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In The Mix

Reality Meets Fiction in Contemporary Iranian Cinema

by Ohad Landesman

It has never been so difficult to tell a documentary from a work of fiction. Lately, as documentarians renew interest in the rhetorical tropes of subjectivity and fabrication, and fiction filmmakers wholeheartedly embrace nonfiction methods and conventions, the pursuit for cinematic truth seems elusive, almost utopian. The recent complex interplay between reality and fiction, representation and artifice, has led to the formulation of an unclassifiable hybrid, the experimental blend of document and story.

This relatively new phenomenon, recently identified and historicized by Kent Jones¹, features countless examples from third-world cinema. Michael Winterbottom's *In This World* (2002) starts out as a documentary about the plight of Pakistani immigrants to London only to abruptly change tone and transform into an intimate fictional story of two teenage refugees, Jamal and Enayat; Rashid Masharawi's *Ticket to Jerusalem* (2002) goes through forbidden checkpoints in Israel to recount the story of a movie projectionist determined to organize a film screening in East Jerusalem for impoverished Palestinians; and Hany Abu-Assad's *Ford Transit* (2002), a faux document of boiling-point tensions in the Israeli Occupied Territories, places an actor disguised as a real transit driver within staged circumstances of humiliation, violence, and despair. Realism is feigned and truth manufactured in a new body of work, which reaffirms the constructedness of both fiction and documentary.

Iranian cinema, one of the darlings of

contemporary film culture, has been drawing for quite some time now a similarly inseparable line between reality and fiction. A groundbreaking milestone is Kamran Shirdel *The Night When it Rained* (1973), a *Rashomon*-like documentary manufacturing conflicting positions on a real-life event in which a young boy heroically prevented a train disaster in Iran. The different versions put together, each told from a certain politi-

Iranian filmmakers freely blend fact and fiction to create a hybrid cinema that addresses the nation's social and political issues.

cal perspective, undermine the very certainty that such an event even happened. Ever since, the most interesting cinematic voices in Iran—Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen and Samira Makhmalbaf, and Jafar Panahi, to name a few—have been exploring the confines and contours of a crossbreed format, establishing it as the artistic trademark of this national cinema. Many have explained the appeal of this esthetic trend as a way to

overcome the limitations of censorship, reconstructing and faking what cannot be shown as reality. Today, though, much more is allowed than has been before, when a new spirit of relatively free speech in Iran allows filmmakers to tackle directly social issues. Is it an artistic wish to expand and rethink the documentary form then? A desire to redefine film esthetics for new technologies? Whatever the reasons may be,

it is clear that not since the early days of Italian neorealism have art and life felt so inseparable in cinema.

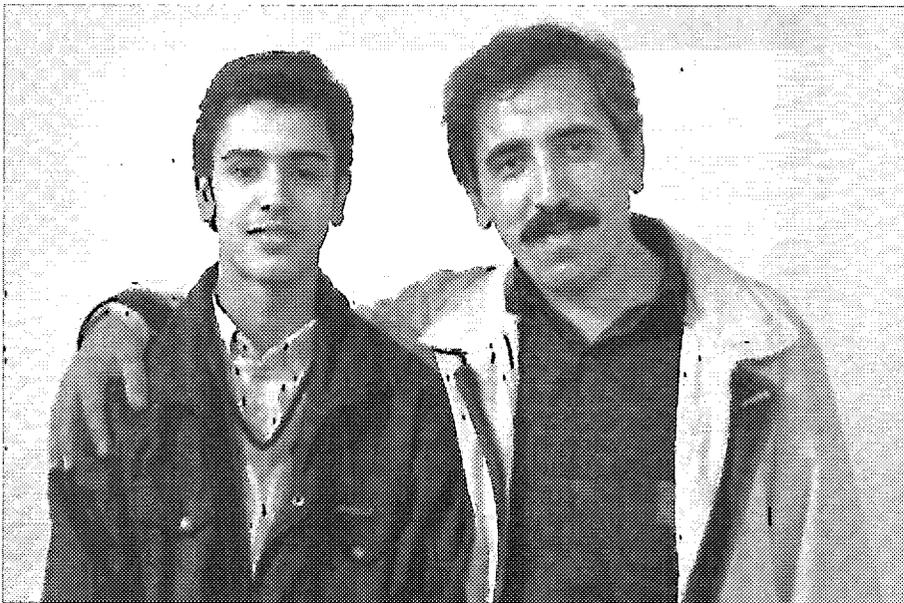
Jafar Panahi's inventive and playful drama *The Mirror* (1997) provides a case in point here. Mina (Mina

Mohammad Khani) is a young girl trying to get home from school by herself after her mother fails to pick her up on time. After endlessly strolling the streets for directions, she finally gets on the wrong bus. She is upset, and the last thing on her mind now is the respect for cinematic illusion. A strange off-screen voice utters, "Mina, don't look at the camera," and before we know it, Mina boldly removes the cast from her arm and

declares that she does not want to act anymore. Although this unpredicted self-reflexive moment could have terminated irrevocably any narrative flow, the film goes on almost uninterrupted. The disappointed film crew decides to keep the microphone on Mina and secretly follow her on her way back home. Inevitably, the gulf between reality and fiction changes into a mirror-like reflection. The little girl repeats the same route she has been walking through during the shoot, only this time she is really lost.



