CINEMAS of the Other
A PERSONAL JOURNEY WITH FILM-MAKERS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND CENTRAL ASIA

An original collection of recent interviews with filmmakers whose works represent the trends in the film industries of their respective countries. In addition to creative concerns, the focal point of the interviews is to position the filmmaker within the social or political context of their respective country. The striking variety in approaches towards each interview creates a rich diversity of tone within the text. Cinemas of the Other offers a carefully researched and detailed first-hand account of the developments and trends in specific regional film industries.

‘An unprecedented set of insights into the creative domain where the politics of creativity meets the politics of emancipation. An exceedingly readable and informative book.’
— PROFESSOR HAMID DABASHI, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Gönül Dönmez-Colin is a writer, researcher and lecturer. She has taught in Montreal and Hong Kong and has done field research in Iran, Turkey, India and Central Asia.
Cinemas of the Other
A Personal Journey with Film-Makers from the Middle East and Central Asia

By Gönül Dönmez-Colin
Gönül Dönmez-Colin’s *Cinemas of the Other* is a path-breaking intervention in the notion of national cinema in the age of globalization. In a succession of highly informative and deeply engaging interviews with leading filmmakers from Iran, Turkey, and a number of Central Asian countries, she navigates the course of emerging and established national cinemas, with an uncanny ability to tease out the hidden features of a geopolitics of culture. The result is an unprecedented set of insights into the creative domain where the politics of creativity meets the poetics of emancipation. An exceedingly readable and informative book.

Professor Hamid Dabashi, Columbia University
Cinemas of the Other
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By Gönül Dönmez-Colin
for Maya, Inés and Phyllis

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Introduction

*Cinemas of the Other: A Personal Journey with Film-makers from the Middle East and Central Asia* is a collection of interviews with film-makers whose works are representative of the cinemas of their respective countries.

In the world cinema today, Hollywood is the dominant film industry, which imposes its culture and values despite the fact that it contributes only a fraction of the annual production worldwide. National cinemas/industries that cannot fight such an economically powerful giant have either withdrawn backstage or have begun to adopt the box office success formula of the adversary. The ‘other’ in the title of this book has a dual meaning: 1) the non-western nations of the Islamic Middle East and Central Asia that are commonly perceived from a Eurocentric point of view as a distinctly separate entity – remote, alien, mysterious, exotic, barbaric, savage and even threatening and dangerous – 2) the cinemas of these nations, which are committed to voice social and political issues of their peoples, and/or oppose, both in style and content, dominant mainstream cinemas, inside and outside the country.

To examine the cinemas of all countries that could be defined as ‘the other’ in this sense is beyond the scope of this book or my expertise. I have chosen Iran and Turkey from the Middle East, the two non-Arab Muslim countries in the region and the Muslim Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan that share several common traits – history, customs, traditions, languages and religious affiliation – with Iran and Turkey.

Despite present difficulties, the cinemas of each of these countries have had a long history. The first Iranian non-fiction film was shot in Ostend, Belgium, with a Gaumont camera by Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkasbashi, the official court photographer, on 18 August 1900, to record the welcoming of the visiting Shah with bouquets of flowers. The first public screenings were held in Cinema Soleil opened in 1900 in Tabriz by Roman Catholic missionaries and commercial viewings were started by Ebrahim Khan Sahhafbashi-e Tehrani, first in the back of his antique shop and later, in 1904, in a cinema in Tehran.

The first Iranian film, *Abi va rabi / Abi and Rabi* (1930), a silent black-and-white film, was directed by Ovanes Ohanian. The first sound film, Abdolhossein Sepanta’s *Dokhtar-e Lor/The Lor Girl* (1933), was shot in India, featuring a rural girl named Golonar who sang and danced in the teahouses on the Lorestan-Khuzistan road.
During the time of the Imperial regime, both the government and the religious authorities aimed at controlling the images shown publicly. Censorship began in the 1920s when imported films dealing openly with sexual matters were seen as a threat to the family. Political or social criticism was unthinkable in local films. By the 1950s and 1960s, censorship on political content tightened, whereas sex had a free rein. The clerics, on the other hand, condemned cinema, along with music and other art forms, as immoral and corrupt and, therefore, *haram* (forbidden). Abolfazl Jalili’s autobiographical film, *Abjad/The First Letter* (2003), elaborates remarkably the stifling religious oppression on arts even before the revolution.

The new regime of the Ayatollahs was not against cinema as such. Khomeini called it ‘one of the achievements of civilisation’, however, starting from 1978, the revolutionary fervour set fire to more than 180 movie houses killing hundreds of people. Many film-makers were indicted on charges of corrupting the public. The attempts to establish an Islamist cinema brought the film industry under the control of the government. Most of the repressive measures were related to the depiction of women on the screen – no close-ups, no women central characters, no appearance of the female gender over nine years of age without the *hejab* (Islamic dress code), no tactual contact between unrelated members of the opposite sex, etc.

In the 1980s, when President Mohammad Khatami was the Minister of Islamic Guidance and Culture, he declared that cinema ‘was not the mosque’. With the founding of the Farabi Cinema Foundation in 1983, positive steps were taken to liberate arts from the clutches of the clerics and promote national cinema, Iranian films began to be noticed in the West. With Abbas Kiarostami, Bahram Beyzai, Dariush Mehrjui and Mohsen Makhmalbaf leading the way, and with several younger talented film-makers, such as Abolfazl Jalili, Majid Majidi and Jafar Panahi, not to forget established women Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Tahmineh Milani, Iranian cinema today is the most vibrant and challenging cinema of the Middle East.

It has been established that cinema arrived in Turkey in 1896 through a Frenchman named Bertrand. His private show at the palace of Sultan Abdulhamit II was followed by public screenings at the fashionable Sponeck Restaurant in Pera, in the cosmopolitan European part of Istanbul, by a Romanian named Sigmund Weinberg, who was the local agent of the French company Pathé Brothers. In 1908, Weinberg opened the first movie theatre in the same district and appropriately called it Cinema Pathé. The district eventually changed its name to Beyoğlu but remained as the centre of the film industry and a particular street called Yeşilçam (The Green Pine) gave its name to a Turkish Hollywood without the studio system.

Alexandre Promio, the cameraman of Lumiére brothers, shot short films about Turks in 1896 in Istanbul, and Macedonian Manaki brothers Yanaki and Militiades made documentaries starting from 1907. However, the first national film, a long documentary called *Aya Stefanos’taki Rus Abidesinin Yıkılması/The Demolition of the Russian Monument at St. Stephan*, was made in 1914 by Fuat Uzknay, who was at that time an officer in the Turkish army.

The shooting of the first feature film, *Himmet Ağa’nın İzdivaci/The Marriage of Himmet Ağa*, a free adaptation from Moliére, was begun by Sigmund Weinberg in 1918 but was suspended due to war and completed two years later by Fuat Uzknay. The following year, a leading figure of theatre, Ahmet Fehim, made waves with *Mürebhiye/The Governess* (1919), a sex-vaudeville about a French seductress called Angelique, which was adapted from a novel by a well-known Turkish novelist, Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar. The film was banned by the commandant of the occupying French forces for degrading French women.
Until the 1940s, Turkish cinema was dominated by one man, Muhsin Ertuğrul, a theatre director with foreign education, who was deeply influenced by French and German theatres and the Soviet revolutionary cinema. In fact, the period between 1923 and 1939 is referred to as the Period of Theatre Men. Ertuğrul’s Ateşten Gömlek/The Shirt of Fire (1923) is a landmark as the first film in which Muslim women appear on screen, breaking a long established taboo. The period is also important for the establishment of severe censorship laws, inspired by Mussolini’s Codice di Censura, which remained in effect for almost fifty years.

Turkish cinema began to show interest in rural life in the 1940s with folkloric melodramas focusing on the theme of the oppressed woman. By the late 1940s, the municipal tax on cinema tickets was reduced by half for Turkish productions. This first subsidy coincided with the emergence of a new generation of film-makers, which resulted in a noticeable rise in film production. Leading personalities of Turkish cinema today, Lütfi Akad, Metin Erksan, Memduh Ün and Atlı Yılmaz, are some of the film-makers who had their formation in those years.

The cinema of the 1960s was fundamentally influenced by social and political changes in the country, particularly the coup d’etat of 27 May 1960, which brought a more relaxed atmosphere that nourished arts. Translations of diverse ideologies, including Marxism-Leninism, became readily available. More books were published and more films were made, particularly in the socialist-realist genre. In 1966, a record number of 238 films were made. However, this did not necessarily mean they were all worthy of attention. Popular cinema and arabesque melodramas also gained ground and sit-coms, thrillers, religious films, westerns, adaptations from photo-romans and sex films inundated the screens.

Before the arrival of television in 1968, cinema had an important place in the family. Cheap morning matinees for women were very popular. When the television and the subsequent video furore threatened the industry, many film companies began to churn out cheap sex and kung fu films.

Umut/The Hope (1970), by Yılmaz Güney, is considered a turning point heralding the beginning of New Turkish Cinema. The story of a phaeton driver (a trade which became obsolete with the arrival of the taxi system), the film is a realistic portrayal of Turkey in a period of transition when capitalism was rapidly gaining ground. Umut was banned for propagating class differences in a country where officially there were no classes; for alluding to American imperialism; for degrading religion and for provoking workers to resist authority.

The reputation of Yılmaz Güney in the western world is built around two important films which he did not direct in the literal sense of the word, but which he scripted while in prison. The first one is Sürü/The Herd (1979), directed by Zeki Ökten, and the second is Yol (1982), directed by Şerif Gören, both of them film-makers influenced by the new cinema of Güney, who were ready for changes despite several productive years they had spent within the confines of Yeşilçam commercial cinema system.

The 1980 coup d’etat, which plunged the country into the dark ages, paradoxically benefited cinema. The absence of the pressure to be politically engaged liberated the artists, and urban problems of the individual surfaced. The cinema, which had taken its inspiration from the rural cinema of Güney, produced films that depended on events rather than on individuals. The rural image was somewhat incomplete. Yeşilçam, which represented Turkish cinema until the end of 1970s, was largely a popular cinema that supported the rural culture and oral traditions. It had anonymous characteristics and a system of hierarchy that did not allow for diverse opinions or expressions. It
was also based on the apprentice-master tradition. The arrival of television, the gradual multiplication of channels and the changes in the social and political environment eased the way for a personal cinema. Along with Ömer Kavur, considered the real auteur of Turkish cinema, Ali Özgentürk and Erden Kural are the other two representatives of this transition from the politically committed neo-realist trend to a more creative and personal cinema.

Long years of economic and political turmoil forced thousands of Turkish citizens into exile and some film-makers such as Erden Kural chose self-imposed exile when they could no longer make films in their country. Kural worked in Germany for many years, but succeeded in using foreign capital to make what he calls ‘Turkish films’.

Feminism arrived rather late in Turkey, but as an increasing number of women began to join the work force, the focus of cinema shifted from men to women. The films of Atıf Yılmaz best display the general evolution of Turkish cinema regarding issues of women from infertility, birth control, widowhood to feminism and even lesbianism.

The New Turkish Cinema that has emerged in the 1990s generated by a handful of talented film-makers – Derviş Zaim, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Zeki Demirkubuz, Yeşim Ustaöğlu and Tayfun Pirselimoğlu, to name a few – displays a healthy diversity in terms of genres, styles and subject matter. The young generation focuses on issues familiar to them, the characters they know and the events they have experienced, realistically or vicariously. They have the courage to deal with the recent past and the present political situation. Ordinary people caught in daily problems make up the heroes or the anti-heroes. Well thought of scripts are usually penned by the director, but often leave room for improvisation. Most importantly, these film-makers display an honesty, sincerity and respect for the audience in the way they tell their stories.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Central Asian cinemas drew attention of the film world when a new vitality was observed, particularly, in Kazakhstan, whose capital at the time, Alma Ata (presently called Almaty), was already the largest film centre of the USSR after Moscow, Leningrad (St Petersburg of today) and Kiev. Kazakhfilm Studio’s origins go back to the 1930s although for the Kazakhs, national cinema begins in 1954 with the first Kazakh fiction film, Shaken Aimanov’s A Love Poem. The first documentary was shot in 1925 and released in 1929 under the historical title Pribytie Pervovo Poezda v Alma Atu/The Arrival of the First Train in Alma Ata. Victor Turin’s Turksib/Stalnoi Put/The Steel Road, on the building of the Turkish-Siberian railway, was also released the same year. Five years later a documentary film studio was founded where newsreels, under the title Soviet Kazakhstan, documentaries and a few feature films were made. During the war, Mosfilm and Lenfilm were evacuated to Alma Ata and Sergei Eisenstein shot two parts of Ivan Grozyj/Ivan, the Terrible there between 1943 and 1945.

