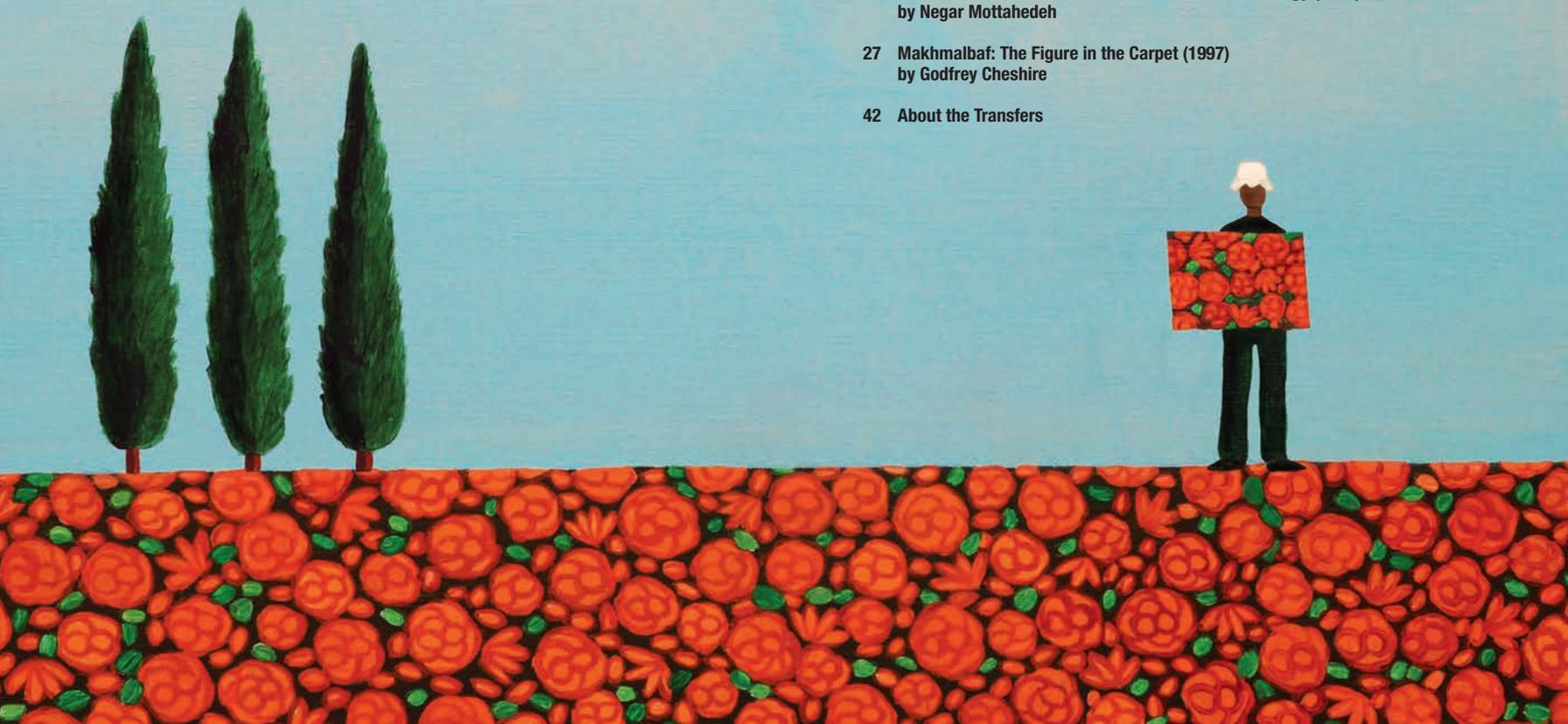




CONTENTS

- 4 Cast and Crew
- 11 A Poetic Trilogy of Color (2018)
by Mohsen Makhmalbaf
- 15 A Force of Nature: Mohsen Makhmalbaf's Poetic Trilogy (2018)
by Negar Mottahedeh
- 27 Makhmalbaf: The Figure in the Carpet (1997)
by Godfrey Cheshire
- 42 About the Transfers



GABBEH

1996

CAST

Abbas Sayahi Uncle
Shaghayegh Jodat Gabbeh
Hossein Moharami Old Man
Rogheih Moharami Old Woman
Parvaneh Ghalandari

CREW

A Film by **Mohsen Makhmalbaf**
Executive Producer **Mostafa Mirzakhani**
Producers **Khalil Daroudchi, Khalil Mahmoudi**
Director of Photography **Mahmoud Kalari**
Edited by **Mohsen Makhmalbaf**
Music **Hossein Alizadeh**
Sound **Mojtaba Mirtahmasebi**
Sound Mixing **Abbas Rastegarpour, Behrooz Shahamat**
Focus Pullers **Shahriar Asadi, Behzad Dorani**
Director's Assistants **Behrem Azimpour, Abolfazi Alagheband**
Set Photography **Mohamad Ahmadi**





THE SILENCE SOKOUT

1998

CAST

Tahmineh Normatova Khorshid
Nadereh Abdelahyeva Nadereh
Golbibi Ziadolahyeva Khorshid's mother
Araz M. Shirmohamadi

CREW

A Film by **Mohsen Makhmalbaf**
Produced by **Marin Karmitz**
Executive Producer **Mohamad Ahmadi**
Director of Photography **Ebrahim Ghafouri**
Edited by **Mohsen Makhmalbaf**
Sound Engineer **Behrooz Shahamat**
Set Photographer and Assistant Editor **Maysam Makhmalbaf**
Assistant Directors **Mostafa Mirzakhani, Samira Makhmalbaf**
Script supervisor **Hana Makhmalbaf**

