Toronto International Film Festival 2003—Part 4

How does the artist portray historical tragedy?

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Several films at the recent Toronto film festival treated, directly or indirectly, the ongoing tragedy in Afghanistan, *Osama* (directed by Afghan filmmaker Siddiq Barmak), *At Five in the Afternoon* (directed by Samira Makhmalbaf, from Iran) and *Silence Between Two Thoughts* (directed by Babak Payami, also Iranian). The first two were shot in Afghanistan, the third a few miles from its border in eastern Iran.

The films deal with politically and ideologically explosive issues. The Iranian government—whose attacks on artistic freedom and filmmakers in particular have escalated over the past several years—attempted to prevent Payami from completing his film, arresting him temporarily and confiscating the film's negative. He was obliged to recreate a video version of *Silence Between Two Thoughts* from computer files. [*See* "Interview with Babak Payami, director of *Silence Between Two Thoughts* "]

The three films take different approaches to Afghan reality. *Osama* follows the experiences of a young girl—loosely based on a true story—during the rule of the Taliban; Samira Makhmalbaf's work is set in post-Taliban Afghanistan; and *Silence Between Two Thoughts* makes no direct reference to either locale or time period.

The three works have this much in common: they paint existence for the masses of people in Afghanistan in hellish colors. The directors forthrightly present the unspeakable poverty and economic backwardness that afflict the Central Asian country, the products of decades of civil war, imperialist intrigue and dictatorial rule by various reactionary cliques. In the two works filmed in Kabul, the characters wander around, often as in a daze or a nightmare, amid dusty ruins.

The terrible external harshness—worsened by drought in Payami's film, set in a small village—is only matched by the spiritual oppression of the film's protagonists, especially (but not only) the female characters, as they suffer the consequences of the upsurge in Islamic fundamentalism.

Each of the works is honest, intelligent and humane. The filmmakers have attempted to shed light on a horrifying situation for an international audience. They deserve full credit for having done so. The degree to which they have been successful demonstrates powerfully that art has no limits as to its subject matter. It is fully capable of taking on and communicating the most painful modern human realities.

Barmak's *Osama* is the first feature production of the post-Taliban Afghan cinema. During the early stages of the Taliban regime a woman finds herself out of a job as the new rulers close down the hospital where she works. She pleads for back wages. "How can I pay you your wages? I have no money, not a dime," says an official. The conditions are ghastly. The hospital has run out of everything, including oxygen. An old man, the woman's patient, dies from a lack of it.

The Taliban militiamen lurk everywhere. "Why do you let her talk to strangers?" they demand of the mother. Seeing a female bicycle passenger whose feet are exposed, they yell, "Cover her up!"

The woman has lost her husband and brother in war. The widow, her mother and 12-year-old daughter face starvation. A woman is not even allowed to walk the city streets without a male companion, making a search for work impossible. "I wish God hadn't made women," says the old woman. The mother feels she has no choice: she cuts her daughter's hair, renames her Osama and dresses her in boy's clothing.

"Osama" gets a job in a shop. But that brief reprieve is interrupted when the Taliban round her up for prayers as a boy and eventually military training and religious indoctrination. In any case, her boss takes off for Pakistan, closing the shop. At "school"—where nothing more than the incantation of the Koran goes on—"Osama" climbs a tree to prove to her suspicious classmates that she's a boy; but she can't get down again and cries. As a punishment she's suspended terrifyingly inside a well.

When officials discover she's a girl, a death sentence is passed on her by a religious court. As she unknowingly waits her turn, skipping rope, a foreign videomaker is shot and a woman stoned to death. An ancient, decrepit mullah obtains "Osama's" pardon from the leading cleric in order to take the 12-year-old as his latest wife.

The film is a succession of virtually unrelieved horrors and humiliations, each of them individually quite convincing. Barmak represents the Taliban movement as merciless and primitive, the sworn enemy of everything modern and urban—an Islamic version of the Pol Pot regime. The cleric/judge and the lecherous mullah are something more, cynical in the one case, hypocritical in the other.