Central Asian cinema was already developed in the 1940s; but under the constraints of the Communist regime, it did not have much chance to flourish. From the time cinema was nationalized in 1919 by a Lenin decree, film production and distribution had been regulated by a government institution, the State Committee for Cinematography (Goskino), which gradually gained control, only to be dismantled with the arrival of perestroika, which opened new horizons for young film-makers who were mostly trained in VGIK (the all-Union State Institute of Cinematography) in Moscow and shared the same concerns and difficulties despite the diversity of their backgrounds.

Kazakhstan was perhaps the only Central Asian State which was not seriously affected by the social, economic and ethnical turmoil that has swept the former republics after the fall of the Soviet
Union. Under the liberal policies of the president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country moved to a free market economy smoothly, and banks and co-operatives took the opportunity to publicize through high-profile investments such as cinema. However, when investments did not show profit, the private sector withdrew and some investors were interrogated for laundering black money; film production has fallen considerably.

When I met Rachid Nugmanov, one of the most prominent voices of the post-Soviet Kazakh new wave, in the summer of 1991 at the Kazakhfilm Studio, he told me the new movement was ‘post-perestroika’. ‘It is about young generations everywhere, be they Kazakh, Russian, or any other — about new relationships and a new vitality. No restrictions.’ No restrictions, even commercial! Kazakh films could never make it to the commercial circuit. So, why worry?

Nugmanov’s unreleased diploma film, Ya-Ha (1986), quickly became an underground cult classic. His first feature, Iglə/The Needle (1988), starring a rock idol, sold twenty million tickets at the box office, but Meist/Revenge/The Reed Flute (1990), by Ernək Şinarbaev, was shelved until invited to an independently promoted Festival of Unwanted Films. Turned down for foreign export by Moscow film officials the previous year, the film won the Grand Prix of that festival, which opened its door to Cannes and other prestigious festivals.

Serik Aprimov plunged into the socially and politically committed film genre right from the start. Konechnaya Ostanovka/Qijan/The Last Stop (1989), a pessimistic portrait of rural daily life, was praised by the critics but condemned by the villagers of Aksuat (the birthplace of the film-maker and the focus of the story) for exposing the naked truth on screen.

The Golden period of the Kazakh cinema, which flourished with perestroika, gradually lost its momentum after the fall of the Soviet Empire and the transition to a market economy. Private studios that had mushroomed following Independence have been obliged to re-evaluate their projects according to the dictates of the capitalist system. Today film-makers and producers think of the western markets when choosing their scripts. Around forty good film-makers are working in Kazakhstan and, about ten of them, have received different prizes in different film festivals, but they are not able to finance their projects. Some, such as Rachid Nugmanov, have immigrated to European countries. Darejan Omirbaev and Serik Aprimov, who have won the confidence of the West, are in a position to find foreign co-producers. But the idea of a cinema with no restrictions, which Nugmanov had once advocated, is in the past.

Cinema arrived in Kyrgyzstan later than the other republics. Kyrgyzfilm Studio was founded in 1942. Between 1954 and 1960, Mosfilm Studio sent many talented film-makers to Frunze (Bishkek of today) to give a boost to the industry. Vasili Pronin’s Saltanat/Sovereignty (1955) was produced there. The negative aspect of this policy was that Kyrgyz cinema did not have much chance to develop its identity.

Bolakbet Shamshiev and Tolomush Okeev are considered as the founders of the national cinema, but world-renown writer Chingiz Aitmatov and his works are responsible for feeding Kyrgyz cinema its artistic nourishment.

Aktan Abdikalikov is the only successful Kyrgyz film-maker at present. Beshkempir/The Adopted Son, a sensitive story about cultural identity, was distributed in several countries through its French partner. Although it was not a favorite in its own country, the industry profited from its international success.
Kyrgyzstan enjoys considerably better economical circumstances than some of its neighbours but eighty per cent of the population of four and one-half million people still live on $2 a day or less. Most citizens cannot afford to go to the cinema. And to aid national cinema is not a priority for the government.

Co-productions seem like the only light at the end of the tunnel, but they come with a price tag. According to the Kyrgyzfilm Studio head Tinay Ibragimov, there is a problem of commercial persuasion to focus on national topics when the money comes from abroad. ‘The relationship between the film and the spectator and the one who gives the money and the censorship is difficult.’

Just like the rest of the world, Hollywood films are the most popular in Kyrgyzstan. Political films directly dealing with the Soviet era are conspicuously absent. ‘We got a good education studying there’, comments Baktyr Karagulov, one of the prominent film-makers, ‘Why should we offend them? Of course, we lost a little, but we always had our culture. Thanks to Khrushchev, we have Aitmatov’.

Before Independence, would-be film-makers studied in Moscow. There is hardly anyone with Moscow education working today. Institute of Fine Arts in the capital Bishkek, which has a department of Film and Television, gave its first graduates – directors and cameramen – last year, but they only make video clips. And Moscow is no longer the gathering point of film-makers from all parts of the Soviet Union. As Aitmatov ironically pointed out, today, they have to go to places like Cottbus in Germany to meet each other.

In Tajikistan, the first documentary, about the arrival of the first train in the capital Dusbanbe, was made in 1929 by three Russian pioneers: Vasily Kuzin, Artem Pishevich and Nikolai Gexulin, and Tajikfilm Studio was established in 1930. The first significant feature film was Pochetnoe Pravo/Honorary Right (1934) by Kamil Yarmatov. Davlat Khudonazarov, a political activist, is an important representative of the new wave of 1960–70 marked by a diversity of styles and themes. Tachir Sabirov, made his most important work, Margi sudher/Death of an Extortionist (1966), during this period.

Following Independence, a new new wave similar to the one in Kazakhstan was aborted by civil war that resulted in a wave of emigration from the republic. Many film-makers moved to Moscow or to western countries and made films with foreign financing. The most successful two are Bakhtiyar Khudoynazarov, who has shown his talents starting with his first film Bratan/Brothers (1992), a black-and-white road movie that crosses the Pamirs with a steam engine, and Jamseed Usmanov, who lives in Paris.

In the last decade of the Soviet Union and early 1990s, video and audio cassettes became increasingly popular sources of entertainment as well as means of disseminating information outside government control. Today, films are shown in the Dushanbe theatres and in villages on an irregular basis. Recent short films screened during a retrospective on Tajik cinema held during the Cottbus Film Festival 2001 showed depression and lack of prospects among the young generation as the most prominent theme.

Cinema in Turkmenistan began with the newsreels just like in the rest of the Soviet Union. In the 1920s, the first chroniclers recorded anniversary celebrations, inaugurations of Lenin monuments and similar events. During World War II, when Kiev Studio was moved to Ashkabad, war ‘note-books’ were made. The documentarians of the post-war period focused on socialist reconstruction, the reclaiming of the desert, the new freedom of the Muslim women, etc. Feature film-making began in 1929 reaching its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. The most renowned Turkmen film-maker Khodzakuli

Caspian Sea offers Turkmenistan a 500 km coastline with numerous natural resources, including oil and fish, but is threatened by extreme levels of pollution as well as fluctuating water levels. Living standards dropped since 1991, although, Turkmenistan still maintains close bilateral economic and military ties with Russia. The government controls the media, and many talented film-makers from Narliev to Shugarev have found themselves in conflict with the regime.

Turkmenian cinema after Independence has the most limited production of the Central Asian States. Turkmenfilm studio produces around four films a year, all of which are shot on video. Shooting 35mm films is not possible.

The first known screening in Central Asia was in Tashkent in 1987, the capital of Uzbekistan. The first Uzbek documentary was shot there in 1923 and the first feature films, *Pakhta-Aral/Pahta Aral* (N. Scerbakov), *Minaret Smerti/The Minaret of the Dead* (Viatcheslav Viskovski) and *The Muslim Woman* (Dimitri Bassaligo), were made in 1925. Nabi Ganiev and Kamil Yarmatov are the founders of modern Uzbek cinema. During the 1960s, following the 'thaw' of Khrushchev and the new wave in the West, Uzbek new wave was born. Ali Khamraev is one of the important representatives of this movement. Perestroika opened the doors to talented young film-makers such as Jahangir Faiziev, Zulfikar Mussakov and Yusuf Razikov, but one must not forget the important contributions of Kamara Kamalova, the most prominent woman film-maker of Uzbekistan, if not Central Asia.

Uzbek films favour popular narratives with strong social themes relative to the republic. The genre and style vary from irony and farce to science fiction and period pieces. National cinema is more popular than Hollywood. The main concern of the film-makers is to meet the needs of their people. 'My aim is not to make films for festivals but for people. Uzbek film-makers shoot films for the 23 million Uzbek people', says Mussakov.

Uzbekistan is a country rich in natural gas, coal, oil, gold and other resources. Among all its Central Asian neighbors, its economy now only stands second to Kazakhstan's. However, the market system has only given prosperity to a privileged few as the country tries to move away from the Stalinist heritage of cotton monoculture, which has brought tremendous environmental devastation. Although stronger and wealthier than either Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan also faces deteriorating social and economic conditions. Formation of a new national identity, decolonization, Islamization, Turkification and deRussification are some of the priorities. With daily life deteriorating in several areas, people blame the new capitalism for their sufferings, and Islamic fundamentalist movement is on the rise.

Just like in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, among recent productions, at least those that we see in the West, political films dealing with the issue of coming to terms with the Soviet period, or an analysis of the present situation, are absent. It has been reported in the western media that despite economic stability, there is still lack of freedom and journalists have been persecuted for their political stance.

Interviews I have conducted with film-makers from different generations point to the emergence of new cinemas in the post-independence Muslim Central Asian States with young film-makers trying to find their path through a difficult transition period. In comparison to the Soviet regime, when the industry was under the tight control of Moscow, there is a certain amount of freedom. However, controversial political subjects are still dealt with auto-censorship, if not state intervention. Except for Uzbekistan, Hollywood films are the most popular. The biggest drawback to the development of
the national cinemas, however, is the lack of money. As the eminent Kyrgyz writer and philosopher Chingiz Aitmatov reiterates, 'The ideological censorship of the Soviet Union is now replaced with the censorship of money which is the reason behind the domination of the Western culture'. Interestingly, several film-makers from different countries have expressed similar concerns regarding culture and cinema in a post-modern age. Erden Kıral and Ali Özgentürk from Turkey, Dariush Mehrjui from Iran, and Chingiz Aitmatov from Kyrgyzstan, lamented the loss of values in our consumer-oriented societies where intellectuals are either shunned or pushed to the margins. Kazakh Rachid Nugmanov and Iranian Abbas Kiarostami converged on the search for nothingness through Japanese haiku poetry. The future of cinema, which was one of the main topics of concern during its 100th birthday, is now linked to acceptance of new technologies, although with reservations. Several menaces were underlined as threatening national film industries: Hollywood dominance, economical limitations, state censorship, but also, the increasingly powerful network of film festivals and funding/distribution systems of the West that have begun to shape national products according to the tastes of western audiences, creating artificial products that do not have an audience in their country.

The project began more than ten years ago. To conduct the interviews with film-makers from the Middle East and Central Asia, I have travelled from Kazakhstan to Canada via Iran, Turkey and several other countries along the way, participating in film events where it would be possible to screen the films and meet the film-makers. All interviewees are film-makers except one. I felt it necessary to include Chinghiz Aitmatov, a novelist and screenwriter who is considered as the ‘the heart and soul of Kyrgyz cinema’.

For the final version of the book, I have tried to gather most recent information by contacting the film-makers and, if possible, conducting new interviews. Unfortunately, two prominent film-makers of Central Asia, Tolomush Okeev from Kyrgyzstan and Tachir Mukharovich Sabirov from Tajikistan, have passed away. I hope that this work will do justice to their memories.

Each interview begins with direct questions discussing the film(s) screened most recently, leading to more general topics, such as the cinema of the country in question. In addition to artistic concerns, the integral part of the interview is to place the film-maker’s work within the socio-economic and political context of his/her environment. Personal questions are approached only if relevant to the work. In several cases, I had to consider the precarious situation of the film-makers in their countries, personal feelings and/or government censorship and restrictions before formulating questions.