THE GARDENER BAGHBAN

2012

CAST

Maysam Makhmalbaf

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Ririva Eona Mabi from Papua New Guinea

Paula Asadi from Canada

Guillaume Nyagatare from Rwanda

Tjireya Tjitendero Juzgado from Angola

Ian David Huang from Taiwan and USA

Bal Kumari Gurung from Nepal

CREW

A Film by Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Cinematography and Editing Maysam Makhmalbaf

Music Paul Collier, Salar Samadi

Sound Asad Rezai





A POETIC TRILOGY OF COLOR

by Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Gandhi once said, "I fail to understand why some people don't see the real landscapes, but instead they visit the art museums in order to see a mimesis of them."

I, however, think that people go to the art galleries to look through a different lens and connect to an artistic vision. These three films, *Gabbeh* (1996), *The Silence (Sokout)*, (1998), and *The Gardener (Baghban)*, (2012), are three different ways of looking at nature and are the result of a specific vision.

I have always avoided repeating myself and have tried to create and experience something new in all my films. However, amongst my works, *Gabbeh*, *The Silence* and *The Gardener* stand out due to their poetic theme and also due to the influence of painting and photography upon me when I was making them. Therefore they can be said to form a harmonious trilogy. And, having said that, I think it is befitting if they are seen and discussed as a unity.

Gabbeh is a film based on the making of an Iranian knotted-pile carpet which is made by nomads and it is not woven according to a pre-existing design. The film is the result of my being influenced by nature and is naturalistic in that sense. I made it with a conscious desire to follow the style of fauvists and impressionists in painting. During *Gabbeh's* filming, sometimes I waited for hours in order to use natural light and find a specific light which was produced a certain color in the landscape.

In contrast to *Gabbeh*, which is based on the picture, *The Silence* is based on the sound. In my opinion, these two can symbolize the cinema itself, which is a mixture of motion pictures and the sound. *The Silence*, similarly to *Gabbeh* is a minimalistic film. For example in many frames, even the rules of perspective are ignored in order to arrive at a new domain and style. It is also a film which represents my own childhood as I was deprived of listening to music when I was very young.

The Gardener is more philosophical and is based on the questions about the positive and negative aspects of religion. *Gabbeh* is made in Iran, *The Silence* is made in Tajikistan and *The Gardener* is made in the city of Haifa in Israel, where there also resides in exile an Iranian religion.





A FORCE OF NATURE

MOHSEN MAKHMALBAF'S POETIC TRILOGY

by Negar Mottahedeh

Poetic, vivid and sensually rooted in the experience of nature, the films in this Blu-ray set draw from the life of a once committed Islamic-turned-rebel filmmaker, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who reached the pinnacle of global recognition when the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 (on the heels of the attacks on US soil on September 11th) serendipitously changed the fate of one of his films. His feature length film on Afghanistan, *Kandahar* (*Safar e Ghandehar*, 2001), went from an obscure premier at Cannes in May 2001 to a film that became the subject of global attention and controversy.

Makhmalbaf's early career as an Iranian filmmaker and writer has roots in his country's own violent history. Iran's revolutionary years, 1977-79, were years of struggle for many Iranians of his generation, culminating in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's first Supreme Leader.

Born of that national soil, *Gabbeh* (1996), *The Silence* (*Sokout*, 1998) and *The Gardener* (*Baghban*, 2012) are products of a more mature landscape in the filmmaker's own life. The films are defined by a minimalism that blurs the lines between fact and fantasy. In this blurring, natural and elemental energies are embodied by human forms, biomimetically one could say, to contend with the pressing demands of capital, the repressive forces of power, and the exclusionary violence associated with acts of scapegoating and othering.

Makhmalbaf's 1996 feature film *A Moment of Innocence* (*Nun va Goldoor*) captures a biographical moment in the filmmaker's life, in which a 17-year-old rebel attacks a pre-Revolutionary era police officer. He steals his gun. In the 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. The knife and the gun visually mutate in this reenactment, transformed into a piece of bread and a flower, instead. Violence is reinvented. Love reigns. A "blissful" moment "of democratic improvisation" resists power, writes the scholar and film critic Hamid Dabashi. This moment plants itself "in the imaginative topography of our future memories, never dissolving, always suggestive, now in our dreams, then in our hopes".¹

¹ - Hamid Dabashi, *The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker: Makhmalbaf at Large* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), p. 207-208

Exchanging the knife of his youth for the editing table, and the gun for the camera, Makhmalbaf,

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.²

What results is the erosion of the distinctions that separate reality from fiction, a trademark of Iranian post-Revolutionary cinema if there ever were one. The temporal and spatial coordinates of Makhmalbaf’s films shift too, articulating new identities that both derive from and imitate nature.

*I am the beginning of the stream
And its end too
I am amongst the pebbles of the stream itself
My beloved passed by and
I was the sparrow in that lover’s hand
I was divided in three*

The poem above belongs to a scene in Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s *Gabbeh*, a scene in which the aging uncle of the main character, Gabbeh, fulfills the prophecy of a dream and encounters his future bride by a stream. In the Turkish lyrics of this poem, written by the uncle’s future bride, there is an intimation of fluctuating temporalities and narrative identities that like *A Moment of Innocence*, *Gabbeh* also embodies.

