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The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker: Makhmalbaf at Large
(review)

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BOOK REVIEWS: Cinephilia and the Post-European Auteurs

Note from the Editors:

In *Manhattan* (Woody Allen, 1979), Diane Keaton inducts Ingmar Bergman into her own personal “Academy of the Overrated.” Allen protests that “Bergman is the only genius in cinema today.” It’s a classic encounter between pseudo-intellectual and obsessive cinephile. It’s also a dated encounter, capturing a moment when a devoted moviegoer, weaned on Truffaut, Godard, and Bergman in the postwar era, could still catch a film by a master auteur at a New York City revival house almost any day of the week. Many revival houses have closed since then, and the old European “geniuses” have mostly receded. But today’s cinephiles attend festivals, set their DVRs to capture obscure gems on Turner Classic Movies, scrounge up old out-of-print VHS tapes, and tithe a substantial portion of their incomes to the Criterion Collection. (Cinephiles clung to TV in the pre-digital days as well—both *Grand Illusion* [Jean Renoir, 1937] and an unnamed W. C. Fields film surface on TV in *Manhattan*.) Today’s devotees have also found a new set of directors upon whom to focus their energies. With this book review feature, we turn to books about four non-European auteurs who inspire cinephilia. Andrei Tarkovsky’s work is historically closest to the postwar wave, though outside of that wave’s Western European center, while the American cult director Abel Ferrara symbolizes the cinephilia fostered by the rise of videotape in the 1980s. In company with directors such as Tsai Ming-liang, Abbas Kiarostami, and Hou Hsiao-hsien, the Iranian Mohsen Makhmalbaf and the Japanese Takeshi Kitano mark contemporary cinephilia’s richly international scope.

Amanda D. Lotz

Heather Hendershot

The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker: Makhmalbaf at Large

by Hamid Dabashi. Foreword by Mohsen Makhmalbaf. I. B. Tauris
2008. \$74.95 hardcover; \$26.95 paper. 255 pages

by NEGAR MOTTAHEDEH

Scrunched up uncomfortably in airplanes, waiting at airports, jostled about in buses and subways, sitting on barstools in cafes, sandwich shops, and restaurants, and standing in line outside of movie theaters, art museums, and yoga studios in cities all around the world, over the

summer I had Hamid Dabashi's *Makhmalbaf at Large* as my companion, and appropriately so. The book weaves together the lives of two dear friends, one, an academic scholar and political activist, and the other, a paradoxical and unruly writer and revolutionary filmmaker, both with deep roots in Iranian cultural history, its poetics and its politics. Dabashi pays tribute to his long friendship with Mohsen Makhmalbaf and to their habitually brisk and lively walks as they talk about the nature of art, love, family, faith, and reality in Paris and its suburbs, and in Tehran, Cannes, Geneva, and New York City.

Makhmalbaf at Large is certainly an important book about the life and work of an Iranian filmmaker, and it is a work of deft scholarship and engagement with twentieth-century European philosophy and the colonial response to its alienating discourse in cinema and the arts; but while the book speaks the historical context for the politics and arts of a tumultuous nation, it reads curiously like a novel: at once poetic, sensual, vivid, and deeply rooted in experience.

The book draws from the life of a once-committed-Islamic-turned-rebel-filmmaker, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who reached the heights of global recognition when September 11, 2001, and the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan serendipitously changed the fate of his film *Kandahar* (2001) from an obscure premier at Cannes in May 2001 to a film that became the subject of global attention and controversy after its first special screening in New York—a screening arranged from a bootleg copy acquired by Dabashi himself, and projected to a packed auditorium at Columbia University post 9/11. The book's purview ranges from the earliest films and writings of Makhmalbaf's career to his latest, examining in particular how his work is embedded in the violent history of the revolutionary years that culminated in the Islamic Republic. But it is the "Close Up" section on *Kandahar*, with its vivid portrayal of the global distribution of the film by the Paris-based company Wild Bunch and of the film's initial reception in New York City that resonates most strongly. Here, in the New York art scene and the context of its lively intellectual repartee, Dabashi is in his element.