To avoid redundancy, I chose not to follow a single pattern for each interview. Although all my questions were prepared in advance with meticulous research, I have allowed for improvisation to let the circumstances and the atmosphere as well as the personality and the present mood of the interviewee lead the way. Some interviews were conducted in a rather formal fashion, whereas others were more like conversations between old friends. In fact, several of the film-makers who participated in this volume have become friends over the years.

The aim of the book is to familiarize the reader – academicians, film studies students as well as laymen – with the cinemas of the region, through first-hand accounts from the film-makers regarding historical and recent developments and trends paying particular attention to political and cultural evolutions, with the eventual desired outcome of opening, without compromises, the ‘otherness’ of the ‘other’ to culminate in a better understanding that would overcome clichés, stereotypes and founded or imagined fears. I have tried to maintain a universal approach and a style
that is not overly academic, to widen the readership to include the general public, interested in discovering little known territories.

Although several books exist on Asian cinemas, and more recently on the Iranian cinema, Central Asian cinemas and the cinema of Turkey are still uncharted territories. Furthermore, I believe that this project is unique as it explores these cinemas through first-hand accounts.
Rakhshan Bani-Etemad is somewhat of an oddity for Iranian cinema: she is a woman; she does not make children’s films; and she pushes the cinematographic limits of her country by focusing on taboo subjects such as poverty, crime, prostitution, polygamy, divorce, repressed feelings, illicit love and similar realities of social existence. The leading woman film-maker of Iran, Bani-Etemad, has been making socially engaged documentaries since the late 1970s. She has also made eight feature films.

Iranian film critics were harsh on her first three features: *Karezhj Az Mahdudeh/Off the Limits* (1988), *Zard-e Ghanari/Yellow Canary* (1989) and *Pool-e Khareji/Foreign Currency* (1990), comedies with a sharp eye for social satire. They saw a young artist keen on entering the profession of cinema, but did not find any differentiative features except perhaps a sense of solidarity with the underprivileged. Scripts written by others did not give her woman’s point of view much chance to develop.

With *Nargess* (1992) that she based on research she conducted for several years while making documentaries, Bani-Etemad began to focus on adult relationships and problems facing women and questioned the traditional mores of society. The story of two women of different backgrounds and age involved with the same man, the film placed relationships in a traditional society in transition to modernity within their apposite cultural and political perspective. Through the medium of social melodrama, *Nargess* pushed the censorship codes of an Islamist fundamentalist regime to the limit by exposing marginal characters caught in un-Islamic circumstances. The final sequence of the film, despite the inevitable tragedy, also suggested the possibility and challenge of women’s solidarity. For Bani-Etemad, *Nargess* was the
story of ‘desperate people overwhelmed by social conditions, among them are women who are under dual pressure due to traditional and historical beliefs’.

Her next work, Rusariye Abi / The Blue Veiled (1995), explored the possibilities of forbidden love – an extramarital liaison between a young factory worker and a much older widower of means. When there is a will, there is a way and, particularly, if the hero is as strong-minded as Nobar who refuses to know ‘her place’. The film received the Bronze Leopard Award at the Locarno Film Festival.

Banoo-e Ordibehesht / The May Lady (1998) is about the tribulations of a forty-two-year-old divorcée caught between motherhood and womanhood in a society where values are constantly changing. The protagonist, Forough Kia is a film-maker assigned to shoot a TV documentary on the subject of the perfect Iranian mother. Her name sets the tone of the story: first name, Forough, evokes Forough Farrokhzad, a pioneer film-maker (The House is Black, 1962) and a talented poet whose unconventional approach to life and art has inspired and influenced intellectuals and artists, especially women, and Kia is homage to Abbas Kiarostami, whose films carry a documentary quality.

Forough is a well-educated, urban middle-class single mother who tries to find her own space between the demands of her lover and the possessive tendencies of her adolescent son. The woman in her yearns for an adult relationship, but such feelings are not well received by her outwardly modern son, who assumes the traditional role of the male member of the family, responsible for protecting the female member regardless of her age or status.

We watch Forough and her son Mani go through their daily routines. She cleans and cooks nonchalantly while arranging business affairs on the cordless telephone. He acts like a typical adolescent – perhaps not so typical for Iran as perceived in the West. This modern boy in blue jeans hangs out with peers and listens to loud western music in his room, the decoration of which is no different than the room of any western adolescent of the same social standing. He even attends a western-style party. However, he is arrested for his transgression and that is a warning signal that all has not changed in Iran yet. Furthermore, a patronising magistrate blames the mother and her divorced status for lack of parental discipline.

The May Lady portrays the life of an intelligent modern urban woman, a theme, which had not been dealt with so realistically in post-revolution Iranian cinema. The objective camera of the documentarian is quite evident. The video footage of the interviews the protagonist conducts with mothers from all echelons of society displays effectively the disparity in lifestyles between lower and upper economic classes and the gap between urban and rural conditions. The most commendable aspects of the film, however, are the poetic undertones and the intimate quality of the protagonist’s inner monologues.

Ms Bani-Etemad answered my questions during the Montreal World Film Festival in 1998 where The May Lady was shown in competition. Mohammad Atebbai, film critic and producer was the interpreter.

THE HIDDEN HALF

Most post-revolutionary Iranian films that reach the West involve children. Very rarely, we see an Iranian film tackling adult situations, let alone deep concerns of women. Yet, you have made three consecutive feature films, Nargess, The Blue Veiled and The May Lady that focus on adult relationships and problems facing women.
A large number of Iranian films deal with children, particularly films that are promoted at international film festivals, but I cannot say that this is the norm for all Iranian films. I brought up two children and yet my films never had anything to do with children. The May Lady is an image of contemporary life in Iran and it reflects different situations in which women find themselves in Iranian society.

In traditional societies, family is the dominant structure. However, divorce often comes up in your films. Is this a significant issue in modern Iran? I understand women’s right to divorce was restored in 1983.

The figures of statistics on divorce are high, but so are the figures on marriage. In our country, women-men relations are mostly based on marriage. Divorce is not an acceptable choice and what comes out of divorce is not very productive for the women and children. Despite the fact that the number of divorces is on the rise with the relaxation of social pressures, the stigma attached to divorce remains the same, particularly for women. In my films, rather than dealing with these social issues, I choose to focus on problems that are more personal.

In terms of the upbringing of the children, are parents as concerned about controlling the boys as they are the girls?

The girls are much more controlled. Even the viewpoints about educating girls are different. For the parents of the present generation, however, the difference between contemporary Iran and the time when we were children is very clear. Today, children are running the families.

How did you succeed in balancing the simple banalities of the protagonist’s daily life such as mundane household chores and the harsh realities of working on a documentary, with the poetry of her relationship with the invisible man?

One of the most difficult tasks was to write the script. When I started, I was excited like a film student. The essential point was how to portray the educated woman and balance her life – her social condition at home and at work – with her sentimental side. This was very difficult. Unfortunately, Iranian films have not been dealing much with this topic from a realistic point of view.

Did you have collaborators in writing the script? How did the idea come about? Is it a subject you have been thinking/researching for some time?

I wrote the script for The May Lady although I have had collaborators in some of my previous work. It is difficult to answer how the idea arrives. Usually, it springs from obsessions that go on for years. I focus on these obsessions to write the script.

Is it based on real experiences? The fact that the protagonist is a documentarian brings in an autobiographical element as you have been making documentaries for so many years. This aspect gives the film the quality of a meditative dialogue between the film-maker and her society.

The film is based on some personal experiences and some research I have conducted through the years by contacting several women while making documentaries. You must have noticed that I used characters from my previous films, Nargess and The Blue Veiled, in the video sequences to give the film a more realistic quality.
Many Iranian films we see abroad are written by the director, which gives the impression that there is a tradition in Iran for the directors to wear more than one hat. I wonder if this is by choice or necessity.

Firstly, scriptwriting in Iran in a professional way does not offer a variety of subject matters to the directors. Secondly, most film-makers of acclaim have certain features in their films, which would be very difficult to capture and convey by someone else. My first three films were written by other people, but I wrote the script for the last three films and I had a co-writer for Nargess, my fourth feature. Nargess is based on the research I conducted on social issues for several years. The characters are fictional but their personalities have common traits with the people I encountered and interviewed for my documentaries. The main characters of the film were cast even before the script was written. The script aided me in exploring, from the point of view of a woman film-maker, the veiled domain of women’s thoughts and feelings in our society. I find it difficult to use the scripts written by other people and I do not think that I will use others’ scripts in the future.

Documentary film-makers are often in a dilemma. You must admit that when talking to other women about their sorrow and misery, you are intruding into their privacy. On the other hand, if you avoid such issues, you would not be able to tell the truth adequately. How can a documentarian avoid being a voyeur and yet make films of social value? Why is it that the protagonist of The May Lady does not seem to be faced with such a dilemma, which, as a documentarian, you must have faced?

This film is an image of what a film-maker is thinking through the language of film. The chief concern of a film-maker is how to deal with issues through her personal outlook and ideology while controlling the sentiments. The point of view of the film-maker is very important. I am not necessarily a sentimental person but my experiences as a documentarian have made me rather tough and serious, therefore, I could hold a balance and control the sentiments.

The story is told from the mother’s point of view, except for two instances: when the boy runs away with his mother’s car and when he is preparing the table for her birthday. The mother is not present during these scenes. Why did you decide to shift to omniscient narrative for these two episodes?

The film is based on the point of view of the mother in a specific point in time. However, I cannot say that the narrator is the mother or that the overall point of view of the film is the mother’s. In a number of sequences, like the ones you have mentioned, Forough is not actually present, but we can see that the events are leading to her. She may or may not be directly involved and yet she has to make the final decision. For instance, the son, Mani character, all his situations are related to his mother. I could deal with his other problems, such as being young in the society, but I only chose what was related to his mother. Even in the scene when he is talking to Forough’s friend, he is still talking about Forough.

As the title of the film appears on the screen, we see only half of the face of a woman. The other half is cut by the frame. Later, in Forough’s bedroom, audience attention is drawn to her photo hanging over the bed, which has a shadow on one side of the face. Is the illuminated half the half that she shows to the outside world, to society? Perfect career woman and perfect mother? Alternatively, is it perhaps the half that her son, and, hence, the society is ready to see and to accept? What did you have in mind?
Whatever I had in mind, I never wanted to say the other half. I am against the expression that women are the other half.

I did not at all say that you meant it that way.

In Iran, it is often said that women are the other half. One of the most famous women’s magazines is called The Other Half.

We usually say the better half!

At the beginning, only half of her face is visible, but later we see the other half as well. I chose this image as a symbol to approach the personality of the character and to see more the woman. As for the portrait above her bed, I wanted to arouse curiosity in the audience for the character.

The way I interpreted the trope was that she always hides her feelings such as her love for a man; half of her character is always hidden. In one of her interior monologues, she asks, ‘Why should the gift of motherhood deprive me of another gift – love?’ The question seems to be addressed to the custodians of a tradition that denies love to widows or divorcees with children. To be a good mother, she has to hide the other half of her personality, the human being with natural feelings. Or perhaps the son only sees half of her – the mother.

The other half of her, which ‘is not seen’, as you have specified, is not limited to her situation in love, but refers to the other half of all women who cannot talk about love. This is not limited to personal love; but includes issues she cannot express.

Why is the man she loves invisible, only a shadow or a voice? His presence is confined to her diaristic voice-overs that reflect her frustrations as a woman, is hidden in the poetry of his love letters or overheard in his desperate telephone messages. She is never united with her lover. Did you have audience expectations in mind in giving priority to her relationship with her son, which seems to occupy most of the screen time and often define her action? Was your choice determined by self-censorship to comply with the regulations that limit manifestations of opposite sex relationships on the screen?

What was more important than the appearance of that character on screen was his place in Forough’s life. When I considered using this man in my film, I envisaged it as an explanation of a single situation, which does not necessitate putting the man on the screen. The limitations we have in Iran in regards to showing realistic relations between opposite sexes determined my choice of the technique of the letter and the voice to display a much more natural relationship of love between a man and a woman.