When the uncle in *Gabbeh* approaches his future bride, she sings the poem that she has written the night before. At his request she recites the poem anew and translates it from the Turkish dialect to Persian. At this moment of union and from within this poem, the future bride reveals a split in her subjectivity. Though apparently one, her recitation, as both stream and sparrow, reconstitutes her as also another two.

2 - Ibid. p. 226

This encounter of the uncle and his future bride is intercut with the scene that introduces and recalls the primary love story of the film. Originally conceived as a documentary on the Qashqa’i nomads and their practice of weaving gabbeh rugs, Makhmalbaf’s fiction film, *Gabbeh*, revolves around the courtship of a young nomad, Gabbeh, and her horse-riding lover, who are prevented from forming a union by a dominating tribal father. Time in *Gabbeh* is submerged in a watery logic, an ebb and flow, that unmoors the land-bound world of human life. Its narrative evades order and chronology. Seen in terms of ‘past’ or ‘future’, each moment of the film is intercut with sequences staged in a seemingly timeless ‘present’ that take place on a riverfront where an elderly couple engage the young nomad, Gabbeh, in a conversation about her life.

Asked about her kin, Gabbeh launches into the story that becomes the film’s fictional narrative, woven loosely by the threads of color that make up the gabbeh rug, and by the lament that textures Gabbeh’s own voice.

The central obstacle to the union of Gabbeh and her distant horse rider is cast as the arrival of Gabbeh’s older uncle. He comes to the tribe to visit his mother after many years of absence. The uncle’s arrival coincides with the death of his mother, Gabbeh’s grandmother. The tribe mourns her death by weaving a rug that narrates the day of the event and of the uncle’s arrival. His mother lost, the uncle goes in search of a wife, and as he is Gabbeh’s elder, Gabbeh’s own courtship with the horse rider is delayed. Gabbeh’s mother gives birth. A kid goat disappears in the mountains and Gabbeh’s younger sister dies in search of it. It rains and the rugs must be collected and protected. Each of these events delays Gabbeh’s union, until the uncle’s life too is transformed by the stream, in an encounter with his future bride in which she recites to him the poem above.

The future bride, awash in the waters of the stream and born of it, is tripled by her recitation, as is Gabbeh. Gabbeh is also two other figures: the old lady by the stream and the gabbeh rug afloat in it. The rug, whose silent threads form the archaic colors of the film *Gabbeh*, chronicles the day of Gabbeh and her lovers’ escape from the tribe, against a woven screen of blue.

Though we hear his inarticulate cries from afar bidding Gabbeh to come to him, Gabbeh’s lover is only seen in distant shots. The persistent close-ups of Gabbeh’s face wrapped in a rural scarf in a blue that is the rugs own, reminds us that she, Shaghayeh Djodat, is the actor who arrived at Makhmalbaf’s casting call in a black urban uniform and headscarf to beg the film auteur for a part in one of his festival films. Her ardent supplications at the 100th anniversary of cinema are, in fact, recorded in Makhmalbaf’s 1995 film *Salaam Cinema* as she tells him, in a whisper, about her lover who moved abroad, and the restriction



placed by Iran's isolationist government on Djodat moving from her homeland to join him. If Makhmalbaf's film wins on the international film festival circuit, she argues, she is bound to travel with it as one of its actors. This is her path to freedom. This is, she argues, how she will be reunited with her lover abroad.

Transformed into the archaic and tribal, and washed in the waters that are the distance between the past and the future, the story of these two internationally distant urban lovers moves like the colorful stems of anemone in the mutable rural plot of Makhmalbaf's festival film *Gabbeh*.

Set in Tajikistan, Mohsen Makhmalbaf's 1998 film, *The Silence*, is about sound and a blind boy, Khorshid. In the boy's sensual movement through a world of color and scent, sound transforms into music. A landlord's angry knock on his tenant's door becomes the four note, short-short-short-long, motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the bee's buzz, a foul note on a wood-carved string instrument. Sounds weave the narrative spaces of *The Silence*, as the colored threads of a rug weave the narrative of *Gabbeh*.

Nature's forces animate the sensory expression of the blind boy, Khorshid (literally translated as "sun" in Tajik), on whose power and purity rests the fate of the whole town. In *The Silence*, a bee who has spent time on dung, as opposed to the pollen of a beautiful flower, is faulted by a tyrannical instrument-seller for misguiding Khorshid's ability to tune instruments. An entire school's orchestra fails to perform as a result. The blind boy is fired and penniless. The landlord's angry four-note knock casts him and his mother out to sea.

Khorshid's biomimesis in *The Silence's* penultimate scene—the young boy's full sensory embodiment of the gallop of a white horse along the town's waterfront—is the exquisite force that endows the boy with the ability to conduct a stunning version of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* in the town's copper bazaar in the film's final scene.

