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Two Theses on the Afghan Woman

Samira and Hana Makhmalbaf Filming Agheleh Farahmand

Haim Bresheeth

Early on in my career, I made the decision to create fictions with actors who were paid to deliver the words that I wrote.

Michelle Citron

The London International Film Festival was home to a most unlikely event in November 2004: the screening of two films about Afghanistan made by two sisters. Internationally acclaimed Iranian film-maker Samira Makhmalbaf (*Blackboards*, 2000 and *The Apple*, 1998), screened her third full-length feature *Panj é asr* (*At Five in the Afternoon*, 2003). Her younger sister Hana¹ screened her debut feature documentary, *Lezate Divanegi* (*Joy of Madness*, Iran, 2003). Not yet fourteen when she made the film, Hana thus broke the record, established by her elder sister, who at seventeen had previously been the youngest film-maker to have a film screened at Cannes.

Joy of Madness was ostensibly a ‘making-of’ film that recorded the processes involved in the production of *At Five in the Afternoon*. While this, along with the obvious quality of both works, was in itself unusual, even more striking was the fact that the same non-professional actress features as the protagonist in both films: a virtually unknown Afghan school teacher in her early twenties named Agheleh Farahmand. By examining the complex relationships between the two films, the two sisters and their common subject, I wish to map the power relations which underpin their behaviour and discourse, while examining at the same time the myriad postcolonial meanings within which these are embedded. While both films ostensibly belong to different genres and were resourced by vastly different budgets it is simplistic to consider *Joy of Madness* as a straightforward documentary or *making-of* feature, though it is no doubt an excellent example of that genre. Hana Makhmalbaf, who has since then completed a second film, *Buda as Sharm Foru Rikht* (*Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*, Iran, 2007), has herself perceptively noted this,

1. Sometimes spelt Hanna.

speaking of the film as ‘a documentary on the surface but a feature film in essence’.² Arguably, despite its much rougher texture and low technology, Hana’s film is no less complex, powerful and imaginative than her elder sister’s celebrated feature. Detailed examination of both films provides an interesting portrait of lived reality in Afghanistan. Together they provide two very distinct but complementary cinematic commentaries on a topic barely covered in film history: Afghan womanhood, femininity and the changing situation faced by women over decades of foreign and local conquest and domination by both colonial and patriarchal regimes.

Of course, the fact that both directors are daughters of the illustrious Mohsen Makhmalbaf is hardly incidental; both are part of the intensive and comprehensive Makhmalbaf Film House, a unique privately owned Iranian film production company and film school of sorts. The MFH is unique even when viewed in a global context. Mohsen Makhmalbaf wields powers that few film-makers enjoy in Iran, or indeed elsewhere. The influence of Makhmalbaf Film House has been allowed to develop under the Iranian state ever since the young Makhmalbaf won the backing of the mullahs as a supporter of the Islamic revolution in Iran. As a young man he was the leader of an Islamic militia group fighting against the Shah and was shot and arrested at the age of seventeen while attempting to disarm a policeman. The fact that he subsequently veered away from this youthful adherence to religious dogma was overlooked by the authorities who sought to cash in on his international standing once he became a world-famous player on the international film festival circuit.³

Makhmalbaf himself has a long history of involvement with Afghanistan – one of his earliest films, *Bicycleran (The Cyclist)*, Iran, 1987) was shot there, and he returned to the country to make *Safar e Ghandehar (Kandahar)*, 2001), just before the events that changed the country forever. Mohsen and his family spend most of the year in Kabul, despite the many projects they are involved in. Indeed, Hamid Dabashi has described the phenomenon of the Makhmalbafs’ interest in Afghanistan as the ‘complete transformation of an entire family of film-makers from their own homeland into another country as the site of their socially responsible filmmaking career’.⁴ Between them, the family is responsible for six films based in Afghanistan, the largest group of films produced in the country in recent times. Mohsen’s wife Marzieh and his three children are all involved in the productions, each fulfilling a number of roles in their making, and creating a unique family outfit that seems to allow each member enormous creative freedom, as well as offering substantial material support and expert advice. While the professionally designed website of the Makhmalbaf Film House provides no information about the aims and objectives of this unusual organisation, clues can be gleaned from an analysis of the many films authored by its members over the years, as well as the numerous interviews they have granted. In trying to place the Makhmalbaf ‘clan’ with any precision one encounters severe problems, however, as existing models of film-making barely assist us in defining this new type of cinematic creativity, and supply little in the way of explaining of its success.