Mani’s feelings for Forough, particularly his possessiveness suggests something more than a son’s natural feelings for his mother. Boys who grow up in the absence of a father can be over-attached to their mothers. However, three instances in the film seem to give certain clues to the audience as to the multi-layered nature of the relationship. One example is her comment ‘He is playing the man in my life’. Another one is Mani’s flirtatious manner when he gives his mother earrings as a birthday present and the third one when she comes home from work and he takes her shoes off slowly and rather sensually. All that sounds very Oedipal to me.
Naturally, the relationship between the lone boy and the mother has a specific form as well as a broader definition. Apart from all these definitions, such relationships endure specific qualifications of our society. For instance, men are very sensitive in issues regarding their women, wives or mothers. The boy has such feelings. We can also name it Oedipus complex as a psychological issue. I tried my best to generalize the situation of Forough for other women to identify with her problems.

Of the three episodes I mentioned earlier, the last two suggest another question. When Forough tries the earrings on and her son finds them very becoming, the audience – at least the western one – expects to see a shot of her full face with the earrings and yet the camera, rather awkwardly, moves on to something else. When the son is removing his mother’s shoes, the camera focuses on an almost lifeless foot and a hand that do not seem to belong to a body. Does the first instance have something to do with the limitations forced by censorship concerning the application of *hejab*, the Islamic code of dressing, which dictates that no part of a woman’s body can be shown, except the face and the hands? And the second instance, with a certain taboo in Iranian cinema, regarding unrelated man and woman touching each other? In Iran, when you show a woman going to bed wearing her scarf, I assume that the audience adjusts to the ‘modesty artifice’ and accepts these unrealistic situations as codes that cannot be broken, but western audiences are somewhat retracted. (laughs) Exactly. We are accustomed to these situations and these techniques.

Your hero is a modern woman who does not have a balanced relationship with her son or her lover. When she is interviewing other women for her documentary, we notice that she cannot relate to them very well either. She is an outsider. In several instances, they reprimand her. They are annoyed with her filming. She cannot be inside. Does the confusion the protagonist experiences arise from the uncertainties of the period of transition in Iran? Is the burden of such a transition – from the old values to the new – more deeply felt by women of her social background and status?

This is partly true. We are in a period of transition from the traditional to the modern, which affects men as well as women. In periods of transition, men suffer as much as women. As long as the transition to modernism is not stabilized, we will be experiencing this confusion.

Many Iranian intellectuals describe the early 1990s, when Mohammad Khatami was the Minister of Culture, as the golden age for arts since the Islamic Revolution, his ‘protest’ resignation in 1992 putting an end to the short-lived artistic liberties. You have had problems with the Film Censor Council regarding *Nargess* and *The Blue Veiled*, but not so much with *The May Lady*. The medium close-ups of the leading actress did not get in the way of receiving a screening permit. How much, if anything, has changed for women and for Iranian cinema since Mr Khatami’s election as president last May? We have heard about the easing of restrictions such as the lift of the three-year ban on *Snowman* by Davoud Mirbaqeri. I remember that film was barred from theatrical release mainly because hardliners found its narrative about a man dressing as a woman to obtain a US visa ‘anti-Islamist’.

After the presidential election, we are experiencing a kind of freedom, which is difficult but, of course, very valuable for us.
However, the rules for Iranian cinema, published by the Ministry of Culture in a little red book in the summer of 1996, seem to be still in force as evidenced in your film. The following remark by the newly appointed Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Dr. Ataollah Mohajerani, was published recently in an Iranian film journal on the requirements for Iranian films to obtain the screening permit: ‘…the issue of hejab is an accepted norm in our society and cinema industry. In other words, no filmmaker should expect to show a woman without a scarf, even when she is in her kitchen preparing food for her husband…In tune with jurisprudential and religious decrees, men and women are not allowed to touch each other, even in a simple handshake. This is a decree, and we cannot overlook it’.

The experience of democracy for our society and especially for the film-makers is a very important and very positive experience. I cannot judge very optimistically that the future is very clear.

Your films are shown at many film festivals, but other Iranian women film-makers are still in the shadow. Puran Derakhshandeh, Farial Behzad, Tahmineh Milani are some of the names that have reached the West although their work has not received much exposure. Actor/director Yasmin Malek Nasr travelled to few festivals last year with her first feature, Common Plight, and young Samira Makhmalbaf received attention at the Cannes Film Festival with her insightful debut film The Apple. However, recent figures available are very low on the participation of women in the film industry. Are there several women film-makers in Iran? What are their concerns, subject matters?

Throughout the history of the pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, only three women managed to make feature films: the first one in 1956 and the other two in the late 1970s. At the time of the Revolution, Iran had only one woman film-maker. The number of women film-makers today is very large. Several also work at high scientific and artistic levels of the industry. Most of them, be they documentarians or feature film-makers, deal with social issues.

You have been consecutively making films about women. What do you think about the male film-makers of Iran who also make films about women? Do they create real characters, or are their characters larger than life? Dariush Mehrjui, an important Iranian director, has consistently made films with strong female characters, several of these films carry the names of the protagonists: Sara, Pari, Leila… I have read in an Iranian film journal that Leila, the story of a young modern woman who accepts her husband to take a second wife to give her in-laws the satisfaction of an heir to the family, was the third box office hit last year. Do you agree that the theme of all-sacrificing mother – a model for all mothers of the country – is very popular in Iranian cinema?

Some of our male film-makers create a myth and not real women characters. They construct a model woman they would like to portray. It is the same for female film-makers. Before The May Lady, I also created characters that I would have liked to see and not real ones. What is more important is not to mould a loveable role-model character but for this character to be seen and judged.

Although it may be difficult to generalize, I would like to know your opinion on the depiction of women in Asian cinema and how it compares with Iranian cinema.
Unfortunately, I have not seen many Asian films. I will refer to Iranian cinema to answer your question. As I mentioned when answering your previous question, image of women and the way this is translated can be divided into two personalities. Before the revolution, women were depicted either as prostitutes or as some kind of a ‘problem’ for man. After the revolution, we fell into another trap; we tried our best to construct a very positive character of women, which created a myth. The film-makers began to mould model characters that the society expected, such as good mothers. The character of a woman cannot be determined by her motherhood qualities. Women are human beings, with positive and negative characteristics. They are not what our society, tradition or culture expects from them. The problem is that when we watch the woman as a mother, we define and judge her character within this situation.

Could you comment about the reaction *The May Lady* received in Iran; you have mentioned at your press conference that it was mixed.

I also expect mixed reactions when it will be commercially released in two weeks. I think positive reactions will override the negative reactions and negative reactions will be influenced by the positive. I will probably lose some of my audience, but, I am sure, at the same time, I will get some serious audience for this film.

What exactly was the reaction from the critics at the Fajr Film Festival in Tehran?

Firstly, I have to say that *The May Lady* was the third choice of the audience. I saw their reaction when I watched the film in public theatres. It was very well received; the critics also loved it. A number of film magazines chose it as the best film of the festival. I wish to share with you the experience I had during the Fajr Film Festival. Films are screened six times in two days. Some people saw it three times. Here in Montreal, the reaction is similar. These are not filmgoers who have nothing better to do, and this is not a conventional, commercial movie, so why do they come to see it twice?

Most films made today, especially in North America, target the age level of sixteen and twenty-one. No one makes adult films anymore, so it is refreshing to come across a film which addresses itself to grown-ups.

The film connects well with serious audience.

Iranian cinema has opened to the West considerably in recent years. Do you think that it is moving in the right direction, or was there a Golden Period some years ago?

Iranian cinema is going through a process and film-makers try to make films to continue this process. The situation of our cinema in the world depends on the future. Speaking for our society, the art cinema that you have been watching abroad is beginning to be established. Ordinary people, as well as the critics, now accept this kind of cinema, which will have a more fixed position in the future. However, the place of Iranian cinema in the world cinema will depend on other nations.

In your opinion, what is the defining feature of the Iranian cinema of the last ten years?

Mostly, it is the unconventional point of view. As far as technique and facilities, we cannot compete with other national cinemas and we do not claim to compete. The essential issue is the subject matter and the point of view to deal with the subject matter. Iranian films today depict human relations. Whether from a sociological point of view or another, human aspect is the most important feature.

*Montreal, August 1998*
Notes

Bio/Filmography
Rakhshan Bani-Etemad was born in 1954 in Tehran. She began her apprenticeship in 1973 in Iranian television as a continuity girl. In 1979, she graduated from the Tehran College of Dramatic Arts in film direction. She made a number of short documentaries and became involved in the film industry as an assistant director. In 1988, she directed her first feature, Karehj Az Mahdudeh/Off the Limits, a satire on bureaucracy, which was a box office, hit. She made two more comedies before Nargess (1992), which was a turning point in her career. Nargess was well received at home and abroad and brought her several awards. She returned to documentary film-making and made three different films with the same subject dealing again with social issues. Rusariye Abi/The Blue Veiled (1995) brought her eight prizes. Zir-e poust-e shahr/Under the Skin of the City (2001) was the second box office hit in Iran. In 2001, she made a documentary, Our Times, focusing on the presidential elections and the position of the youth and particularly women in times of change and, in 2005, she made Gilaneh with Mohsen Abdolvahab about the struggles of a woman whose son was irrevocably wounded during the Iran-Iraq war.

She is the recipient of the 1998 Prince Claus Award in Netherlands and the 2000 Florence Special Honour of Peace and Liberty in Italy.

Feature films
1988 Karehj Az Mahdudeh/Off the Limits
1989 Zard-e Ghanari/Canary Yellow
1990 Pool-e Khareji/Foreign Exchange
1992 Nargess
1995 Rusariye Abi / The Blue Veiled
1998 Banoo-ye Ordibehesht / The May Lady
2001 Zir-e poust-e shahr / Under the Skin of the City
2005 Gilaneh (with Mohsen Abdolvahab)

Bahram Beyza’i

Film-maker, philosopher, writer, professor and dramaturge, Bahram Beyza’i is one of the most distinguished, prolific and outspoken figures of Iranian culture. His film career began in 1970 with a successful short named Amoo Sibiloo/Uncle with a Moustache, and his first feature, Ragbaar/Downpour (1971), established his style, which relies heavily on symbolism. The story of a teacher who arrives in an old district and changes the lives of everyone, Downpour used metaphor and allegory to tell a realistic story. Gharibeh va Meh/The Stranger and the Fog (1973), based on a dream – the arrival of five characters at an unknown place – followed the same style. Kalagh/The Crow (1977) did not have a wide audience, partly
because it was screened at a time when people were preoccupied with the Islamist revolution. Cherikeh-ye Tara/The Ballad of Tara (1978) was made amidst uprisings and street demonstrations and was not publicly shown. In 1981, with limited resources, he transformed his play Marg-e Yazdgerd/The Death of Yazdgerd, about Islamic history, already performed by a group of professional and non-professional actors, on to the screen, but the film received the same fate as The Ballad of Tara. While Safir/The Ambassador, by Fariborz Saleh, a big budget film, also on the Islamic history, made the same year with the support of the Revolutionary Guards Corps was widely distributed, The Death of Yazdgerd was never released. Between 1981 and 1985, he edited a number of films and wrote screenplays. Bashu: Garibeh-ye Kuchak/Bashu: the Little Stranger (1986), made after the revolution, brought him international accolades. Subsequently, he made Shayad Vaghti Digar/May Be Some Other Time (1987) and Mosaferan/The Travellers (1992). The last was the outcome of a five-year period of difficulties in his life, his eighth feature film, and one that won many national prizes.

After The Travellers, he was forbidden to make films for about a decade. He spent this time writing screenplays and plays for the theatre, teaching and editing. In 1999, he made a short film, Dialogue With the Wind, financed by the Kish Free Zone Organisation, but the film was not included in Tales of Kish, shown at Cannes Film Festival.

The most recent film of Beyza’i, Sag-koshi/Killing Rabids (2001), is set in the 1980s in a period of economic recession and reconstruction following the Iran-Iraq war when corruption was rampant. Beyza’i uses the special atmosphere of that period to express his current view on contemporary social and economic developments in Iran. However, the focal point is the place of women in a patriarchal society and the vulnerability of even educated and financially independent women.