Just as the surface of the material world becomes dark and dreary, the soil dormant, the trees naked and bare and no beauty or freshness remain to cheer the darkness and desolation, so the winter of the spiritual cycle witnesses the death and disappearance of divine growth and extinction of the light and love of God. But again the cycle begins and a new springtime appears. In it the former springtime has returned, the world is resuscitated, illumined and attains spirituality; religion is renewed and reorganized, hearts are turned to God, the summons of God is heard and life is again bestowed upon man.³

3 - From a talk by 'Abdu'l-Baha, the son of the Prophet Founder of the Baha'i Faith, delivered on May 5, 1912 in Chicago to the Plymouth Congregational Church, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 90-93

The quote above captures the idea of spiritual renewal animating the fundamental beliefs of the Baha'i community and its activities. It is this poetic impulse to mimic nature's invigorating and seasonally reawakened beauty that beckons the filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf. The attraction to the Baha'is in *The Gardener*, in spite of Makhmalbaf's own embrace of agnosticism in his latter years, nests in the conduct of the Baha'is themselves. Their comportment is biomimetic, as if invigorated by the natural world. The community takes as its example nature's embrace of the principle of unity in diversity: "The tabernacle of unity hath been raised," writes the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah, in an admonition to the people of the world; "Regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch."⁴

The Baha'is are the largest religious minority in Iran. Persecuted in Iran for their belief in the progressive unfolding of religious truth, the Faith's Prophet Founder, Baha'u'llah, and many of his early followers were banished from their country of birth and relegated to a life of imprisonment and exile. Baha'u'llah died in exile in 1892 and the Baha'i World Center now sits on the grounds where he and his family spent their last years, in the distant reaches of the Ottoman prison system, an area of the world currently under the auspices of the Israeli government.

Makhmalbaf arrives in Israel with his son, Maysam, to distill lessons of peace and unity from the poetics of the life led by the Baha'is who live and serve in these surroundings.

Among these lessons is a module on the abundance and humility of trees, attributes Baha'i children are taught to embody in the gardens surrounding the Baha'i properties as they lift the abundance of their fruits in their hands, as if unfolded branches of a fruit tree.

"Children, we're going to grow so many fruits, and sometimes people are mean to us. But we just show them kindness. That's what we were created to do. So, when someone throws a stone. What do we do? We give them our fruits." Responding to their teacher's counsel, hands outstretched, the children drop their apples to the ground. The repetition of these nature-bound poetics brings home the lessons of acceptance and diversity invigorating a community that, as Makhmalbaf's camera shows, embraces every race as its member. Committed to nature's constitution of the principles of unity in diversity, the Baha'i community, though scapegoated, persecuted, and exterminated in its country of birth for over a century and a half, becomes the source of the beautiful and a path to peace and a life of abundance, togetherness and ecstatic joy.

4 - Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, first published 1935, pp. 218

In the three films collected in this volume, the sensual ethics of Makhmalbaf's own camera transmutes modern conceptions of temporality and human identity. Yoking the eye of the camera with nature's own perspective, Makhmalbaf retrieves from the natural world the innate ability to assemble the beautiful through an array of colors and sound. The logic that binds Mohsen Makhmalbaf's feature films *Gabbah*, *The Silence*, and *The Gardener* is that of biomimesis, the human form mimetically invigorated by the gentle, diverse, and bountiful forces of nature.

Negar Mottahedeh is a cultural critic and theorist specializing in interdisciplinary and feminist contributions to the fields of Middle Eastern Studies and Film and Media Studies. She is the author of Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema (Duke University Press, 2008)







MAKHMALBAF

THE FIGURE IN THE CARPET

by Godfrey Cheshire

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Though far removed from Hitchcock's jokey obsessiveness, Mohsen Makhmalbaf makes occasional appearances in his own films. In *Two Sightless Eyes* (*Do Cheshman Beesu*, 1983), the second of four early features he made as an adherent of Islamic fundamentalism, he plays a revolutionary cleric, gaunt, turban-clad, and sternly righteous. Twelve years and a huge philosophical distance later, filming the lushly sensual *Gabbeh* (1996) amid the nomads of central Iran, Makhmalbaf couldn't use a native woman for an outdoor scene of childbirth, so he donned skirts and played the female role himself, in discreet, disguising longshot. Together two images synopsis an artistic odyssey that runs markedly against the cultural tide - from mullah to mother, from defender of orthodox certainty to poet of nature's pure profusion.

Those images describe the journey's earliest and latest phases. Between them come others describing its pivotal middle passage: the filmmaker as hero of social change, and as his own double. Though Makhmalbaf appears only in the last minutes of Abbas Kiarostami's masterful 1991 metadocumentary *Close-Up* (*Namayah Nazdik*), which chronicles the trial of a poor young man, Hossein Sabzian, accused of impersonating Makhmalbaf, Sabzian's testimony paints an effulgent, worshipful portrait of the filmmaker as a public figure idolized as a defender of the poor, a champion of social responsibility in the cinema.

Salaam Cinema (1995), Makhmalbaf's own metadoc, at first builds on that hero image by showing thousands of ordinary Iranians drawn to a film audition simply by his name, then undercuts it by showing the film's director - Makhmalbaf playing a fictionalized version of himself - as a mini-despot whose abuses stem from the power granted him by cinema.

The audition arena in *Salaam Cinema* contains three items which Makhmalbaf has said are symbolic, including a large mirror representing cinema. Such mirrors recur throughout

his work, and cumulatively pose the question of cinema's essential purpose: to capture the image of a world in search of justice, or of a filmmaker seeking self-definition? If the nominal contradiction in those aims gives Makhmalbaf's cinema the power of an underlying conflict, a glimpse of reconciliation stunningly visits his latest film *In A Moment of Innocence* aka *The Bread and the Vase* (*Nun va Goldoon*, 1996), the filmmaker returns to an incident in his radical adolescence when he attacked and wounded a young policeman. Through the process of recreating the event as cinema, he turns the two youthful antagonists into noncombatants - a startling, pacifistic transmutation of self and society that also reimagines the cinema's power as not just reflective but transformative.