Mina (Mina Mohammad Khani) is the schoolgirl protagonist of Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror*. When her mother forgets to pick her up at school, fact meets fiction in her odyssey across Tehran.



Director Mohsen Makhmalbaf poses with Ali Bakhshi, who portrays Makhmalbaf's seventeen-year-old self as anti-Shah activist in *A Moment of Innocence* (1996) (photo courtesy of New Yorker Films).

The Mirror can be easily paired with another social allegory centered on children, Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998). Makhmalbaf's uncompromising feature debut chronicles the harrowing story of Massoumeh and Zahra Naderi, two young twin girls who were locked up in their own house for twelve years by their disturbingly possessive father. Seventeen-year-old Samira decided to document the aftermath of this disaster by following the girls as they restage the first liberating days of their new life. What she achieves, then, is a unique blur of fiction and documentary in which drama, even though slightly scripted, unfolds naturally as the Naderi family plays itself. Cinema fuses with life to create a symbolic indictment for oppression, a metaphor for a nation still trying to overcome the constraints of tradition and religion.

Abbas Kiarostami, who often fictionalizes his social documents (*Homework*, 1989; *And Life Goes On*, 1991; *ABC Africa*, 2001), arrives closer than ever to the evasive truth he is after in his quasidocumentary *Close Up* (1990). The film recounts the amazing true story of Ali Sabzian, an obsessed and disturbed film buff who cleverly misled a gullible Iranian family into believing that he is no other than the famous filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Everyone involved in the film appear as themselves, whether directly documented or participating in fictional reenactments. Kiarostami, who often leaves to the imagination more than what he actually shows, uses hybridity as a conceptual strategy. The veracity of everything we hear or see is kept uncertain to align with the psychological disorder of the film's protagonist and his inability to separate truth from delusion. *Close-Up* is an exceptionally

thoughtful meditation on the unique status of cinema in Iran today. In a poverty-stricken country, fiction meets reality at the point in which cinematic illusion provides imaginary salvation, the fantasy of easily crossing economic boundaries.

"Iranian hybrids accentuate through their idiosyncratic form how seriously cinema is taken in Iran today."

Ironically perhaps, the medium of cinema has been utilized as a form of psychotherapy not only by the impersonator Sabzian, but also by the impersonated Makhmalbaf. Facts meet fiction again in *A Moment of Innocence* (1996), Makhmalbaf's

personal effort to exorcise demons of the past and deal with a traumatic moment from his youth. A member of an anti-Shah militant group, young Makhmalbaf stabbed a police officer in an effort to disarm him. Consequently, he was imprisoned in a torture chamber by the brutal Savak secret police and stayed there until the Islamic revolution commenced. Twenty years later, during an audition for *Salaam Cinema* (1995), Makhmalbaf meets the same policeman he had attacked and asks him to dramatize his past on film by directing a young boy as himself. *Moment* becomes a shamelessly introverted reflection on the ability of cinema to recreate memories, multilayered with several levels of self-reflexivity—it is a film dealing with the making of a film about the life of a filmmaker. Makhmalbaf has already tested the boundaries of film acting, exploring how far his auditioners would go for their role in *Salaam Cinema*. Here, quite similarly, actors fall back on the harsh reality from which their roles have been created without the ability to distinguish one from the other. Perplexed and emotionally tormented by carrying the burden of someone else's trauma, the actor playing little Makhmalbaf suffers an almost identical breakdown as Mina's: "I don't want to act anymore," he cries out, refusing to stab the policeman. Is this the point of no return, where acting ends and life begins?

Abbas Kiarostami was the first filmmaker to declare his exclusive devotion to digital video after shooting *ABC Africa* (2001). The new technology plays a major role a year later in his unclassifiable hybrid *Ten* (2002), a purist and idealized attempt to materialize the democratic and esthetic qualities of DV in cinema. Admittedly, it would have been



Massoumeh and Zahra Naderi, twin sisters imprisoned in their own home by their father, portray themselves in Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Abbas Kiarostami's *Close Up* (1990) utilizes a quasidocumentary approach to tell the true-life story of an obsessed Iranian film buff.

impossible to make *Ten* without the two little cameras mounted on the car's dashboard. With no directorial mediation, the hidden cameras voyeuristically capture intense confrontational dialogs about life in contemporary Tehran. But the ambiguity this technology elicits between document and fiction is not merely a strategy for arriving indirectly at a political argument in a censoring national climate—after all, Mania speaks fearlessly about the difficulties of being a woman in Tehran.