Despite his popularity and his valuable contribution to Iranian cinema and theatre, Beyza’i has never been successful in gaining the support of the government, neither before nor after the revolution. In a career spanning over thirty-five years, he could only make nine films. The Death of Yazdgerd and The Ballad of Tara have still not been able to receive a screening permit. One reason is that the actresses do not observe hejab, the Islamic dress code obligatory for all Iranian films. Bashu: the Little Stranger, which is considered as his masterpiece, barely escaped the censorship and received a screening permit only after the end of the Iran-Iraq war. The censors cut 30 minutes of The Travellers. In 2003, the director’s cut of The Travellers was shown in one theatre, a landmark event, as this was the first time after the revolution that the director’s cut of an Iranian film was screened.

I met Mr Beyza’i during the Istanbul International Film Festival in April 2004 where a retrospective of some of his works was held. He shared with me, openly and generously, information about his long and tumultuous career and his exceptional work, a large part of which, unfortunately, is still not available for public screening.
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

Women are at the centre of all your films. In The Travellers, they run the total household.

In my first feature film, Downpour, men and women play equal roles. Perhaps that was the first time in the new Iranian cinema that the woman was shown as having the same problems as man. The protagonist is a working-class woman – a dressmaker. She is responsible for protecting her mother and little brother and, because of this, cannot make decisions for herself. In my second film, The Stranger and the Fog, the central character is a widow living in a village in the north of Iran. The whole village expects her to be faithful to the memory of her husband, and they are against her choosing a new life. The film exposes the conflict between traditional thinking widespread in the rural milieu and the new Iranian woman who wants to make her own decisions about her life. Looking back, I consider The Stranger and the Fog a very courageous film – very experimental and aggressive towards religion and tradition. The same goes for my third film, The Crow, that places a bride and her mother-in-law at the centre. The older woman is searching for her youth; and the youth of the younger woman is in the memories of the older woman. These films are very different than the films made during that period. Most of all, the characters are not slaves to tradition. Naturally, the censors were not happy with me.

The protagonist of Downpour is a dressmaker. Is this the first time ‘working-woman’ appears in Iranian cinema?

Probably not. If you follow Iranian commercial films, you can find many so-called ‘working-women’. They are not real workers but usually singers or dancers, in other words, everything except workers; it is an identity. That kind of working-class woman is in Turkish films, too, their profession serving as a euphemism for other things they do. In Downpour, for the first time we find a woman who is a worker from the worker class. She does not sing and she does not dance. She is working.

Turkish cinema’s real ‘working-women’ appeared at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Before that, women who worked were dancers, singers or prostitutes.1

Yes, the same as in Iranian cinema. If they have a job, they are dancers or singers.

In the 1960s, Iranian cinema experienced an important movement. Earlier, you have referred to it as the ‘new Iranian cinema’.

I think the history of the Iranian cinema is very much linked with that of the Iranian intellectualism, which in return, is a movement linked with the history of modern Iran. Musadderq, the Prime Minister who nationalized oil around 1950, was jailed in 1953 and there was a trial against him.

1953 was the year of the CIA-backed coup that replaced the old colonial power (Britain) with the US superpower.

The new intellectual movement emerged at that time. Modernist poets, Ahmad Shamlu (I have seen a translation of his poetry here in Istanbul), Mehdi Akhavan Sales, Forough Farrokhzad and Sohrab Sepehri and many young thinkers appeared wondering why things were the way they were in Iran. I am a playwright, researcher, essayist and critic involved with the history of the Iranian Oriental theatre. I was a professor at the university before the revolution. After the revolution, I was ejected. My first film was very different from the Iranian professional cinema. Before this film, only two or
three film-makers made professional films. These intellectuals followed the traditional thinking of Iran and did not go against the trend although they were very good film-makers with strong artistic interpretations. *Downpour* was against the usual trend. Later, *The Stranger and the Fog* and *The Crow* were all against the traditional interpretation of the old way of thinking.

Your style is also different. For instance, in *The Travellers*, you use mystical allegory. In fact, this film seems to incorporate most of your stylistic and thematic preoccupations – the veiled identity of women, passages of time, mysticism – while focusing on the themes of death and predestination. The mirror is one of the recurring tropes. Could you explain the significance of the mirror people bring to the house in *The Travellers*? In *Bashu*, when villagers gather at Na’i’s house to protest the presence of Bashu, the mirror is brought in. When Bashu is sick, Na’i uses the mirror to see if he is breathing and Bashu does the same when Na’i is sick, but his act is more like an attempt to give life to her.

Traditionally, when you enter a new house, you bring a mirror and a light. Mirror is used in all weddings, but today it has changed its meaning. People use it without knowing why. In ancient Iranian culture, the mirror reflects the water and represents Anahita, the symbol of family, woman, birth and life itself. The mirror is also hope.

What about the surreal movement of the characters in the opening scenes of *The Travellers*?

This was my way of dealing with the restrictions. I could not show any singing or dancing. Women could not be seductive. I decided to create a surreal atmosphere. Even then, nine parts of the film were cut.

I have read that *The Travellers* was inspired by a picture you saw at a café depicting thirty women tied together, working, and a man watching.

I thought about this picture when I tried to explain why women were important for me. In my research for the roots of the Iranian theatre and culture, I discovered that women were absent from our society. In the villages, in terms of productivity, women were at the centre of society but the bosses were men waiting to sell the produce. I referred to this picture in trying to open the people’s eyes to women and their role in society. But *The Travellers* does not concern itself with this subject. The film is against all traditions about life and death.

*The Travellers* juxtaposes the jubilation of a wedding with the sorrow of mourning by transporting the dead to the world of the living and turning the mourning ceremony into a joyful feast. To achieve this, you use *ta’ziyeh* (passion play) and *rughowzi* (comic drama). In *The Ballad*, the man from history remembers the characters of *ta’ziyeh*.2

When I saw *ta’ziyeh* in a village for the first time, I was moved to see a theatre that was not western in form, but Iranian, and I had never known it before. *Ta’ziyeh* is a very powerful form of theatre, non-western and original. All my work interrelates new intellectualism of Iran with the form that I have found in Iranian traditional theatre, which was stopped by the westernisation of Iran. Sometimes I ask myself, if it were not stopped but adapted to the time, how would it be today. My work is the filter. *The Travellers* is some kind of an answer to this question.
\textit{Ta’ziyeh} is also about distaniation.

The distaniation of \textit{ta’ziyeh} is very original, not intellectual but original in Muslim thought because the player believes that he is not the saint. He is a man and all men are sinners, he cannot be the saint. He believes in himself and his inner feelings. It is distaniation, but not like Brecht, which is intellectual. \textit{Ta’ziyeh} is the inner feelings. Brechtian distaniation is employed to say something else and, sometimes, it does not work. If Brecht escapes from sentimentality, he creates the sentimental. He wants the spectator to think but he thinks for the spectator. He pushes the spectator to his way of thinking. I think this does not work. They tell me you do not need sentimentality when you are thinking, but it makes me sentimental.

Iranian critics divide your film work into rural and urban – \textit{The Stranger and the Fog}, \textit{The Ballad of Tara} and \textit{Bashu: the Little Stranger}, rural, and \textit{The Crow}, \textit{Maybe Some Other Time} and \textit{Killing Rabids}, urban – and claim that your rural films present a ritualistic and mystic environment where love is possible, whereas your urban films show that the absence of rituals and traditions create a social and psychological misplacement. In \textit{Bashu: the Little Stranger}, you address several issues. The woman is at the centre. The language is pivotal in relation to human loneliness and possibilities of communication. In \textit{The Ballad}, dialogue between the present and the past and between the man and the woman is possible.

\textit{The Stranger and the Fog}, \textit{The Ballad of Tara} and \textit{Bashu: the Little Stranger} constitute a trilogy about the north of Iran. The first is an expressionistic film, the second is semi-historical and semi-mythical, the third is realistic but with the essence of expressionism and mythology. \textit{The Ballad of Tara} is the story of a village woman who one day meets a man from history who has returned from the past to claim his sword, one that Tara has inherited from her grandfather. \textit{Cherikeh}, which means ballad, is an ancient Iranian oral folk song tradition that recounts with the accompaniment of \textit{saz}, the local instrument, the tales of individual love stories that are linked to collective destiny.

Several aspects of this film as well as \textit{The Death of Yazdgerd} are reminiscent of the Eastern theatre tradition, or even Shinto rites – the handling of the masks, dolls and facial covers. The mask serves to distinguish the actor from the narrator as in the Eastern tradition. When the actor removes the mask, he ceases to be the character and becomes the narrator. In \textit{The Death}, Susan Taslimi uses two masks to play the role of the miller and the role of the king. The film is restricted to the space of a mill and time is limited. You succeed in preserving the theatrical elements by controlling them through the movements of the camera, the characters and editing.

\textit{The Death of Yazdgerd} is a theatre piece staged one year after the revolution, and three years later, it was made into a film. A very important work that I wish people could watch, but this is not possible. It is the story of the last Iranian king, Yazdgerd, before Islam arrived in Iran and ended an era. Yazdgerd was killed by a miller. The film is about the trial of this miller and his family. This is a dialogue between low-class people and high-class people when the low class are the sinners – the traditional sinners of history – and the high class are the traditional judges, but there is a change on the way.

When we made \textit{Bashu}, the Iran and Iraq war was going on and it was a sad period of our lives, especially for the children. The film is about a boy from the south of Iran who escapes to the north. In the south where he used to live, ancient Ilam (Khuzestan) to be exact, they speak some kind of Arabic, not Arabic Arabic but Khuzi Arabic. When he escapes to the north, he finds himself in a
village in the northern province of Gilan where the family speak Gilaki, not pure Gilaki but a kind of a dialect. The film is about the language of emotions and not the formal language. The Iranian spectator could never understand all these languages. I think people related to the film by the emotions, not by the language of the film, but by that other language – the emotional or human language.

I believe this was the first time that Gilaki was spoken in an Iranian film. There is also the language Na’i uses when she speaks to the birds and animals. Another novelty is that the film breaks the traditional family structure.

Yes, the traditional family is very important in Iran. But during that period, we could see on the streets of Tehran boys or girls who escaped from the war and came to the big city. Many were begging. It was a very sad moment. Some people trade with the war. Some people are fed up with the war. But who can solve the problem of these boys and girls? This film is mainly the answer. We are responsible for the young generation.

Susan Taslimi’s character rebels against tradition and against the ethnocentrism of the villagers, and decides to keep the boy. She is the head of the family in the absence of her husband. The film presents the woman as the stronger character and not the man, which is another break-up of the traditional family as perceived particularly in this part of the world.

Yes. At the end of the film, they have a new family. The man who has lost his hand in the war, the boy who lost his family in the war, and the woman who, I think, is like the goddess of fertility, Anahita, from ancient Persia who makes the family. The character of Na’i is based on her. That is why she is brought back to life ritualistically. Bashu beats the drums and pulls her into the living. Anahita was very important in Asia Minor. I have drawn upon my studies of ethnology, Iranian traditions and ceremonies for this film.

Why was it banned?

Bashu is a film about the war; the censors thought it was against the war. For me, every film about the war is against the war. The propaganda of the day was telling people that war was sacred; Bashu shows that it is tragic.

The Crow is concerned with the history of the city of Tehran that the Shah tried to obliterate.

When I was young, Tehran was a very European city but now I think it is ugly. The old Tehran has disappeared. I do not love it anymore. It is a city without memories and without trees. In this film, the mother-in-law takes the protagonist’s wife on a fantasy tour of old Tehran where she reminisces her childhood memories and compares the present city with the past. Perhaps, the memories of the old woman are the memories of my mother about Tehran. My mother was a little girl when Tehran was European and she told me about that period. The Tehran that you see in The Crow is that Tehran. The Crow is a dialogue without words between the bride, her mother-in-law and her husband and between the past and the present. At the end of the film, they reach an understanding.

May Be Some Other Time is also connected with history as well as the history of cinema. Taslimi is brilliant playing three different roles: Kian, who suffers from schizophrenic nightmares about her past; her twin sister, the extrovert Vida; and their mother, a figure that belongs to the past. Interestingly, just like Na’i of Bashu,
the main character here also suffers from an illness. Is this a metaphor for the condition of women?

Yes, illness is a metaphor. *May Be Some Other Time* has its roots in my other films. A poor woman cannot protect her twin daughters and abandons one at a street corner; after few years, she becomes very sensitive about her loss and goes mad. This is the story of the past. The present is the story of a woman who wants to know her identity but hides her search from her husband who interprets her absences as infidelity. At the end, she finds her sister who is also depressed because she has missed her other half. The two sisters find each other but they do not know what to do with the reality. The film is a document on the situation of women in a certain epoch in Iran when the issues that affect them and the sadness in their hearts were forbidden to be expressed on the screen. So many things are left unsaid.