When discussing all Iranian post-revolutionary cinema, one feels the need to develop a new model of analysis, for a number of reasons. While this is clearly a radical and post-revolutionary society, its ideological

2. As quoted on the BBC site in a review by Tom Dawson, 18 May 2004; http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2004/05/18/joy_of_madness_2004_review.shtml

3. Eric Egan, *The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics and Culture in Iran*, Mage Publishers, Washington, DC, 2005

4. Hamid Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large: The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker*, I B Tauris, London, 2008, p 219

source is not that of Western Marxism; this makes it difficult to apply the model developed by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino.⁵ Not only does Iranian cinema evade the defining parameters of both First and Second cinema; it is equally distinct from film-making that falls into the category of Third Cinema. This is because it has been financed and supported by an exceedingly authoritarian Islamic Republic, seemingly uninterested in the liberal arts, yet keen to support liberal film-makers whose films enjoy success in Western film festivals. It certainly was not a cinema created by an underground organisation, and its audience notions are dramatically different from those of Solanas and Getino. This is by no means the typical film movement allied to a political movement along the lines developed by Peter Wollen in his account of the political vanguard and its relation to the cinematic and artistic avant-garde as sister movements serving a common set of goals.⁶ Nor can one conceive of this cinema using the outdated model developed in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma* by Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer and François Truffaut – practitioners of *auteur* cinema.⁷ This last model of analysis, what Hess calls ‘world view as aesthetics’, does not fit directors in post-revolutionary Iran – not even Abbas Kiarostami, despite the obvious references and homage he pays to their legacy; the difference in context, historical, political and aesthetic contexts is too substantial to be overlooked. The Iranian post-revolutionary situation bears little relation to France in the late 1950s, or indeed Argentina in the mid-1960s. The Iranian cinematic phenomenon is one of a kind, and in need of special contextualisation and analysis. A number of writers such as Laura Mulvey,⁸ and Michael Chanan⁹ and Hamid Naficy¹⁰ have pointed out special features of the Iranian cinema – the so-called ‘uncertainty principle’, demonstrated in the use of cross-generic devices and strategies which render definitions of ‘documentary’ and ‘fiction’ problematic; and the fact that truth values are also difficult to determine. Such ‘slippery’ boundaries between the genres of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ are of great interest here – the Makhmalbaf films are always perched on this boundary, borrowing from both areas, but not settling in either. This generic ‘aloofness’ is key to the reading of both films under discussion here.

Furthermore, these two films were both shot in Afghanistan, the volatile theatre of the ‘war on terror’ launched by President George W Bush. This war is also a reminder to Iran that the USA and many of its Western allies have moved from adopting a series of warning measures (sanctions and boycotts) towards the real possibility of military action against Iran itself. Though initially rebuked by the incoming President Barack Obama, Israel never tires of inciting military action against Iran. Hence, the war in Afghanistan, and to a lesser degree in Iraq, is perceived as a war by proxy against Iran. And not without good reason – both countries flank Iran, now surrounded by US and other Western allies, so feeling under siege is a reaction to the realities of the conflict. Both films were made in this volatile climate of an ongoing war which still has no end in sight in Afghanistan, where it has yet to bring any tangible benefits to the bulk of the Afghan population. The difficulties of working in a war zone colour the very fabric of both films, and are indeed the crucial background against which they are both set.

