological, prophetic voice and a far more globally predicated dialogue will emerge. Right now some 3,000 films are produced annually for a global population of some 6 billion people, that is to say one film per 20 million people. But not all these 3,000 films have the opportunity of actually being screened. Competition with Hollywood is intense throughout the world. National cinemas are putting up an heroic resistance to Hollywood cinema. Many movie theatres are monopolised by Hollywood productions. There are movie theatres that are reserved for yet to be made films in Hollywood, while the national cinemas are on the verge of destruction.

When there were few books people considered what was written superior truth and if a book was found in a remote village they would attribute its origin to heavenly sources. When books became abundant, this absolute and sacred assumption was broken and earthly auteurs lost their heavenly presumptions. In the age of the scarcity of cinematic productions *Titanic* has the function of that heavenly book and our world very much like that small village.

The prevailing cinematic view of the world is that of the First World imposed on the Third World. Africa has been seen from the French point of view and not from the African point of view, nor have the French and Americans been seen from the African point of view. The digital revolution will surpass that imbalance. The First World will thus lose its centrality of vision as the dominant view of the world. The globality of our situation will no longer leave any credibility for the assumptions of a centre and a periphery to the world. We are now beyond the point of thinking that we received the technique from the West and then added to it our own substance. As a filmmaker, I will no longer be just an Iranian attending a film festival. I am a citizen of the world. Because from now on the global citizenship is no longer defined by the brick and mortar of houses or the printed words of the press, but by the collective force of an expansive visual vocabulary.

A certain degree of techno-phobia has always accompanied the art of cinema. One can only imagine the fear and anxiety that the first generation of moviegoers felt. Or the first time the French saw Lumiere's train on the screen. The cinema of our future will not be immune to technological challenges and opportunities that are taking place around us. Beyond the techno-phobia of the previous generations, however, the new generation will play with these technological gadgets as toys of a whole new game.

It seems to me that this very conference is convened out of a techno-phobic impulse and as a collective mode of therapeutic exercise to alleviate this techno-phobia. Whereas I believe we should consider this event a ritual funeral for technology. Technology has now progressed so much that is no longer technological! All we need in order to master the operation of a digital camera is how to turn a few buttons, as if unbuttoning our jacket in a dark room. One of our conclusions at the closing of this conference could very well be that after the digital revolution we are all cured of our techno-phobia.

A new fear will now preoccupy filmmakers, and that is whether or not I

as an artist have something to say that other people with a digital camera in their hand do not. There is a story in Mathnavi of Rumi, one of our greatest poets, that once a grammarian mounted a ship and headed for the sea. Upon the calm and quite sea he had a conversation with the captain and asked him if he knew anything of syntax and morphology. "No," answered the captain. "Half of your life is wasted," retorted the learned grammarian. A short while later, the ship is caught in the middle of a huge storm. "Do you know how to swim?" asks the captain. "No," says the grammarian. "All your life is wasted," assures the captain.

Twenty years ago if someone wanted to enter the profession of filmmaking she would have been asked if she knew its technique. If she did not she would have been told that she was illiterate about half of the art. Some 20 years later the only question she needs to answer is if she has art.



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