That deep concern with the medium and its symbolic uses may sound familiar, but Makhmalbaf is, in ways both incidental and deliberate, a case apart. Unlike the other Iranian directors who found or recaptured international prominence in the eighties (Abbas Kiarostami, Dariush Mehrjui, Bahram Baizai, Amir Naderi), he had no roots in the pre-Revolutionary cinema, but was, in fact, a product of the Revolution itself. Born in 1957, he was brought up in a devout lower-middleclass Teherani family, religiously abjured cinema as a youth (he reportedly didn't see a movie until he was in his twenties) and was heavily involved in anti-Shah activity when in 1974, as a budding 17-year-old terrorist, he attacked that young policeman. Immediately captured, he was sent to prison and tortured for four years, before being released by the onset of revolution. Thereafter he shifted his activities from the political sphere to the cultural, joining with other fundamentalist artists to found the Islamic Propagation Organization, an outfit of avowed militancy.

His career combines prolific multimedia activity with driven, protean changes in approach and belief. Active in radio and theater before turning to film, he has published some twenty books of plays, screenplays, fiction, essays, and criticism. While he has frequently contributed to the work of other filmmakers (as writer, editor, advisor, etc.), his own rate of production as a writer-director is virtually unrivaled among contemporary Iranian directors: 14 features and two shorts between 1982 and 1996. His earliest films had the unique distinction of being displayed in mosques, at a time when the faithful often viewed cinema itself with the deepest distrust. But Makhmalbaf soon began to fall away from fundamentalist belief, toward his own mix of humanism and secular social concern. Because his subsequent films championed the poor, the misery-laden and war-damaged, he accrued a large constituency among these groups and among many cinephiles, becoming the artistic folk hero seen in *Close-Up*. But his apostasy also made him many bitter enemies on the right, while other, more intellectual observers found a damning inconsistency in his shifting beliefs.

His cinema starts out as one of demonstration, giving belief primacy over aesthetic and emotional concerns. Like many autodidacts (and Makhmalbaf is a prodigious one: his reading and conversational references span the spectrum of Eastern and Western philosophy and arts), he has a robust respect for ideas and the authority they imply. The differences between his mode of demonstration and Bresson's, say, are that Makhmalbaf, after his early fundamentalist period, remains in a state of lunging, propulsive, purposeful intellectual flux (illustrating an idea just as it transforms into another); and also, that he doesn't shy from personalizing *everything*. As a result, whatever his troubles with the government (five films banned) or his former fundamentalist cohorts, he has never been suspected - as Kiarostami and others have - of reflecting Western agendas and influences. However objectionable his ideas may be, they are irreducibly, even radically, his own.

Another result, though, is that he doesn't seem to *belong* to cinema, as other great directors do, but only to be in provisional, tactical alliance with it. His early features are made by someone palpably excited by the zoom lens and the editing table, but crudely erratic in their use - no doubt because he was most engaged by the profundity of his message. Even so, *Nassoooh's Repentance* (*Tawba Nasuh*, 1982) and *Two Sightless Eyes* retain the fasciation of films made in the heat of revolutionary fervor by a passionate, unschooled filmmaker convinced that he was simultaneously reinventing and redeeming the medium. Both come from an Iran still roiling with the tumult of its rebirth as an Islamic republic, and although they are undeniably stiff with dogmatic rectitude, they also hint at the battle with uncertainty that was to come, in which the cinema's own seductiveness would be an issue. The latter film ends in a mirrored mosque where the camera climactically veers off on its own, as if intoxicated with the hall's magical proliferation of images.

At the outset, Makhmalbaf's work relayed the revolutionary conviction that with faith and politics seamlessly joined, evil would fall under the sword of worldly righteousness. When his own faith began to turn toward philosophical inquiry, evil, no longer containable by such assumptions, leapt to the fore as an issue: it remained there throughout the Eighties. Giving the subject a treatment that's bizarre but striking in its abstraction, *Fleeing from Evil to God* aka *Seeking Refuge* (*Isti'azah*, 1984) follows a boatful of pilgrims to an island where they turn on each other as they fall victim to the illusions and mental snares the devil has set for them. Oddly enough, the film suggests a medieval, Islamist version of *Jaws* (1975); the visual off-space looms with a deadly menace that the nominally reassuring ending doesn't quell. *Boycott* (*Baykot*, 1985) transfers the same sense of pervasive physical and moral peril to a viscerally brutal prison drama that surely reflects Makhmalbaf's own years of captivity; more kinetic and assured than its predecessors, the film (which stars Majid Majidi, later

the director of *The Father* [Pedar, 1996], among other films) also finds Makhmalbaf more sympathetic toward the communists, whom his earlier work had condemned outright.

In recent interviews, Makhmalbaf has said that he now sees his filmmaking as dividing into four periods. In this scheme, *Boycott* is both the final film of the faith- and revolution-dominated first period and a bridge to the vibrant social criticism of the second, which comprises *The Peddler* (*Dastforoush*, 1986), *The Cyclist* (*Bicycleran*, 1988), and *Marriage of the Blessed* (*Arousi-ye Khouban*, 1989). By various measures, not just thematic, these films do make a distinct unit. Full of energy, inventiveness, and bravado, but lacking the poise and fluency that would emerge later, they made Makhmalbaf a major cultural figure in Iran and established his name on the international festival circuit. In mood as well as subject, they are decidedly post-revolutionary, bristling with angry dismay that the new order has not obliterated injustice and suffering. Yet they also seem to hinge on a curious, crucial duality, enclosing within their political arguments an outrage that feels more personal and more philosophical.