That Samira Makhmalbaf is deeply invested in the conflict between the West and the Muslim world is evident from her earlier work, as well

5. F Solanas and O Getino, ‘Towards a Third Cinema’ in *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema*, Michael ed Chanan, BFI, London, 1983
6. Peter Wollen, ‘The Two Avant-gardes’, *Edinburgh Magazine*, Summer 1976
7. François Truffaut, ‘La Politique des Auteurs’, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no 25, July 1953, p 45
8. Laura Mulvey, ‘Kiarostami’s Uncertainty Principle’, *Sight and Sound*, London, June 1998, pp 24–7
9. Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary*, London, BFI, 2007, p 191
10. Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton University Press, Princeton–Oxford, 2001, pp 222–5



In an image resonating with Brecht's *Mother Courage*, the refugees haul their cart after their horse dies of hunger in *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), directed by Samira Makhmalbaf

as from the iconic *Kandahar* made by her father in 2001. She took part in the multi-director film *September 11* which combined eleven short films made by eleven directors. In contrast to many of the other episodes, the section directed by Samira Makhmalbaf is totally lacking in violent visual referents and is a ruminative, even philosophical episode about the different value systems which apply in the West and Afghanistan where the classroom of children she confronts with her camera are oblivious to the momentous events in the US – events which are about to change their lives forever. Even when told about them, the children cannot quite grasp their importance. While on one hand we encounter the vast distance between the Afghan children and the Western world, the film also directs our gaze to how very little the West knows and understands Afghanistan at the very point when it is about to destroy it, as a preamble to the destruction of Iraq. The film also introduces two of her hallmark concerns: the centrality of education and the roles of women in society, both of which are at the heart of *At Five in the Afternoon*. Another of her films, *Blackboards*, while not shot in Afghanistan but in the Kurdistan border zone between Iraq and Iran, deals with very similar concerns, which she seems to have carried with her throughout her career. It was of great interest, then, that she has decided to devote her Afghan film to the daily life of a young woman teacher and her immediate family – her father, sister-in-law and baby nephew. For a young feminist working in Iran, this was a major staking-out of her positions, which are too independent for the Iranian ruling elite, not to mention the Afghan government or other Islamic regimes in the region. The many reversals facing Afghan women recently, such as the legislation removing their right to education and work, are clear evidence of the difficulties of such positions held by Samira Makhmalbaf, despite the changes frequently heralded by the Western allies as great advances. For all these reasons, *At Five in the Afternoon* was eagerly awaited in the West, where Samira's work is closely observed and garners much critical interest, as well as academic examination.

Agheleh Farahmand, who is at the heart of both sisters' films, ties their respective works together within a discourse between the three women – the actress/teacher Farahmand herself, Samira Makhmalbaf, (very much) the director, and the visually absent but ever-present Hana through her camera, seemingly missing nothing of the drama behind the film-making process.

The elements of this feminine discourse between the differently empowered three women, or, more accurately, two women and a young girl, can be analysed as a rich tapestry of power relations. Not all of these are immediately obvious and are only evident when one considers the background of the director, and the role of her family, always in the background. The role of her father Mohsen, executive producer of the film, is especially important. He does much to save it from collapsing as a result of Samira's temper-tantrums during the pre-production period – outbursts that are carefully captured by her sister Hana in her 'making-of documentary'. If one were to compare the two films through the relationships between the women, which both capture and display, then surprisingly Hana's mini-DV video documentary is the more fascinating creation, despite its poor visual quality in comparison with her sister's professionally shot 35 mm feature film. It seems at times that the austere