Could we see this film as a metaphor for Iranian cinema after the revolution?

Yes, yes. (*laughs*)

In your most recent film, *Killing Rabids*, to prove her love for her husband, the protagonist bows down to humiliation, torture and even rape, only to be rewarded with the divorce papers! You show, in a bitter tone, how infidelity may even lead some women to extreme actions such as violence against the husband, or to indifference to his death in the hands of another. Your women are not part of the establishment of the ‘order’ but suffer the consequences. They ask for kindness and love, which is denied to them. Only with fortitude can they break out of the vicious circle, and even that is only momentary.

The subject of that film is very difficult to explain: a man issues checks he cannot pay and he is imprisoned. He tells his wife the checks were issued with his partner to borrow money for an export business, but the man took the money and flew out of Iran. He wants her to buy back these checks with their last money. She is successful and the husband comes out of jail, but she then discovers that the partner is not out of Iran. It was a *complot*: the husband wanted to escape to Europe with his girlfriend. The wife is presented with the divorce papers after working hard and even being raped to help him. My wife, Mozhdeh Shamsai, played the lead. (She was also in *The Travellers* and *Dialogue with the Wind*.)

Although the film takes place twenty years ago, it is a sharp critique of the new economy.

It is all about the new economy, the new Iran and the new commercialism that is killing everything.

Not much different than here in Turkey if you look at downtown Istanbul and all the young spending money they don’t really earn.

I wish that they could screen *Killing Rabids* here as part of the retrospective. Iranians loved this film. It expressed the things they wanted to say, things that have to be said.

You worked with Susan Taslimi on several occasions. Four out of the six films she acted in while living in Iran were directed by you: *The Ballad of Tara, The Death of Yazdgerd, Bashu: the Little Stranger* and *Maybe Some Other Time*.

She worked in those four films and in one stage production.
An Iranian critic praises her performance in *The Death* claiming the verbal rises and falls, a privilege of those with experience in theatre, as one of the most beautiful performances and goes on to say that what she does is completely different from the naturalistic performance: ‘…She acts like an intelligent marionette with sufficient control over her body. At the beginning of the piece, Taslimi’s face is suddenly expressionless and feelingless. She gazes at an unknown point. Her hands, in a coordinated way, cover her face while she utters her words like a bullet pelted at the audience. Then she starts a verbal crescendo and leads it to the height without the slightest physical and verbal pause. Then with the final blow of her hands, she covers her face with a mask. In a beautiful fall, she slowly removes the cover from her face and continues the rest of the words. All through this piece, she does not blink at all and fascinates us like a being, which belongs to another world.\(^3\)

Susan was my student at the university, but her talent is more than that of what one could call student of theatre. Her mother, who died very young – when Susan was only two or three – was a stage actor in the 1950s. Susan worked in numerous professional, non-professional and experimental theatres, including a group that was led by Arby Ovanessian\(^4\), a well-known theatre director who was Peter Brooks’ assistant. I saw two of her works; she was superb. As an ex-professor of her classes, I knew her and she knew me. I asked her to play in *Ballad of Tara* and she came. The first week of shooting, Iranian revolution happened and everything was damaged. We made four films under very bad conditions and absolute social mayhem. During our last collaboration, *May Be Some Other Time*, she was very upset and disturbed because they wanted to stop her acting. They threw her out of the theatre because of her power, her personality and her ideas – because she was *mustakil*. She was very independent. They could not accept it. Now the conditions have changed but during those days, horrific things happened. The worse period was after the revolution and during the war with Iraq. All theatres were closed and cinema was under the pressure of censorship. They were against women and against women at the centre of the film. When Susan collaborated with me, certainly she was at the centre, which they did not like. In *The Death of Yazdgerd*, she was reprimanded for assuming a more important role than the male protagonist; this was not acceptable. She has enormous presence on screen, which was interpreted as ‘sex’ and sex was banned. For instance, she was criticized for her role in *The Ballad of Tara*, her hair creating ‘electricity’, which was sin. After all these troubles, she went to Sweden in 1988 and now she is an actor on stage and theatre director and she directed two films there.

I saw *Hus i Helvete/All Hell Broke Loose*, her first film that she directed in 2002 and liked it. When I met her in Nantes in 1991, she was a sad woman.

She was sad? How was she sad?

She was quiet, pensive. She had some sadness in her.

Yes, she did not want to leave her country. She loves her country.

You could see that – a very beautiful woman with a shadow of sadness. What about you? After the revolution, what happened?

They did not let me work. I was thrown out of the Tehran University and I had no job. My family left Iran and became refugees in Germany and Sweden. I was also forced to go out.
Where did you go?

I went to Germany and then to Sweden but it was too late for me to adapt myself. I am a writer and when I write, I think in Farsi. I cannot write in Swedish. That culture and country does not belong to me and I do not belong to that culture and country. May be there are not many problems but the problem is that may be there is no cinema. After almost a year, I came back to Iran. I had nothing to live. At forty years, I had to start from the beginning. I was separated from my wife; she decided to live in Sweden. Now I have a new family. It took five-six years to start a new family and work in Tehran. I write, I publish books, I write plays and scripts and, by chance, I make films. (laughs)

It is mentioned in the festival catalogue that you wrote the script for *Fasle Panjom/The Fifth Season* (1996), Rafi Pitts's film.

I did not write the script for him. It was a very good script that was published in Tehran. A few years later, Rafi Pitts adapted it very badly.

His first film, *Salander* (1994), a short shot in Azerbaijan is also based on a script by you and a tribute to you, according to an interview he gave to *Cinemaya* magazine. There he mentions that having asked your permission to adapt your script for *The Fifth Season*, he retained your dialogues but changed the rest, as he did not feel he could tackle the heavy symbolism. A script by Beyza’i can only be made by Beyza’i, according to Pitts.

I still think it was a very bad adaptation of a very good original script.

After the Islamist revolution, how long did you stay away from cinema?

Two years after I made *The Death of Yazdgerd* that is still banned. It was a tormenting experience to make it in the first place. I had to write the script ten times before it could be accepted by the government but, even then, I was told to stop it during the editing stage and, one day, quite unexpectedly, I was told to finish it fast and hand it in. *The Ballad of Tara* that I made a year before the revolution was also banned. Five years after *The Death of Yazdgerd*, I made *Bashu*, which was banned for four years. The following year, I made *May be Some Other Time* and three years after I made *The Travellers* and ten years after I made *Killing Rabids*. One year before, I made *Goftegoo Ba Baad/ DialogueWith the Wind* – a twenty minute film.

Part of Tales of Kish?

It could be (laughs). When *Tales of Kish* was planned, I was told there would be six twenty-minute films: six points of view from six directors. When it was finished, they chose two or three that were very similar, all about poor people and the poor point of view of the Kish Island and screened those at the Cannes Film Festival. I took back mine. Now the film belongs to me.

What about *Killing Rabids*?

It was made after a long period during which they refused all my screenplays. I was not issued a permit to work. I staged theatre and waited until I was accepted back to cinema. The film received the audience prize as the best film in twenty years at the Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran, but I don’t know what the problem is now. There is an argument between the Farabi Cinema Foundation and another fundraiser of the film, an Iranian from Turkey regarding the release of the film. The problem is not about him but the Iranian mafia.
You mean the Mafia controls the film industry?

The Mafia has its roots in the government. They have a powerful influence on Iranian cinema and everywhere money is involved in Iran. I think the roots of the Iranian mafia in cinema are in the Ministry of Information. You know, the Ministry of Information is very strong in Iran. Wherever there is money, they are at the centre.

Are they involved with commercial cinema?

Not only the commercial cinema. They make everything pseudo – pseudo-intellectualism, pseudo-antagonism, pseudo-opposition. We have a real opposition but now the opposition of Iran is Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Makhmalbaf is a Muslim. He is not antagonist or intellectual. He is not an Iranian intellectual but Muslim intellectual. He is a pseudo-intellectual who represents them. Foreigners that award him cannot see the pseudo-intellectual that the Ministry of Information has made. Many Iranian intellectuals are refused these awards. They have no possibilities, no money to make films or theatre and no spectators. I cannot make films because they do not like it.

I can see why. Even at the time when it was forbidden to show close-ups of women, you had close-ups of Susan Taslimi in Bashu.

It was a revolution. (laughs)

Some other talented film-makers are also not able to make films. For instance, Said Ebrahimifar, a friend of mine, after one beautiful film, Nar-O-Nay /Pomegranate and Cane (1989), which garnered several national and international awards, he hasn’t been able to make another film for one reason or another.

Baroush Karim Naseki could not make a film for fourteen years. He is an Armenian with a subject about the Iranian minority but they don’t issue him a permit. Intellectuals abroad cannot see all that. They see the films of Makhmalbaf and others and think that these film-makers are intellectuals against tradition. You know the Buddha statues that were destroyed in Bamian, Makhmalbaf says ‘Muslims don’t ruin Buddha statues, Buddha himself was damaged because of shame for things that happen in Afghanistan.’ (laughs) Ridiculous!

The rules have changed recently regarding the licensing of projects. Do you still have to have your script approved before shooting your film?

I have written many screenplays to make a new film but the producers tell me, ‘It is a very good screenplay, I love it but give me time, two or three weeks to test if the government agrees or not’. They may agree on paper but when the film is made, they may ban it, so the producers do not want to take risks. They want to show the film. They want to test the government to see if they really agree or just agree on paper because the authorities are not responsible for what they sign. They can issue a permit but this is not enough to assure that the film will be screened.

So there is no real law?

No, nobody can understand anything.

In the 1990s, Iranian cinema captured the interest of the West with fiction films bordering on documentary. Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf, Jalili, Panahi, practically most of the film-makers that have made their mark in the western world have employed this method in one way or another, which is quite different than your style.
The trend goes back to the 1960s and to the non-professional 8mm films. Sohrab Saless’ early films, Amir Naderi’s Marsiyeh/Requiem (1976) and Ab Bad Khak/Water, Wind, Dust (1985) are also in this mode. An important film-maker, Kamran Shirdel made documentaries that crossed over to feature film-making. My understanding of a feature film is the importance of the creative process and the element of fantasy.

During the last couple of years, Iranian cinema has been shifting from children films that the West finally got tired of to films about women. The most recent trend, according to what we have witnessed as foreign guests at the Fajr Film Festival, seems to be the problems of the young generation, crime, drugs, etc. What do you think about this movement? How realistic is what is shown?

There is a fashion to make films about women, and women film-makers also explore these subjects. However, many of these films express the point of view of men. When a woman film-maker has the traditional point of view, she has a man looking at the problem of the women. Women are making films but many films that women make have the traditional view of women – the point of view of men.

Who are you referring to?

(laughs) Many of them! Many of them! We have some films by women that are provoking, but not deep.

Do you mean Tahmineh Milani?

I cannot name people.

She is provoking.

Yes, provoking and perhaps very daring, but not very deep because I think, she feels her time is short and she has to say everything and when the time is short, she has to provoke only. Some works are very realistic and others are in realistic form because realism in cinema is a form, too. Many films in Iran have a realistic form but are not realistic.

What about Rakhshan Bani-Etemad? She is the most known woman film-maker of Iran.

(pause) I am not a critic. I refuse to…

I do not want to insist if you do not want to talk about another colleague, but you told me earlier that you wrote criticism.

I have seen only one documentary by her and I like it – the film about a woman presidential candidate. 

Our Times.

I like it. I never watched her feature films. I am against the films that have realistic form but not deeply realistic. I have to watch her films to talk. I also saw the short film she made for Tales of Kish, but that was not good.

My favourite is Nargess.

Unfortunately, I never saw it.
During the Fajr Film Festival in Tehran, foreign guests were taken to the film museum that has been recently renovated with a large display of all the film posters and the international awards. Young ladies, perhaps film students, knowledgeable on Iranian cinema accompanied us. In front of the poster of *The Circle* by Jafar Panahi, one of them asked me if I saw the film and what I thought about it. She said that it did not portray a true picture of Iranian life. She wondered why the foreigners liked it. Her reaction is very different than our reaction as outsiders. What do you think about these issues?