The Peddler tells three consecutive stories (each shot by a different cinematographer) focused on cast-offs of Iranian society: poor parents with deformed children, a gender-conflicted young man who might be a Persian cousin of Norman Bates, and a criminal trapped in the lethal logic of his underworld activity. A fevered, all-but-surreal mélange of hysteria and disgust, the film aims to shock but goes well beyond the usual confines of social protest; its real targets seem to be the conditions of life itself. Though reflecting a more unified metaphor and style, *The Cyclist*, which tells of a poor man's punishing endurance contest on a bicycle (it acknowledges a debt to *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* [1969]), inveighs against the harsh nature of physical (not just economic) existence. For its part, *Marriage of the Blessed* remains closely sighted on a controversial subject, the social predations caused by the long Iran-Iraq war. Yet its tale of a middleclass marriage (this was Makhmalbaf's first film set in such a milieu) disintegrating due to the war's psychological after-effects on the husband also projects a bitter, Sartrean air of revulsion and world-weariness.

A Time for Love (*Nobat e Asheghi*, 1991), which Makhmalbaf called the first film of his third period, came after a hiatus from directing and marks a renewal in several senses. Shot in Istanbul, whose position as a Cosmopolitan bridge between East and West refracts an artistic itinerary, and richly photographed, it suggests Makhmalbaf withdrawing from the immediacy of Iranian social crises to look at the world from a more detached, ruminative, and fluid perspective. It transforms *The Peddler's* tripartite approach from telling three

stories to telling one story - two men and a woman are involved in a web of illicit passion and deception - from three different angles. The textured look and oblique, lyrical narrative make this Makhmalbaf's first film with obvious affinities to Western art films (although these shouldn't be overestimated), while the concern with varying viewpoints announces a new interest in the interplay of truth, power, and art. Yet, for treating the subject of physical passion, the film was banned in Iran, as was his next; the story of a young woman who undergoes a crisis of values, *Nights on the Zayandeh Rood* (*Shabhaye Zayandeh-Rood*, 1991). They remain the hardest of his films to see.

All but one of Makhmalbaf's five subsequent features (the exception is *Gabbeh*, which he regards as inaugurating his work's fourth phase) directly concern cinema. Conveniently, these four break down into two related pairs. *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* (*Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema*, 1992) and *The Actor* (*Honarpisheh*, 1993) might be described as reflexive screwball comedies. The idea of comedy coming from the erstwhile purveyor of revolutionary zeal and existential angst may sound strange, but just as humor wasn't entirely absent from his earlier movies (from *Boycott* on, all have flashes of absurdist wit), its increase here testifies to the rapid broadening of his humanism.

Once Upon a Time, Cinema takes the fact that the Qajar dynasty's penultimate Shah brought the first movie camera to Iran, in 1900, and spins that into a fantasia that trips across Iranian cinema history, incorporating clips from old films and characters from history along with the fictional and the fanciful. Just as rapid fire and erratically zany, *The Actor* constructs a fictional marital meltdown around the persona of Akbar Abdi, a real Iranian movie star. Playing on the confusion between the actors and roles, the film seems intended to give *Marriage of the Blessed* a comic revision, yet it had a tragic real-life epilogue when Makhmalbaf's wife (to whom it is dedicated) died as the result of a household accident.

Salaam Cinema and *A Moment of Innocence*, the two films that feature Makhmalbaf on screen, also belong together because they were initially conceived as one. The auditions recorded in *Salaam* were meant both to cast and to comprise a prologue within *A Moment of Innocence*, until they grew into a freestanding feature (which, incidentally, has existed in several versions of different lengths, from 13 hours down to 75 minutes). The specific mode of reflexivity and the blurring of documentary and fiction in these films evidence a certain debt to Kiarostami, as Makhmalbaf has acknowledged, but to see that as their essence is to undervalue their originality and power considerably. Likewise, foreign bias and ignorance inform the misassumptions that *Salaam* couldn't be meant as a political allegory, and that its "Makhmalbaf" is the man himself rather than a cleverly fashioned self-caricature.



These two films are among the most searching and ingenious meditations on the cinema's social powers produced by any filmmaker in recent decades. *Salaam* evokes the "play" of projection and identification that makes the medium so enrapturing, but doesn't avoid the cruel inequities between those who control the mechanism and those who surrender to its fantasies. *A Moment of Innocence* starts with inequity, pondering the perceptual distances separating Makhmalbaf and the policeman he once wounded, yet it ends with the exhilarating assertion that (good) will and (cinematic) imagination can overcome such damaging disparities. Still, as revealing and provocative as the films are, they find Makhmalbaf standing apart from the mirror, inspecting it. In doing so, they show him embracing and exalting the medium while remaining estranged from it; and suggest that he has long been in clamorous pursuit of the film that would take him past all questions of belonging, or not, to the cinema, into a total, transparent *identification* with it.