beauty of the feature film, with its stark vistas of Afghanistan, both urban and rural, provides a captivating landscape that acts almost as a replacement for the reserved and distant human figures around whom the film revolves. The most striking contrast is the one between the two Aghelehs – the young, educated, modern, truculent and self-confident teacher in the documentary, and the scripted older woman offered as a gaze-subject in the feature film, devoid of independence and individuality in comparison with the real-life actress. This is made all the more noticeable as her role model in *At Five in the Afternoon* is the late Benazir Bhutto, referred to directly in the film as proof that women in Muslim countries are capable of reaching the top of the social pyramid. In *Joy of Madness* we come to know an Agheleh who is a complex character, no less resourceful than her Iranian counterpart, Samira; in many ways the film is the narrative of their fascination, as well as their struggle with each other. One suspects Samira has chosen Agheleh for her independent stance, as well as for her striking face, almost as an icon of her own standing within Iranian society. In an interview quoted by Hannah McGill¹¹ she notes how people stereotype her as director: she is a woman, too small and too young; should she be a fat, older man to make films, she asks? Samira is obviously part of the MFH ideological stance: ‘Because I had a better situation, better opportunities, compared to other women, I always feel a responsibility for these women. I think I have to do something.’¹² *At Five in the Afternoon* is certainly her effort to do that, but it seems to be much more.

Reading the various interviews Samira has given since her meteoric rise to international fame, one gets the distinct impression she has moved from being a young film-maker in Iran to becoming a global media star in a very short time. That this is so can be gleaned from *Joy of Madness* where we see the methods used by Samira in all their brutal effectiveness: ‘*Joy of Madness* suggests increased fame has brought increased attitude: Samira’s casting process is a kaleidoscopic and unpredictable onslaught of charm, aggression, haughty disdain and shameless emotional blackmail.’¹³ By examining the process of casting her film through the eyes of her younger sister in *Joy of Madness*, we gain a candid view and genuine understanding of Samira’s method and means. A detailed examination is called for, however, if one is to establish accurately the ‘method behind the madness’ of the title song of the film. The following section offers a close examination of the film as a text in an attempt to define the socio-political dynamics behind the actions of participants.

In one of the earliest scenes in the film, Samira and her family are searching for an actor to play the role of the cart driver. As she does not speak the local language and communicates mainly in Farsi, it proves to be a wild-goose chase, with many candidates falling by the wayside, and one emerging above all others – a mullah who charms Samira with his easygoing and jokey manner. This proves to be her first mistake – the nice mullah was only joking, it turns out, and does not agree to the terms drawn by the bullying and explosive Samira. She is not ready to be turned down by anyone, and finds it difficult to believe that the half-starved people of Kabul will find it in themselves to refuse a well-paid film role. All this is beautifully rendered by the tireless handheld camera of Hana Makhmalbaf – the one camera which seems never to lie. She captures the power struggles between her strong-willed but moody sister

11. Hannah McGill, ‘Iranian House Style’, *Sight and Sound*, April 2004, London, pp 32–4

12. *Ibid*, pp 33, 34

13. *Ibid*, p 33

and the impish old mullah who will not yield to the powerful foreigner, especially as she is female. It is the first instance of the colonial tensions that appear in the film. I call it colonial as the Makhmalbafs are powerful foreigners – Iranians with not only money to spend but international fame to boot, arraigned against the poorest and most miserable people in Asia, caught in a war which is only the latest of many, after decades of conflict, and a series of despotic regimes. The Iranian film-making family is clearly seen by the locals as colonial, there not to settle but to use them in ways they do not fully understand. As a result they are seen as deeply suspect, and the locals attempt to protect themselves by disengagement. It is clear that even with the help of locals, such as the main actor Razi Mohebi, who travels in the crew's transporter and assists them in engaging with the local population, the Makhmalbafs are ill prepared for what they find in the Kabul of late 2002 after the 'victory' of the coalition forces over the Taliban. They fail to understand the double fear which racks this population – fear of the Taliban, seemingly defeated but ever-present and, as proven later, far from vanquished, as well as their justified fear of the old/new warlords backed by the Western powers. This failure to comprehend the locals will dog the Makhmalbafs in their dealings with the people of Kabul – they seem to assume that money will buy anyone and anything, especially people in such a troubled situation, but find to their consternation that, for the people of Kabul, some things are more important than money. When money fails, other ploys are attempted. Mohsen tries another tack on the truculent mullah: 'We can give you a letter from President Karzai', and 'We will provide him with a letter from the Ministry of Education'. The Makhmalbafs are obviously well connected, but those offers fall on deaf ears, and the mullah remains as aloof as ever. In one of the scenes a soldier tries to find out what all the commotion is about, and is drafted by the producer to assist and persuade the unreasonable mullah to act. Surprisingly, he makes some headway, as he understands the mullah and his refusal to budge, but then Samira, up to that point totally insistent on her need for the mullah, butts in: 'What kind of people are you, if your Mullah is lying?' She challenges everyone around her, including the soldier who is trying to help by negotiating a contract with the old mullah. She bursts out: 'Don't write a contract! I can't believe a man who can't keep his word. I'm off!', and off she goes in a huff. The negotiations are over as she punishes the mullah for his truculence, and his whole society to boot.