For Kiarostami at least, digital video envisions a much bigger promise for cinema. It allows a filmmaker to remain faithful to his natural settings while eliminating any artifice embedded in the cumbersome 35mm filmmaking process. *Ten*, then, becomes an experiment in minimalism, where esthetic innovation is achieved through omission rather than excessive abundance of technical possibilities. With no script, sets, film crew, or any camera movement, Kiarostami strives to bring cinema back to its 'point-zero' and fulfill the Bazinian esthetic responsibility in its full extremity: observing life without judging it or intervening in its natural flow.

Perhaps the philosophy behind the Iranian hybrid film comes close to Italian neorealism, both privileging cinema as the preferred site for reflecting social reality by annihilating the distance between art and life. Still, this analogy might fall short at explaining why Iranian hybrids put so much emphasis on self-reflexivity and authorial presence. But even the purpose of these techniques is not easy to trace. The employment of the film-within-a-film structure cannot be understood by referring merely to modernist skepticism or postmodern playfulness. After all, any urge to deconstruct the documentary form or to foreground cinephilic impulses provides only a partial explanation. Perhaps it is all part of an

ongoing effort to suggest an alternative to Western cinematic practices. *Ten*, for one, abolishes completely a world of representations and offers in return only austere and primitive images.

But surely there is something else at stake here. Iranian hybrids accentuate through their idiosyncratic form how seriously cinema is taken in Iran today. While any other national cinema might have countered with skepticism or even cynicism any attempt to use the medium as a social ladder, a therapeutic tool, or a nonmediated channel to reality, Iranian cinema is clearly and unapologetically dead serious about it. ■

¹ See Kent Jones. "I Walk the Line." *Film Comment*, January-February 2005.

A Short History of Iranian Cinema (continued)

With Khatami's return to power as president in June 1997, this path was followed by the second generation of postrevolutionary Iranian filmmakers, which included Bahman Gobadi, Samira Makhmalbaf, Parviz Shahbazi, Alireza Amini, Hassan Yekta-panah, Hamid Nematollah, and Babak Payami. Iranian cinema evolved with the new look of their films. The difference between them and the previous generation is that although they choose more radical subjects, they are not so keen to show their films in Iran. With the cost of filmmaking in Iran being unbelievably low (nearly 150,000 Euros) and the small market for these films outside Iran, sometimes Western viewers see Iranian films that are absolutely unheard of at home. Films such as *The Bitter Dream* (Amir Yusefi) and *Good Earth* (Sepideh Farsi), for example, which are being screened in France, may never end up on a screen inside Iran. This creates the risk, however, of cutting Iranian viewers' link to Iranian films.

What is screened in the West and at international film festivals is not all that Iranian cinema has to offer. Apart from hundreds of short films, every year some ninety feature films are produced in Iran. Nearly twenty percent of these films are made by intellectual filmmakers and the rest are produced by what is known as the "main body" of Iranian cinema.

Many major American film production companies had offices in Tehran before the revolution, but they closed soon afterwards. Mosfilm, a Soviet company, was the sole provider of foreign films for quite a few years. As of 1983, the screening of foreign films was seriously limited in a move designed to protect domestic productions. Although this led to an economic flourishing of the Iranian cinema, it failed to create a national cinema in any real sense. Apart from a handful of quality films, it was largely mediocre productions—comprising the majority of Iran's cinema output and accounting for some sixty percent of the market—which benefited from this legal protection. Even so, and in spite of the subsidies, these B and C category films failed to increase the number of their viewers in the past two decades.

Those who made these films catered to the viewers' most immediate demands. Some of these filmmakers, for example, took advantage of the liberalization policy introduced by Khatami's government. They made films packed with teenagers chanting populist political slogans—which is precisely how they missed their opportunity. Forecasting a good or poor box-office yield for a new film cannot be made nowadays in view of rapidly changing political developments, unless the films violate a taboo, and most Iranian filmmakers cannot take such risks.

For about two years now, major American films such as *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *The Passion of the Christ*, *Kill Bill (Vol. I and II)*, *City by the Sea*, and *The Aviator* have been screened in Tehran simultaneously with their exhibition worldwide. They are later screened in other major Iranian cities. Thanks to the availability of contraband VHS videotapes and DVD's, costing the equivalent of one Euro each, many viewers prefer to watch these movies at home rather than paying four times as much to see them in movie theaters.

At the present time, comedies are very popular in Iran. In 2004, *Lizard*, a well-made film by Kamal Tabrizi, about a thief who flees in the disguise of an Islamic cleric, was banned three weeks after its first screening. Yet it has become Iran's best-selling film as a result of bootleg video sales.

The story of Iranian cinema is thus a strange one, that of a bed and several dreams. It could be the dream of a religious cinema or that of a secular cinema, a populist cinema, or an artistic cinema. In any event, the ship sails on, with various captains on board. ■

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