At a public screening the director explained that he had found his young actress, Marina Golbahari, one of 13 children of an extremely poor family, begging in the streets of Kabul. All of the film's performers are nonprofessionals. He noted as well that some of the individuals who portray Taliban militiamen had been that in real life and now repented of their actions.

Barmak, who attended film school in the former USSR and lives in Kabul, briefly discussed the conditions under which the Taliban came to power in the mid-1990s. "The Afghan people were tired of civil war. They wanted someone who would bring them peace.... The Taliban wanted power. The oil companies wanted power. It's a very dirty political game." Speaking more generally, he said, "In my opinion the world must be changed for the better.... Women have more rights now that the Taliban are gone. But the Americans only want to use Afghanistan as a military base."

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The latest film by 23-year-old Samira Makhmalbaf (*The Apple*, *Blackboards*), based on a novel by her father, filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, derives its title from Federico Garcia Lorca's elegiac poem. In its opening stanza the poem, about the death of a bullfighter in 1934, includes the line, "The rest was death, and death alone at five in the afternoon."

Noqreh is a young woman in contemporary Kabul. She survives with her deeply religious and traditional father and her sister-in-law, whose infant is "dying of hunger and disease." After her father drops her off at religious school, a concession she has wrung out of him, Noqreh sneaks out the back, puts on white, high-heel shoes and goes off to a class where she and other young women discuss the future of the country.

"Who wants to be president of the republic of Afghanistan?" the teacher asks. A debate erupts over whether women should aspire to such an office. Noqreh is one of those who announces her desire to be head of state, like Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister of Pakistan. The film depicts some of the obstacles that lie in her path.

Driven by his conviction that Kabul has now become a city of blasphemers, Noqreh's father moves his little family from one set of temporary living quarters to another. He insists on leaving one overcrowded ruin of an apartment building because another refugee plays his radio too loudly. At a military checkpoint they face the dangerous "new" Afghanistan. They take up residence in the wreck of an old airplane. Noqreh meets a young man, who promises to bring her copies of political speeches so she can see how politicians speak. But she doesn't dare be seen with him in public: "People will gossip."

Noqreh asks every returning refugee from Pakistan, "Is the president a man or a women?" Two poverty-stricken women answer simply, movingly, "We don't know. We're illiterate. We lived in caves. We went hungry."

The old man becomes dissatisfied with conditions in the wreck of an airplane, so they move again. By this time the baby is near death. They move into an empty government building, another ruin. The young man makes Noqreh's photograph into a political poster and pins it up on every column.

Now they leave the city altogether, heading for a "real Islamic city." Things go from bad to worse in the middle of the desert. For fire at night, they have to burn their cart. Helicopters and airplanes fly overhead. They encounter an old man lying on the ground by his dying donkey. He is on his way to a Taliban council in Kandahar which will decide whether to hand over bin Laden to the US. "You are too late, my friend. America has invaded Afghanistan. Omar and bin Laden have fled." The family continues slowly into the desert, with Noqreh reciting lines from Lorca's poem: "Ah, that terrible five in the afternoon! It was five by all the clocks!"

In an interview at Cannes this May, Samira Makhmalbaf told an interviewer from the *Guardian* that the Taliban were not simply a group "who ruled in Afghanistan for a few years and then were gone. They're in the minds of people, in the culture of Afghanistan and in the culture of so many eastern countries—it's not like an external wound you can dress. It's deeper. It's like a cancer. It takes time." As for the bleak ending, "I try to give the reality, not just to make what I want—[to tell] no more lies." She hopes that in her movie people can "hear the voice of the people of Afghanistan ... I can try to be their representative."

The version that we have of Babak Payami's film, this video reconstruction, is a "scarred" version of the original, which the director assured me was much more "beautiful."

The first shot of the film lasts eight minutes or so, as the camera pans around a courtyard. We see a man, his head wrapped in a scarf, slowly taking aim with his rifle and firing. We hear bodies fall. He appears to wipe a tear. Finally a voice is heard. "Haji says the girl is a virgin. Virgins go to hell, convicts must go to hell." We eventually see the girl, miserable and terrified, against a wall, with the two corpses beside her. She's to be saved, and the executioner—for that's what he is—for the local religious leader/warlord, the Haji, is ordered to marry her.