14. Interestingly, when Mohsen introduces his daughter to Agheleh in their mobile office, he tells her, at the first signs of her holding out: 'She is 22 years old. She is the famous young film-maker. There are books about her. Over a thousand newspapers have written about her worldwide. There are films about her I'll give you to watch. She wants to make a film about the suffering of Afghan women.' It seems that Samira is not young enough for her proud father, who takes off two years to make her achievements even more outstanding.

This scene prepares us for the main part of the film in which Samira makes a majestic entrance at a local school in order to see if any of the teachers might be a candidate for the main female role, that of Noqreh. She locates a serious candidate for the role – Agheleh Farahmand Razie, a young teacher of marked beauty and poise – who happens to be the same age as the director: twenty-four.¹⁴ Samira likes this coincidence, and presents herself as Agheleh's peer:

Please collaborate with me. I am looking for a friend. I promise that any girl who comes to work with us won't lose anything! I can talk to your husband. It won't take six years. It will take two months, or less!

This presentation is less than successful in masking the power relations between the two women, all too clear to the quick-witted Agheleh, who



Fetching water in the destroyed palace at the end of *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), directed by Samira Makhmalbaf

feels she is treated as a subaltern native by Samira and takes umbrage. Samira is relentless, but fails to persuade the young teacher, so Mohsen steps in again: ‘Do you know what one of the benefits of the film is? The benefit is that this film won’t be shown here. Eventually, Samira will make a film with an Afghan girl, whoever she is.’ Samira then adds, repeating her line of attack: ‘As a woman I care for you and I’ll be here to support you.’ All this seems to have little effect on Agheleh, even when a relative sitting with her in the vehicle tries to persuade her: ‘Agheleh, accept it. We’ll discuss it at home.’ Samira then adds:

Two women want to work together, then what is the problem? You are supposed to do something for Afghan children. Your husband would approve. It is in the interests of Afghan children. Don’t tell me this film will ruin your future. I promised and I swear to God that your future will be much better.

As Agheleh seems to doubt this outburst, she adds: ‘Don’t say no! Don’t doubt it.’ But Agheleh is immovable, and she leaves the car without agreement. One cannot fail to be impressed by her resolve and mental resources as she is faced by a battery of powerful people all claiming to be interested in improving her lot.

This first encounter between the two women, recorded faithfully by a third, Hana, becomes emblematic of the relationship between them – time and again both come to replay their positions, like two seasoned traders who understand that an agreement will be negotiated, but refuse to soften their stance before the endgame. Time and again we see the

various stratagems employed by Samira, only to be rebuffed by the resilient and staunch Aghelah. Samira is unable to understand the subtext transmitted by her Afghan counterpart and hence fails to enlist her in the film production. They both display an attraction and fascination with each other, as well as a wariness resulting from their deep-seated differences, their starting positions and aims. At the end of this encounter between the two women, when Aghelah's relative, sitting with her in the production van, is also voicing her doubts, Samira adds: 'What do you think all this fear can do? You tolerated the Taliban, but you don't do anything now? You don't cooperate to save yourselves. If you continue like this, life won't get better. Everyone's fate will depend on what they do about it.'