There is an idea in Iran that many film-makers make films for the foreigners, not for Iranians. Maybe they trade Iranian problems, the poverty of Iran. Sometimes this is true, not for *The Circle*. Sometimes they are trading the problems of Iran with these graphic pictures instead of analysing the problems or helping to dissolve them. They make these pictures to get prizes and money. After I made *Bashu*, first film in Iranian film history that uses a language other than Farsi (mostly, Gilaki or Hursi, only a little bit of Farsi), everyone started to make films in Kurdish and in Afghan and Turkish dialects. There was a fashion to make films about the tribes, the Afghans... It is a trade for film-makers, a new bazaar for Iranian cinema. Many Iranians feel that these films do not show the dimensions of the problems; but trade the problems with the foreigners.

In Turkey, during such a period critics used to ask if we were selling films or *kilims*. As I visit Fajr every year, I notice that recently several films have been made about Afghanistan, about the Kurds or the border issues. Some are good but others are repetitions.

Not only repetitions, but also perhaps they are another kind of commercial films. We can make films very cheaply in Iran with Iranian money and can sell them abroad in dollars. You get big money from the foreign producer and make the film with only part of that money. For the producer and the film-maker, this is a very big business.

**Iran has begun to distribute its own films and several independent distributors are coming into the scene every year.**

They are very good businessmen. I think very few people are independent in Iranian cinema. Many are under the protection of the government and many under the protection of the foreigners. Those who are independent, have no protection, neither from the government, nor the foreigners. They are the only independent film-makers.

**The young are interested in making films. During the festival, several approached us with a VHS or DVD to ask our opinion about their work.**

Now everyone wants to be an actor or actress in Iran or a film-maker.

**Do you spend more time in theatre?**

Last year, I staged a play with three episodes on *Sheherazad and the 1001 Nights*, which was very successful. It was about the roots, the changing of the place and the return of this book to Iran because the roots are not clear for people. The first episode is about the roots of the book, the second about the translation of this book into Arabic and the third about the translation from Arabic back to Persian. As you know, the original version disappeared. We have only the Arabic version.
Is there anything you would like to add?

One or two things about myself: I did not have a formal education in cinema. I learned by watching films of Hitchcock, Ford, Eisenstein, Oudovkin, Welles... Among the more recent film-makers, Tarkovsky, Kurosawa and Resnais interest me. I was thirty-two when I made my first film, Uncle with a Moustache, a short piece. History and the theatre of the East – India, Japan and China – have had a great influence on me in addition to Iran and its traditions of ta’ziyeh and tamasha. Some time ago, I wrote a book on Iranian theatre. Some people say my cinema is theatrical. I don’t think this is true, except perhaps Death of Yazdgerd, which I am very fond of. Filmed theatre, such as the works of Olivier or Brook interests me.

Istanbul, April 2004

Notes
2. The oldest form of theatre in Iran, dating back to the pre-Islamic era. Originally, it was in the form of spring rituals that incorporated music, words and movements to venerate the Iranian mythological hero Siyavash. With the advent of Islam, it began to be performed during the first ten days of Muharram, to commemorate the tragic event when Imam Hussein, the third Imam of the Shiites, and his family were martyred. For the last 300 years, it is an integral part of the mourning ceremonies of the Iranian Shiites.

Bio/Filmography
Bahram Beyza’i was born in Tehran, Iran, on 26 December 1938, to a literary family. He was introduced to the world of art when he was still very young. He entered the University of Tehran, but did not finish his studies due to lack of interest in the subject he was studying. He started researching Iranian theatre and epic literature, studied pre-Islamic history and familiarized himself with Persian painting. He wrote about Eastern art and Iranian theatre and moved on to cinema. In 1970, he wrote The Truth and the Wise Man, which was published by the Institute for the Intellectual development of Children and Young Adults. Shortly after, he made a short film called Uncle Moustache.

Feature films
1971 Ragbaar/Downpour
1973 Gharibeh va Meh/The Stranger and the Fog
1977 Kalagh/The Crow
1978 Cherikhe-ye Tara/The Ballad of Tara
1981 Marg-e Yazdgerd/The Death of Yazdgerd
1986 Bashu: Garibeh-ye Kuchak/Bashu: the Little Stranger
1987 Shayad Vaqhti Digar/May Be Some Other Time
1992 Mosafiran/The Travellers
2001 Sag Koshi/Killing Rabids
Abolfazl Jalili is a socially committed controversial film-maker who does not shy away from exposing traditionally taboo subjects of his country, such as drug addiction, child labour, illiteracy and superstition. His films rarely find distributors in Iran, but Jalili is a well-known film-maker on the international scene. *Det, yani dokhtar/Det Means Girl* (1994), *Yek dastan-e Vaghe’i/A True Story* (made in 1995, released in 1998), *Dance of the Dust* (made in 1992, released in 1998) and *Dan* (1997) have been critically acclaimed at many international film festivals. Regarding *A True Story*, Jean Luc Godard is to have said, ‘*A True Story* may turn out to be a film that is not made very well, but it will always be ahead of the art’.

Jalili started to work for the Iranian television (IRIB) in 1979 and made some short films before directing his first feature, *Milad* (1983), about a boy in search of his father, followed by *Bahar/Spring* (1984), about children in refugee camps. Both films were made during the Iran-Iraq war and well received by the authorities.

Disillusioned with the moral evolution of Iran after the Islamist revolution, Jalili dissociated himself from official cinema and developed an experimental approach focusing on the plight of children and adolescents. His third film, *Gel/Scabies* (1987) received the critics’ attention. His fourth film, *Det, yani dokhtar/Det Means Girl* (1994), won the Golden Osella Award at the Venice Film Festival 1995 and, in 1998, *Raghs-e Khak/Dance of the Dust*, which had been banned for seven years, received the Silver Leopard at the Locarno International Film Festival.

Iranian critics consider *Dan* (1996) an extension of the *Kanun Cinema*, a wave that gained momentum after the revolution and expanded in the ensuing years. Just as the previous successful examples of the genre, such as *The Traveller* (1974) by Abbas Kiarostami, *Dan* also focuses on the predicaments children face in a world where adults are more hindrance than help. The narrative is mostly from the point of view of the boy, except when a hidden

*Delbaran*
male narrator (perhaps the director or even God) intervenes. Analysing the roots of the socio-economic evils he exposes is not the style of Jalili. He prefers to leave the choice to interpret the story, or simply absorb the emotions conveyed, to the audience.

The landscape is often an important protagonist in Jalili’s films. Delbaran/Charmers (2001), which was made two years after this interview, is the story of a young Afghani illegal, Kaim, who runs errands for an old couple operating a café at a border town. Determined not to shed a single tear for the parents that he had lost to war or for the sister he left behind, Kaim runs back and forth non-stop trying to appear tougher than he really is. The scene when the kind doctor establishes a rapport with Kaim – the only time Kaim lets go of his survival mask – conveys the underlying humanism of the film without resorting to sentimentalism. A clandestine marriage in a cave normally inhabited by the sheep is as absurd as it can be, but it brings in the comic relief. As the official readies to arrest the Afghani groom, he wants to know why the man is marrying an Iranian girl. The answer (through the interpreter) is that he loves her. How would he communicate with her when he does not even speak her language? The answer again is that he loves her. This is also a reminder that the old road between the two countries, which has now become obsolete because a new road is being built, used to be called Delbaran, meaning love road.

Although most of Jalili’s films carry autobiographical elements, his most recent film, Abjad/The First Letter (2003), is directly autobiographical. The film shows in a bold fashion how authoritarianism and repression can stifle creativity in the young.

The following interview took place during the International Rotterdam Film Festival in February 1999, where a retrospective of Jalili’s work was held.

**THREADING THE THIN LINE: FICTION AS DOCUMENTARY**

The protagonist of Dan is a nine-year-old boy who cannot enrol in school or find work because he does not own a birth certificate – the certificate becoming a symbol for the identity that underprivileged children are not able to acquire. Parallel is the story of a girl who accepts a marriage of convenience to help her family survive. But most of all, Dan deals with two important social issues: child labour and drug addiction. Both subjects are very contemporary. Starting with child labour, how much of it is the reality of Iran today?

Iranian laws forbid child labour, but children are used clandestinely because they can work for less pay. In the film, we see that the police attempt to take the children away from the work place and to talk to their parents to know why they allow them to work. The reality is that sometimes children are obliged to work for their parents because the families are very poor. Other times, children do not want to study, so they find a job. I did this myself when I was young. I did not need the money but I wanted to skip my studies.

What about drug addiction? Dan is the first Iranian film I have seen, which actually puts a junkie on the screen.

Drug addiction is an international problem, which is not indigenous to Iran, but concerns Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan as well. It is a Third World issue. For Europe, it may look like somewhat of a luxury. In our country, it is not a luxury; if you are troubled by some problems, there is nothing to do except to become an alcoholic or a drug user. Or you may go into a trance – ifan as we call it –
like a dervish, which is a mental high similar to the one induced by religion or the physical high induced by drugs. These are all means to step out of reality.

The actor who plays the father, a conscript who stays away from the registry office to avoid being sent to war and hence leaves his five children without a birth certificate, looks like a real junky. Was he an actor or a junky?

He was a junky. If the shooting took longer, I would have become a junky myself because of this guy!

What about the boy? You have a reputation for picking up young non-professionals in the most unexpected places.

I found him on the street but, in the film, he does not play himself. I worked with actors from the street.

How do you direct children? What is the secret of making them do what you want them to do?

I feel close to the children who have problems because I had problems myself.

What kind of problems?

Economical and psychological. I was a lonely child. I know their loneliness. I am not talking about loneliness that comes from being alone, but loneliness as a human being. People live together, but they are all alone. Before I put the children in front of the camera, I ask them to work with me so that we can get used to each other. I try to show them how to be friendly and how to understand each other. I share their problems and they share mine. After the film, they become part of the family of other children who have worked with me.

Do they continue to make other films?

Yes, but not as actors. I believe that everyone can play only once. That is why I use them only once as actors. Every human being can only explore the character once, after that, it is acting. I always look for original characters. Otherwise, it would be as if and not the real thing. I use my previous actors as assistants or set designers.

What about the other non-professionals in the film, such as the drug addict father, how do you direct them?

They asked me the same question in Japan and I replied that if I divulged all the tricks, how could I continue to work! I try to help the actors to forget about the camera and to think that the camera has no significance. Everyone has his/her own attitude but would change it when there is someone present. For example, during an intimate moment with God, you can cry in front of him if you have a problem. When you are crying, your make-up may run but you are talking with God and it is beautiful. You cannot do that when someone is present. This is the secret moment of each human being. My problem is that I share this moment with camera, soundman and light. I teach the actors to forget about sound, light and camera. When you feel that you can forget these, then you will succeed. I always talk with the actors about such things and not the film itself.

Your films are montage driven and your style is often elliptic. How much of the script is written before and how much after the shoot? I have noticed that you tend to keep the dialogue to the minimum. Dance of the Dust is almost devoid of any dialogue. The children who probably speak different dialects experience the intensity of the
emotion through abstract sounds and images, metaphors or symbols and their silent communication transmits their deep solitude. In your films, ‘the unsaid’ is more powerful than the ‘said’.

I never write a script, I cannot. You wouldn’t believe me if I showed you my scripts. You would say, ‘He cannot make a film!’ If I look at you and see a beautiful moment, a feeling on your face, I try to give it to my actors. The only thing I do is to remember that feeling or moment and to put it on a piece of paper; that is all. Before the shoot, I try to give the actors that feeling. In my head, I know what to do. I think of the story twenty-four hours a day. I am not always satisfied, it takes time but when I have it, I shoot. I try to match what I had written with the feelings and create a fresh feeling. If I had written ‘The sun is shining’ and if it is raining, I change it to a rainy day.

Just like your previous films, Dan is also shot in a mock-documentary style, which gives credence to the fictional story. I remember one of your earlier films, A True Story, where hospital scenes looked very real. Do you sometimes mix documentary footage?

They are all fiction, but I have my own formula: I try to make it so real that you think it is documentary. For instance, I may give my cameraman an unexpected shock while he is filming so that the camera would shake. True Story and Dan go beyond reality. The reality is what we see and feel around us. The other side, what you do not see is the real one. If you look at a building, you see the façade. If you go inside, you see other things. I am trying to see the other side that you do not see. The backside. To see everything together is the existence.

In one of the earlier scenes of Dan, the women visit a hodja, perhaps for advice, and a girl, completely covered in black chador sees an image in the mirror. I did not quite understand the significance of this ceremony.