Gabbeh is that film. While it is tempting to qualify that with "for now," the singularity of Makhmalbaf's 13th feature seems destined to endure, and perhaps, if we are lucky, to serve as the pole star for his future voyagings. As with other Iranian masterpieces, its apparent simplicity is deceptive because we have been fooled into regarding simplicity as the enemy of the artistically complex and the profound, rather than their oldest ally. On first viewing, it can seem merely dazzling, a lyrically imagined mix of anthropology and *faux-naïf* fabulation; we watch its tale of love and loss, memory and regret among the nomadic tribes who weave carpets called gabbehs, as we would reencounter a favorite storybook from childhood, admiring, even more than before, its delicacy and poignant directness. On subsequent viewings, though, the film's few cinematic reference points (Paradjanov, Dovzhenko, the renowned 1925 documentary *Grass*) melt away, leaving the sense that we are encountering not just a strange, entrancing story but a hidden language behind the filmic vernacular we have grown up with, and a fictional world as magically potent as C.F. Kane's lost toy.

It is a documentary of a dream, of reality destroyed, transfigured, and reconstituted by imagination. A poem of *doubleness*, of perceptor and perceived, of art and the world, the film found its first spiral of interlocked opposites (a familiar pair - fiction and documentary - made unfamiliar again) in the unusual conditions of its making. Makhmalbaf had proposed numerous ideas for dramatic features, all of which the government censors rejected. He then asked for and received permission to shoot a documentary about the gabbeh-weaving nomads of central Iran, intending all the while to interlard that material with stories of his own devising. In fact, the documentary material is itself largely fictional: as the nomads today lead more supervised and circumscribed lives, and transport their livestock by trucks,

Makhmalbaf and company had to recreate their former existence of unrestricted movement by horse and on foot, across unspoiled vistas increasingly consigned to memory.

The weavers make their gabbehs from found materials, in a double sense: the colors come from the plants where they happen to be, the designs incorporate images (children, animals, landscapes) they encounter as they weave. The carpets, wonderfully thick and all but modernist in their simple yet striking patterns, thus tell stories and are at once individual and communal, spontaneous and formalized. Makhmalbaf clearly relishes the symbolism of all this. The factory-made Persian carpets for which Iran is known equate with Hollywood cinema, while gabbehs equal personal, "visionary" films like *Gabbeh*, he has said. The film's method justifies such half-smiling claims to an astonishing extent: not only is the meshing of found and fabricated materials uncannily smooth and expressive, but Makhmalbaf, in subordinating his demonstrative tendencies to the documentary's serendipities and close observations, has produced his most serenely assured film - and the first that seems sui generis to an idea of transcendent, poetic cinema.

It opens with a beautiful gabbeh floating down a creek (the juxtaposition of carpet and flowing water is instantly dreamlike) as a wolf's howl is heard, causing a beautiful young woman in blue to turn and smile. By a pond, located perhaps in some eternal place where old married couples argue, an Old Woman tries to keep an Old Man from using his sore feet to wash their gabbeh. The gabbeh bears the image of a woman and a man riding a horse, and the old couple soon - via a cut that nicely substitutes for an arsenal of special effects - find themselves facing Gabbeh, the young woman in blue, who explains the story inscribed in the carpet: The man on the horse loved her, followed her like a distant shadow who signaled with wolf calls, and wanted to marry her. But her father kept the marriage at bay by insisting that the girl wait ... till her uncle returned, till her uncle married, till her mother gave birth, and on and on. Though preserved in the gabbeh, the image of united horse-borne lovers grows as illusory as a wish concealed in a mirage.

Or perhaps it is like this: Within every vouchsafed love, even say between old lovers who sometimes argue, there is the fear of love's cessation, a fear that can make might-never-be-again look a lot like might-never-have-been. In this mirror vision, the old couple and the young one are reverse images of each other; future tragedy swaps clothes with the past; and the gabbeh narrates a story of love's fleeting as if it were the tale of the tribe. The tribe, like Gabbeh's promise of happiness, is forever moving away, vanishing over forbidding horizons. Yet even in this movement the film registers what is vouchsafed, and suggests its own kinship to music, where the saddest song of love's loss can strike the

listener as gorgeous, enrapturing, full of vivifying passion and wonder. Here, the wonder envelops literally everything nature holds and the eye beholds, from plants to the dye colors they produce to the emotions the colors describe when turned into image-stories by women, weaving.

Colors, especially, sing with symbolic purpose. Early on, in a mock-didactic narrative digression, Gabbeh's wayward uncle enters a tent-school full of nomad kids, stands in front of a blackboard, and lectures - with magical-realist visual assists - on color. Smiling, he points to the word for red, and as the children correctly shout out the word, his hand reaches into a field of tulips and returns (again, simple cuts obviate fancy FX) with a handful of ruddy blossoms. "The redness of the tulips," he says. And so on through the yellow of the wheat and the sun, the blue of water and "the clear sky of God," the green of the prairie's endless grasses. Besides being delightful visually *and* rhetorically, a witty retort to the Makhmalbaf of *Two Sightless Eyes* and the Godard of *La Chinoise* (1967) etc., this passage returns us to a filmic/traditional world where color is the domain of women (and vice versa), and where, in that climactic scene featuring Makhmalbaf himself as the woman giving birth, a swirling chorus of antiphonal chanting tells us, "Life is color," "Love is color," "Man is color," "Woman is color," "Child is color."