The girl, locked in a shed, silently resists the idea and the executioner does not force himself on her. The film proceeds almost wordlessly. They prepare the reprieved girl for her wedding day. The villagers, including his stepfather, are angry at the executioner for serving the Haji. He defends himself, "Haji saved this land. I'm devoted to his cause. Before Haji there was nothing but drought." But there's only drought and misery now.

The executioner's little sister visits the girl, the bride-to-be, in her makeshift prison. "Have you sinned?" she asks. "Girls don't sin." "Haji says you've sinned." "No one ever sins," replies the girl.

The women of the village, led by its matriarch, make a pilgrimage up a mountain pass. Freed from normal restraints, they dance and carry on. The girl tries to escape, but looking out on the landscape, she sees only barren land in every direction. There's nowhere to go.

The townspeople rise up against Haji, who flees. His executioner remains to bear the brunt of the population's anger. He's cursed and beaten. "Murderer!" "Filthy bastard!" "Kill him!" Someone says, "They turned an orphan from our village into an executioner." The rumor flies that the girl has been killed. In fact, she's alive. The executioner meets his tragic fate.

Payami, as he explained in our conversation, has spent much of his time outside Iran. As the most "Western" of the Iranian directors whose works were screened, it only follows, by an immutable law of artistic production, that his film should be the most "Iranian" in its approach. It moves slowly and, as noted, almost mutely. Sometimes both the languor and the silence are overdone. But the film, at its best, has considerable power. Payami treats the problems of the region, including the devastating role of religious bigotry and fanaticism, with great seriousness.

The attempt by the authorities in Iran to suppress *Silence Between Two Thoughts* is a despicable attack on artistic and intellectual freedom. Artists and intellectuals around the world must come to Payami's assistance and demand that the Iranian government drop all efforts to censor his work, return his materials, including the film's negative, and permit him to continue working without restrictions.

Each of the three films has its strengths and weaknesses, and it is unfair in principle to lump them together, even for praise. *Osama* is horrifying in its depiction of a defenseless young girl at the mercy of utterly medieval practices. Makhmalbaf's film painfully marks out the limits for its characters, depicting Afghanistan as a prison-house for the soul. *Silence Between Two Thoughts* underscores the plight in particular of ordinary people who get caught up blindly in the fundamentalist cause.

Nonetheless, there is a commonality to the films, both good and bad. They present intensely detailed and indelible pictures of the tragedy in Afghanistan or the region. They spare no one and nothing. The director in each case, one feels, has undergone an extremely trying and exhausting experience simply in the production of his or her film. There is a genuine commitment here to truth and the progress of the peoples of the area.

Barmak's is the most densely naturalistic of the works, with the inevitable limitations that implies. The accumulation of terrible events threatens at times to overturn the film, because such a piling up of tragedy ultimately inures the spectator, dulls him or her to the painful incidents onscreen. We need to know not simply what happened, but more of *the*

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truth about what happened. This is a generalized problem.

The other two works are less naturalistic, each would like to make itself a universal statement and, to a certain extent, does. However, as Samira Makhmalbaf's statement indicates, other issues arise. Talibanism is "in the minds of people in the minds of people, in the culture of Afghanistan and in the culture of so many eastern countries"? It's like a "cancer"? The words are perhaps taken out of context, but this would seem to blame the peoples of the region and their "minds" for the economic backwardness produced, in the first place, by decades of colonial or semi-colonial exploitation, along with the ideological reaction created by the combined efforts of imperialism and fundamentalism. And is Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto, whose corrupt bourgeois regime opened the door to the present military junta, a model for anyone, male or female?