At this point, one is reminded of Carolyn Anderson and Thomas Benson's argument about the role 'social actors' play in documentary cinema: 'Without the participation of social actors, the documentary form known as direct or observational cinema could not exist. Without the informed consent of the subjects, the form lacks ethical integrity.'¹⁵ Though not a documentary, the necessary consent for Samira's intended feature is just as important here, and it proves elusive despite all her attempts.

The judgmental outburst above is typical; Samira is tempestuous and childish in her relationships with all locals. Her body language is that of a powerful colonial. She treats the locals like children, using a paternalistic manner and line of argument, reinforced by a mixture of promises and castigation. In this, she is assisted by her father Mohsen, who is far more experienced and persuasive, without losing his poise. To add weight to Samira's arguments, Mohsen tells Aghelah of the great future awaiting her, if only she will agree to play in the film:

One woman played in a film of mine. Nilufar Pazira, an Afghan girl, you know her? She became Afghan women's ambassador to UNESCO. She is going to be President of the Kabul film festival. Luck is knocking at your door. You will later understand what a chance you have turned down.

On learning this, Aghelah turns from the imploring family towards the camera and the front seat, saying: 'There is a problem. My fiancé is not here. He'll come to take me in a month.' She speaks quietly and intimately. She then explains that he is not in Kabul and that he spent some time in Iran. This gives Samira another angle of argument:

If he spent time in Iran, he knows my father, and he will agree! I swear if I talk to him, he will accept, I promise you, OK? Then he'll tell you that you did a good thing. Your mother, your father and your school will say the same thing, I promise.

Aghelah still seems unprepared to agree, so Mohsen tries another tack:

How long did your fiancé spend in Iran? He is here now but we can get him a visa if he wants to return to Iran. Then you will be invited to many countries with this film. You can travel with your husband. The chance is here. If you say no, she will look for someone else.

Here Aghelah spends almost two long minutes being totally quiet. This calm and resilience under the pressure of money, fame and power is

15. Carolyn Anderson and Thomas Benson, *Documentary Dilemmas: Frederick Wiseman's 'Titicut Follies'*, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale-Edwardsville, 1991, p 151

most impressive. Someone opens the van door and conveys something to her. She then tells the Makhmalbafs: 'My fiancé has just arrived.' Mohsen asks: 'Have you seen him?' Agheleh indicates not. 'Have you not seen your husband since he arrived?' he asks in amazement and suspicion. Her relative laughs: 'That's how Afghan girls get married', and adds that they cannot see their husbands until their wedding night, smiling at Agheleh.

Assuming that the doubts Agheleh suffers from are related to her future husband, Samira repeats her offer: 'I will talk to your husband, OK? I promise you'll face no problems. Just take me as your future friend.' Agheleh is still pensive and unperturbed by the pressure; she leaves the van, which starts moving almost immediately. Here Samira proves she has not changed: 'I tried with all my heart to give her positive energy. If she doesn't feel it, her pretty face is not enough for the film. How can I get her to act? So much fear!'

In the van we also see the driver Razi Moheibi, who will later play the poet in *Five in the Afternoon*, but at that point acting as the local fixer. He says to the Makhmalbafs: 'Give us a week and we'll get her consent.' It seems he is better at understanding the cultural undercurrents, unsurprisingly, and seems unfazed by the whole argument. What is really instructive is how little Samira and Mohsen understand about Agheleh and her motives for stalling a decision, despite the fact that she is definitely interested in the offer. The first encounter ends on a note of uncertainty and a failure to establish trust.

The second encounter, following closely in the film, takes place at Agheleh's home, where it is unclear whether the visit had been agreed beforehand with the family. On arrival at Agheleh's home, Samira asks Hana not to film the encounter, but Hana ignores her request. Samira, not sure she has come to the correct address, asks Agheleh's father for pictures of his daughter.