To grasp the profound political resonance of such scenes is to glimpse the expressive power movies retain in Iran, one reason why the nation's filmmaking has been so vital in recent years. The cultural forces that would reduce public life - especially that of women - to monochrome and darkness Makhmalbaf brands as enemies not just of color, but of life. Thus he, in allowing women the brightest of nomadic colors, in giving their faces ample closeups, and especially in narrating this story of romantic desire from a female perspective - all elements that push the bounds of permissibility in Iran - gives his poem the sharpest of polemical points. (After nearly a year in official limbo, *Gabbeh* was recently released in Iran, reportedly with the express approval of the Ayatollah.) Yet it must also be noted that the same point stings both East and West: characteristically, his argument against fundamentalist morbidity is just as damning when turned on Hollywood's sleek, mechanized death culture.

That should be kept in mind when inspecting the aesthetic traces of his philosophic journey. Significantly, Makhmalbaf avoids the temptation of replacing the authoritarianism of mullahs with that of the (art film) market, as would have happened if he'd simply shifted his allegiances, so to speak, from Qom to Cannes; in various senses, his artistic humanism remains distinctly Eastern, which in certain benign ways translates as anti-Western, or

at least deliberately, meaningfully non-Western. Whereas Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) famously opened the West's eyes to Asia partly by fragmenting the singular narrative viewpoint, *Gabbeh* takes the same tendency further, implicitly fracturing various orthodoxies (Iranian religious like Western filmic) as it does. Indeed, the most striking formal thing about the film is also the most oddly disorienting when you first see it: there seems to be this constant, subtle shifting in *what this is about* and *who is telling it* and *where we are*.

Only our oversophisticated inattention to film language, perhaps, leaves us unamazed when that initial god's-eye view of a waterborne gabbeh becomes a human-level drama of two old people arguing, and then a carpet turns into a girl in blue whose story takes us to a place where, among other wonders, an elusive uncle suddenly appears and delivers a magical-realist lecture on color to children in a tent. The effect here is one of spiraling, densely meshed, endlessly mutating narrative viewpoints and voices that recurrently alter our perspective on time and place and truth, in a pattern as intricate as intersecting tides or (of course) the warp and weft of a gabbeh. And as for the source of such dynamic designs, there's not only the latter analogue to consider, and beyond that the innumerable precedents and parallels to be found in oral storytelling and Eastern literary tradition - there's also a less obvious figure of inspiration and symbolic example: Einstein.

Makhmalbaf frequently mentions the scientist as among those who have influenced him, and his films at least as far back as *A Time for Love*, with its three conflicting viewpoints, provide the evidence: both philosophically and formally, they are all about truth as a relative value. In some senses, of course, this continues the concern with truth that was central to his work as an Islamic agitprop artist, though from a radically altered perspective. Yet Makhmalbaf hasn't lost his "religious view of life," only greatly expanded his understanding of that term while leaving it still very connected to himself and his culture. Plainly, for him *relativistic* truth does not equal relative truth, does not convert into nihilistic or arbitrary values, and does not support oxymorons like "absolute freedom," that chimera which has proved so corrosive to the West. What it does imply are a universe of endlessly expanding realities that are nonetheless governed by the laws of nature, laws that include the observer's - or artist's - transforming perception.

Once that is admitted, it is only a short, inexorable step to the realization that, while art creates very much as nature (or a mother) does, volition allows the artist to manifest what he chooses; that the universe, in short, *can be reconfigured by conscious beneficence*. In *A Moment of Innocence*, Makhmalbaf reimagines his (and Iran's) cathartic past with a climactic freeze-frame that comprises a unique and stirring testament to nonviolence.

Gabbeh's ending contains the same sort of reformulation: after hearing that Gabbeh's father killed her and her lover when they tried to ride off to a new life together, we're told that no, they didn't die, the father invented that story to prevent his other daughters from running away - a magical turnabout that manages to make the film at this point seem dark *and* light, ominous and epiphanic.

Both films show painful reality being comprehended, then transformed, by art, but *Gabbeh* goes several steps further, throwing away the other film's conceptual machinery and personal references and diving straight into a passionate encounter with the universe. It contains no obvious nods to cinema because Makhmalbaf is no longer contemplating the mirror; he *is* the mirror. As ecstatic and sensual as the poetry of Rumi, *Gabbeh* comes out of a difficult past and reflects hard-won skills (Makhmalbaf's are here abetted by the extraordinary cinematographer Mahmoud Kalari), yet it lands lightly on the most graceful of double-metaphors. For as much as Persian carpets are the West's prime material emblems of Iran, our childhood imaginations first encounter the Middle East in the image of the magic carpet - and it's the latter that *Gabbeh* so rapturously recalls, transporting us to a place where cinema remains limpid, exalting, and full of transforming benevolence.

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ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

Gabbeh and *The Silence* were exclusively restored by Arrow Films and are presented in their original aspect ratios of 1.85:1 with mono sound. For *Gabbeh*, a 35mm internegative was scanned on an Arriscan in 2K resolution and for *The Silence*, a 35mm interpositive was scanned on an Arriscan in 2K resolution. All film treatment and scanning was completed at Eclair in Paris. The films were graded and restored at Dragon DI, Wales. Picture grading was completed on a Pablo Rio system and restoration was completed using PFClean and Revival software. The original audio mixes were remastered from the optical sound negatives. All materials for these restorations were made available from MK2.

Restoration supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**

The Gardener is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.78:1 with stereo audio. The master was prepared in High Definition by Makhmalbaf Film House and delivered to Arrow Films.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by **James Blackford**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Authoring and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**
Artwork **Scott Saslow**

SPECIAL THANKS

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