Describing up to this point his love of cinema (a love particular to "we colored folks from the former (or emerging) colonies"),¹ outlining "the nature and function of post/colonial agency"² in national cinemas, and giving voice to the history of national trauma on which Dabashi claims national cinema is predicated and its "emancipatory aesthetics" articulated,³ Dabashi proceeds, in the penultimate "Close Up" chapter, to describe the mature landscape that defines Makhmalbaf's "virtual minimalism,"⁴ where the lines between fact and fantasy blur to reveal the elemental energies of the cultures he films, and in light play and joyous color, combat the forces of global capital and its culture industry.

Makhmalbaf's *A Moment of Innocence* (1996) (reviewed in the "Medium Shot" section) captures the biographical moment when the filmmaker as seventeen-year-old rebel took a knife and attacked a Pahlavi-era police officer to steal his gun. In the

1 Hamid Dabashi, *The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker: Makhmalbaf at Large* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), xxiii.

2 Ibid., xxiv.

3 Ibid., xxvi.

4 Ibid., 204.

reenactment of the scenes of his youth in this film, Makhmalbaf brings together his “younger” and “older” self, as well as the police officer he stabbed decades earlier. In the course of the reenactment, the knife and gun visually mutate into a piece of bread and a flower. Violence is reinvented. Love reigns.

This sublation of the real into what Dabashi terms “blissful moments of democratic improvisation” in Makhmalbaf’s work resists the colonial center of power without becoming its dialectical opposite.⁵ Makhmalbaf’s films mobilize “an orchestral choreography of signs that never collapse into signifiers, signs signating *ad gloriam*, planting themselves in the imaginative topography of our future memories, never dissolving, always suggestive, now in our dreams, then in our hopes.”⁶ With these words, Dabashi captures the ever-changing temporal and spatial coordinates of Makhmalbaf’s film. Now, *how* Makhmalbaf does this is as important as his doing it. And what is wonderful about Dabashi’s ever-presence in the weave of Makhmalbaf’s life in this book, is that he is witness to the coming into being of a revolutionary cinema. Makhmalbaf has exchanged the knife of his youth for the editing table and the gun for the camera:

He cuts with a staccato whipping between his hands and his eyes, slicing the scene and pacing the frame with the swift determination of appointed and purposeful strike. That revolutionary violence that once moved him to attack and strike a police officer is now sublated, metamorphosed, syncopated, and then spread evenly in the hidden assuredness with which he frames his shots, decides his camera movements, instructs his director of photography, commands “Action!” and then “Cut!”—and then goes about pasting a long shot here, a close up there, and thus seamlessly sells his dreams for a living.⁷

What results is the erosion of the distinctions that separate reality from fiction, a trademark of Iranian post-Revolution cinema, if ever there was one. Here, facts are “re-constituted, re-negotiated” by art and “let loose to hunt for their alternatives, all in a creatively multi-focal thrust that no author or filmmaker, let alone a censor official, can control.”⁸

Thus, in describing a national cinema as at once the effect in art of a national trauma and the object of the forces of globalization in the politics of global film festivals and film distributors, Dabashi reviews the agency of the postcolonial artist in the work of numerous Iranian filmmakers, among them Abbas Kiarostami, Bahram Beiza’i, Amir Naderi, Dayush Mehrju’i, Ja’far Panahi, and Majid Majidi, and registers in the work of this national cinema the paradoxical encounter with and response to modernity. In this account, Dabashi draws on the long history of Iranian modernity, reflects on the work of its modernist thinkers and poets, and shows through them a cultural history of an encounter with modernity in which reality is redefined, re-historicized, re-signified, emancipated, and reinvented through art. *

5 Ibid., 207.

6 Ibid., 208.

7 Ibid., 226.

8 Ibid., 123.