In speaking to Hana and her father, Samira again blames Agheleh, whom she hardly knows, of lying: 'Maybe she did not want to tell us about it, she lied to us.'

Later, when Agheleh returns from work and starts talking business with Samira, she asks what type of film is being planned, and shows herself to be anything but naive. 'Who decides the content? Or do we both have to agree on making this film?'

When told it is a feature film, she seems quite knowledgeable: 'That means that you have written this script. Why aren't you honest with me? Why ask about the Taliban? I feel offended by this question. It's painful to me.' She smiles through all this. 'I truly hate the Taliban.'

'Why?' demands Samira, who does not appear to comprehend or display any concern for the political views and concerns of her chosen lead.

Because it was a very chaotic government; a very mean government, barbaric towards the people. The five years they were in power, people suffered a lot... They were so violent that I am afraid the calamities will afflict me again. People were so afraid. Women and teachers are afraid to remove their burkas. They are afraid that, God forbid, there are still some Taliban stooges here and some day they will harm them. That's why they don't want to talk to you.

From all we hear in the film, it is clear that her political understanding is better informed than that of the director, Samira, who has come with an agenda of her own, looking for a face and body that can be manipulated to project this ideological position. While Samira's priorities are led by the film, its budget and timetable, Agheleh's priorities are dictated by the sociopolitical realities in Afghanistan of 2003. Ironically, Samira wished to comment on such realities, but shows little appreciation of their complexities and contradictory nature, and the enormous pressures they bring upon ordinary people, and especially onto Afghan women like Agheleh.

What follows is an odd screen test in which Samira asks Agheleh about her eyebrows ('How long will it take until they grow thick?'), offers to add to them using make-up ('You will look younger with thick eyebrows!') and massages the brow of her future actress. What follows could almost be a lovers' discourse.

'What if you make me the star of your film and then leave me?'
 'I won't hurt you because I like you.'
 'How can you like me if you don't know me?'
 'I like Afghan people and Afghan girls, but I don't have the time to get to know all of them.'

Samira, possibly as a result of Agheleh's directness and resolve, is moving in to shape her future star:

'Can you be more feminine and less serious? Act more like a woman?'
 'What?'
 'More naturally.'
 'Is this OK?'
 'Yes. That's good. Smile a little.'

After this intense personal exchange, Samira returns to her director's persona: 'Thank you, dear Agheleh. I will let you know in a couple of days.' This move is well deflected by Agheleh's salvo: 'But how do you know I will accept your offer?' Samira senses she may have overplayed her hand: 'Well, I am asking you if you want to act in this film, think about it.'

Despite her background Agheleh plays the professional: 'I have some questions. If I accept, how long will the filming take?' Samira wishes to reassure her: 'One and a half months.'

Agheleh: 'Who has the lead role?' Here Samira is careful: 'Whoever is cast. You, maybe.' Agheleh is not to be fended off: 'Have you cast anyone more important than me?' Samira says she has not. Feeling she has the upper hand, Agheleh tries again: 'Couldn't you find anybody in all the radio or television?' Now it seems she has overplayed her hand; Samira returns to the careful balance, maybe tired of the game: 'If someone younger than you shows up tomorrow, we'll choose her.' After a thought, she adds: 'But so far, you are the best.'

Agheleh's mother wishes to be reassured: 'Is there any danger?' Samira seems unfazed: 'No dear, there's no threat. Her role is a good one. She plays the role of a well-spoken Afghan woman who is a student, not a teacher.' This last description receives a swift rebuff from Agheleh: 'I don't want it!' Samira, shaken, finds this hard to believe: 'Don't you?'



A father offering his baby son to appear in *At Five in the Afternoon*, in a scene from *Joy of Madness* (2003), directed by Hana Makhmalbaf, courtesy www.makhmalbaf.com, photo: Maysam Makhmalbaf

Agheleh is decisive: ‘No, because it will take up my time and I’m afraid of the consequences.’