In our conversation, Payami made astute comments about the present socioeconomic situation in Iran and Afghanistan, and its prehistory, but it is not immediately clear how his film brings out that prehistory, thus making the terrible present more comprehensible. He argues that the fundamentalism portrayed in his film is a global phenomenon, and plays a pernicious role in the US as well. No doubt, but is the average spectator likely to derive that insight from a viewing of a film that so concretely locates itself in the Middle East?

How does the artist portray historical tragedy? First, by portraying the tragedy historically.

The strenuous concentration on immediate, concrete detail bringing out the horrors perpetrated by the Taliban and Taliban-like forces, admirable in itself, may very well—as I suggested in the interview with Payami—induce many spectators to reflect to themselves: Bush may be a swine, but at least he got rid of that monstrous regime!

Unless the greater historical truth is somehow introduced into the narrative, in whatever fashion the artist may choose, there are genuine hazards in a narrow focus on the Afghan events, or any events for that matter. None of the filmmakers indicated the slightest sympathy for the US invasion of either Afghanistan or Iraq, for imperialism's "solution" to the crisis, and I trust that none of them feel any. But neither have they made a sufficient effort, in my view, to overcome the immediacy of their material.

The present catastrophe in Afghanistan cannot be grasped apart from an awareness in particular of the decades-long US intervention in that unfortunate nation. In large measure bin Laden and the Taliban are the wretched products of American policy, begun in the late 1970s and carried on throughout the 1980s, of inciting Islamic fundamentalism to weaken the Soviet Union and weaken its influence in Central Asia. Bin Laden and others were recruited, directly or indirectly, by US intelligence to wage war against the USSR and destabilize the region. The Taliban were brought to power in the chaos that followed, with the blessings of Washington.

Moreover, the entire bin Laden phenomenon has its roots in Washington's alliance with oil-rich Saudi Arabia. The US has for decades propped up this feudalist autocracy, which promotes its own brand of Islamic fundamentalism as a means of maintaining its grip on power.

And what of the present circumstance, Afghanistan under US domination and with a puppet regime in place? The conditions continue to be unspeakable for the broad mass of the population, with one set of warlords replacing another, or with the same warlord simply changing the flag on the front of his limousine.

As the WSWS recently reported: "The scale of the social disaster in Afghanistan is immense. Even in comparatively better-off Kabul, where most of the aid agencies are concentrated, there is widespread unemployment and poverty. In an interview last week, Pierre Salignon, program director for the aid group Médecins Sans Frontières, explained: 'Kabul is 70 percent destroyed, and people throughout the city live in an extremely precarious situation. The public assumes that peace in Afghanistan has returned but the reality is different: insecurity for civilians amidst an armed peace with ethnic tensions. And while international aid is concentrated in the capital, it has been poorly developed.'

"Outside Kabul, conditions are far worse. The US has perpetuated the arbitrary rule of a myriad of feuding warlords and local militia leaders who establish their own laws and exact their own taxes, taking the lion's share for themselves and their close supporters. At last month's session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, US officials blocked any criticism of the human rights abuses in Afghanistan, past or present, for the simple reason that any investigation would be compelled to focus on the atrocious record of those being supported by the Bush administration."

Is it really possible to get at the deepest truth about the Afghan tragedy, even in a drama, without at some point an effort being made—if not in the first wave of films, then in the second or third—to introduce critical historical and social issues?

The filmmakers would perhaps answer that they are not interested in the how and why, simply in the lived experience of the population, how the situation is understood and felt by the Afghan people themselves.

That is no doubt a worthy or legitimate starting point, but is it the sum-total that art can achieve? The "overnearness" to immediate, concrete life can, at a certain point, block the artist from arriving at a more objective and wider understanding. Or often accurate everyday detail is accompanied by rather abstract and even misguided conceptions, as in Makhmalbaf's case. Or *this* fundamentalism becomes *any* fundamentalism, and the suffering in Afghanistan *any* suffering, not the result of *definite* and *specific* historical and social forces that can be exposed and defeated.

There were many serious efforts on display at the Toronto festival, including these three. But certain problems persist. Above all, it seems to me, this: how to find, or rediscover, the artistic means by which the prehistory of events enters into drama as a real and compelling element.

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