So ends their second meeting, again without a firm commitment on either side. It will take much further effort to secure Agheleh’s agreement to play the lead in Samira’s film.

That the young Afghan woman ends up as the star of Samira’s film is less than surprising; her ability to stand up for herself during the preproduction period has made her an even more coveted prize for Samira Makhmalbaf, a substantial goal to be achieved, a person to be won over and controlled. This ability to resist being taken over does not protect Agheleh during the filming itself. In the end, the struggle between the two strong and determined women ends as could be expected – the director, with her control of the text and mise-en-scène, and the structure of the narrative, manages to bend the independent young Agheleh to her needs. The point here is not whether the portrayal of the young woman in *At Five in the Afternoon* is justified or accurate. What seems to be at stake, rather, is the fact that Agheleh is playing a woman very unlike herself, a woman without a clear political outlook of the kind presented by Agheleh in the documentary *Joy of Madness*. Samira dresses her up, has her walk up and down the endless ruins of the Kabul palace, tottering on her high heels in shots bordering on the fetishistic, and uttering lines which are much less coherent than her own speech in the documentary. The control relationship emanating from what is almost a colonial situation is staggering: on the one hand, Samira’s film



Samira selecting actors from the market in *Joy of Madness* (2003), directed by Hana Makhmalbaf, courtesy www.makhmalbaf.com, photo: Maysam Makhmalbaf

includes some implied criticism of the results of the American-led occupation of Afghanistan, but on the other, her own taking over of Noqreh's character and inclinations seems at times no less colonialist through the mechanisms of authorial cinema. Thus, the relationship between the two women acquires erotic, and even sadomasochistic, undertones in the long ponderous scenes in which Noqreh is presented to the viewer's gaze as an object of desire, despite the feminism proclaimed by the director in many of her interviews.

The citation at the head of this article from Michelle Citron speaks of the two ethical responsibilities of the film-maker – one to her/his subject(s), the other to his/her audience.¹⁶ In her experience, Citron has faced some contradictions between these ethical relationships. The questions she asks are to do with how one reconciles such contradictory demands, much sharper, of course, in the case of film-makers who make films outside their own community. Now *Joy of Madness* could arguably be defined as an anthropological study of the Makhmalbaf clan, by a member of that clan, Hana, and might therefore satisfy Catherine Russell, following Bill Nichols's expectations from what he calls Ethnotopia.¹⁷ In her own use of this term, Russell argues that the contemporary documentarist/ethnographer assumes a more dynamic position¹⁸ than that occupied by his or her predecessors; the term combines *Utopia* and *Ethnos*, suggesting that the story changes depending on the position or topos. It is of course preferable for the documentarist to make films about her/his own community. This is what Hana is doing. That other people also appear in her film is a result of the role they play in her sister's film. Hence the ethnotopic positioning of Hana is not problematic, and her courage in sticking to her guns when confronted with her sister's ego is both impressive and commendable. In the case of Samira Makhmalbaf and her relationship with both the subject and the audience, one may conclude that the film does not sufficiently resolve its 'ethical responsibilities' – the rewriting of an actual young Afghan woman into a fictional character has deconstructed a complex and resourceful human being and replaced her with a paler fictional construction. If the social politics of *Joy of Madness* is somewhat chaotic, it is still coherent, and Agheleh emerges as a rounded human being we can understand and relate to directly. In her sister's film, this has not been achieved – the script was completed before the director ventured into Afghan society and was not altered by the difficult and dispiriting experience that *Joy of Madness* carefully preserves. The fiction fails to deal with the reality which the documentary painfully maintains.

16. Michelle Citron, 'Fleeing From Documentary: Autobiographical Film? Video and the Ethics of Responsibility', in *Feminism and Documentary*, eds Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, pp 271–84
17. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991, p 218
18. Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1999, p 76