This is a traditional ceremony, I think I had to explain more but I did not. To find a missing person, they ask a virgin to look at a mirror and to try to see where he is. We do not know if there is any truth to it, but it is a ceremony.

Who is she supposed to see?

They ask her if she can see the boy. She says, ‘I just see light’. In the next scene, the boy is sitting on the bus and the wind is blowing. Then I focus on the statue of children shaking hands. The camera tilts up to show the boy taking a pigeon in his hand. Symbolically, he has escaped.

I had the impression the people were speaking a Turkic language. Where they Azeri?

They are from the Azeri minority in Iran.

I also heard a Turkish song on the radio. Furthermore, I caught the word Kurdistan mentioned during the news hour.

I love Turkish music. Sometimes, the Azeri people listen to Turkish music. I am amazed that you could catch all these minute details. As for the word Kurdistan, this is the name of a major highway in Iran. The news was referring to the congestion of traffic there and had nothing to do with the land of Kurdistan.
Could you explain the title?

‘Dan’ comes from the imperative of the verb ‘danestan,’ meaning to know, to learn. Once I made a short film that had the title *Tavana Boud Har Ke Dana Boud / Power Goes to Those Who Know*, which is an old Iranian proverb.

Despite your established position in the international film festival circuits as an uncompromising and original film-maker, you seem to have problems in Iran to realize your projects and to distribute your films. For instance, *Dance of the Dust*, to which you often refer as your favourite film, brought you heavy criticism from the authorities – the scene when the protagonist dismantles relics in his frustration was interpreted by the clerics as a sign of religious rebelliousness. *A True Story* was withheld for three years because it was perceived as criticism of the Iranian medical system. Furthermore, some critics of your country are not favourable to your transgressions in terms of narrative or genre. One critic was not happy with the ambiguity of time and place in *Dan*, which he attributed to a ‘confusion of simplicity and structural fluidity with carelessness’. The same critic pointed out as a weakness the fact that you do not seek the roots of the socio-economical evils, but leave it to the audience to perceive the film cerebrally or emotionally.

Because I do everything myself, my films are very cheap. Therefore, I have no problem producing, but talking about the public, my films are never shown, so I do not know what the public thinks. *Dan* was shown only once during the Fajr Film Festival where the public is comprised of students, intellectuals and film lovers, not the ordinary public. They seemed to like the film.

Are there many instances when the authorities prevent a film from being made?

Nine years ago, one of my films was stopped when I had already shot 80 minutes of it and had five minutes left. Even when they let me finish a film, they show it only once!


I started to shoot in this genre very early. Because I could not make these films myself, others picked up the genre, but I was the pioneer. I was fifteen years old when I began to work with non-professionals when almost no one was doing it. The same directors who now work with non-professionals were criticizing me saying, ‘This is not cinema’. Now many foreigners – not Iranians – ask me ‘Do you work with non-professionals, like Makhmalbaf’? What can I say?

Your understanding of film language and aesthetics is quite different than other Iranian directors. Some critics see the influence of Godard in your films.
You may not believe me when I say this, but I only see one or two films a year, Iranian or foreign. I remember a film called *Slow Motion*, I am not sure if it was by Jean Luc Godard. I read two interviews with Godard. I think he is a philosopher and a great man. I like his head; it is so clear. I dream to be able to think like him.

Some of my Persian colleagues ask me how I can make films if I do not see any. My answer is, ‘You see movies; I see life’.

*Rotterdam, February 1999*

**Notes**
1. *Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri Kudakan va Nojavanan*, the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, was created by Queen Farah. Its Department of Cinema opened in the late sixties, headed by Ebrahim Foruzesh and Abbas Kiarostami. One of the most active state-run producers of Iranian film industry for a long time, the Centre has produced such present classics as *The Runner* by Amir Naderi, *Where is the Friend’s House?* by Abbas Kiarostami and *Bashu: the Little Stranger* by Bahram Beyza’i, as well as *The Children of Heaven* by Majid Majidi. It continues its activities today.

**Bio/Filmography**

Born in 1957 in Saveh in Central Iran, into a religious family, Abolfazl Jalili spent his childhood in Tehran. He was interested in the visual arts from an early age. He began to earn his living as a painter and calligrapher but, in 1973, at the age of sixteen, went on to filmmaking when he bought a 8mm camera and produced several short-length films. Later he entered the College of Dramatic Arts to have an academic training, but left after two months. In 1979, he joined the Iranian TV (IRIB) where he directed several 16mm shorts and documentaries about the Iran-Iraq war focusing on the victims of war, among them innocent children. A controversial figure in Iranian cinema, Jalili has been co-producing his films with foreign companies. His films have received several awards at international film festivals.

**Feature films**

1983  *Milad*  
1984  *Bahar/The Spring*  
1987  *Gal/Scabies*  
1992  *Raghs-e Khak/Dance of the Dust*  
1994  *Det, yani dokhtar/Det, Means Girl*  
1995  *Yek Dastan-E Vaghe’i/A True Story*  
1996  *Dan*  
2001  *Delbaran/Charmers*  
2003  *Abjad/The First Letter*  
2005  *Gol ya Pouch/Full or Empty*
**Mahmud Kalari**

Considered the most sought-after cinematographer of Iran, Mahmoud Kalari has worked with the finest filmmakers of his country before shooting his own film as a director. He was behind the camera in *Bad Ma Ra Khahad Bord/The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) by Abbas Kiarostami, *Gabbeh, Salaam Cinema* and *A Moment of Innocence* by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Sara and Leila* by Dariush Mehrjui and *Reyhaneh* by Ali Resa Raisian.

He received the prestigious Crystal Simorgh for Best Cinematography at Iran’s Fajr Film Festival for his work in *Sorb/The Lead* (Masud Kimiai) in 1988, *Gabbeh* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf) in 1996, *Pear Tree* (Dariush Mehrjui) in 1997 and *Booye Kafoor, Atre Yas/Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine* (Bahman Farmanara) in 2001. He also worked with Farmanara in *Khaneh-yee Rouye Ab/A House Built on Water* (2001).

Kalari’s first film, *Abr-o Aftaab/Cloud and the Rising Sun* (1997), appealed to foreign audiences with its beautiful photography of the mystifying landscapes of northern Iran and won several awards at many international film festivals. With the cash prize he received at the Mar del Plata Film Festival of Argentina, Kalari made his second film, *Dancing with Dreams* (2001), which is based on an Abbas Kiarostami screenplay. A co-production with Argentina, the film is about an Iranian director who travels to that country to participate in a film festival.

The following interview took place during the Nantes Festival des 3 continents in November 2000, where a retrospective of Mahmud Kalari’s work was held.

**Valuable Lessons of Camera**

**How does one become a director of photography in Iran? Is there a tradition of apprenticeship to master? Is formal academic training necessary or advantageous?**

Many cinematographers start as assistant cameraman and learn from others. Some study at schools. Let me tell you a little bit about our film history. First Iranian film, *Abi Va Rabi/Abi and Rabi* was directed in 1930 by Ovanes Ohanian, an Armenian who was educated in Russia at the High Cinema School of Moscow. He became familiar with the new and innovative experiments of the Soviet directors and cinematographers there and on returning to Iran in 1930, founded the first institute for cinema training, The Artistic School of Cinema in Tehran’s Ala’odeleh (Firdowsi) Street. The school started by enrolling 300 students. The first group graduated in 1931 and at the same time the first production of Ohanian and his students, *Abi and Rabi*, was screened at Mayak cinema. Khan Baba Khan Mo’tazedi, an engineer, served as the cinematographer for the film, using a Gaumont camera. The first Persian language sound feature, *Dokhtar-e Lor/The Lor Girl* (1933), was made in Bombay, India, by two Iranians living there, Aradesh Irani and the expatriate poet Abdolhossein Sepanta. Irani wrote the story and Sepanta penned the dialogues and lyrics and acted in the film. In the 1940s, some Iranian cinematographers were trained in other countries and some worked with...
the Russians. Any Iranian film of that period, which is in black and white, is shot by this kind of cinematographer. Fifteen years after the first Iranian film was made, different aesthetics emerged. Assistant cameraman, cameraman, director pattern is seen in the 1960s. In the 1970s, nine years before the Islamist revolution, we had two or three cinematographers that learned their trade in school – the Iranian television school where they studied cinematography, camera and television work on one part and cinema on the other. During the same period, we also had some cinematographers who finished their studies outside Iran.

Fereydun Qovanlu and Mostafa Alemian are two that studied cinematography. However, I think it is strange that one cannot find special works in the cinema of these men who studied their trade as one can find in the cinema of the 1960s cinematographers. Ahmad Shirazi comes from the master-apprenticeship tradition and works differently in terms of framing, hand-held camera and special black-and-white work. Amir Karari and Iraj Sadeqpur, who also went through the apprenticeship system, have done different kind of works. Among those who studied, we have only one, Hushang Baharlu, whose work is special.

**How did the revolution affect the system?**

After the revolution, something happened in Iran. Several foundations and departments were formed to help cinema. The first years of the revolution, cinema was dead. There were only some propaganda films. The Farabi Cinema Foundation founded in 1983 tried to find young and new people to make a new cinema. They did not like the old guys because their work was very commercial, cheap and not at all artistic. What was called *film farsi* was made with one, two, three or, maximum, four actors. It had sequences that everyone knew. One or two action, one or two bedroom scenes, one or two sex scenes, one or two café scenes or dancing. They tried new views and imagination and a new cinema for the revolution, a new mentality. First, they looked at the experimental cinema that started in the 1970s, *cinema-ye azad*. These film-makers were from different fields; some were students of painting or architecture. They made shorts and 8mm films. By the middle of the 1980s, they began to make feature films and more than ten films were made by amateur directors, cinematographers and actors. About ten directors came from professional cinema. Middle of the 1980s, there were six or seven cinematographers. I am one of them.

**When was your first professional experience?**

I was the cameraman for *The Frosty Roads* (1986), by Massud Jafari Jozani, who studied in the US and returned to Iran to make his first film. I had a photo exhibition in Iran at that time working for the Sigma agency. Jafari saw my pictures and liked to work with me. I was thirty-three years old and never shot a movie before except 16mm documentary and super-8mm – *cinema-ye azad*. This was the first time I stood behind a 35mm camera and worked with professional actors from theatre. In my previous work, everyone was amateur including the director. That film was screened at the Fajr Film Festival in Tehran in (1987) and got the Best Cinematography award. While we were shooting, I asked Jafari what to do because I knew nothing about technique – tracking shot, reels, crane work, etc. He said, ‘It is not important. Make the composition with the 35mm the way you do with a 35mm still photo camera’. During the shoot, I read books and learned the technique. Lenses and negatives, I knew before, but the rest? The following three years, I shot more than six movies with the most famous Iranian directors.

*The Frosty Roads* is set against the background of nature, which enters into dramatic interplay with the other narrative elements of the story. This is something you have further developed in your work, bringing into sharp focus the role of nature as an
element of the dramatic structure. *Gabbeh* is a very good example. In *A Time of Love*, you successfully blend nature with the urban landscape. In films with mostly interior sets such as *Salaam Cinema* and *Bread and Vase* by Makhmalbaf and *Sara* and *Leila* by Mehrjui, you use colour and light effectively. Having worked with different directors and some of them the finest of Iranian cinema, from Mehrjui to Kiarostami, I would assume that with different directors you have different experiences.

Different lights are to be used for inside and outside and different exposure. If you say it is difficult, the director loses the track of his imagination. Different film-makers have different views and styles. It can be difficult for the cinematographer. Makhmalbaf was not so famous when we shot *The Time of Love* but think of Mehrjui with so many works to his credit. Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf are extremely different. Makhmalbaf has unbelievable energy. You must go for it like a marathon. Sometimes he forgets we are shooting. He feels we are living four-five films together. He never talks ‘medium shot’, etc. Some of his films are like documentaries, such as *Salaam Cinema*. Kiarostami is completely different. He knows exactly what he wants. We start from this composition, this side of the sky, this tree on the left, that mountain on the right. We wanted to work together with Kiarostami for seven years. He wanted to make *Safar/Journey*, but ended up giving his script to another film-maker, Alireza Raisian, who completed it in 1995. We did only one film together. Kiarostami’s style is closer to Iranian film-making situation – small crew, small film-making, super-low budget. You have time to find exactly what you want. You don’t pay too much. You are not afraid time will run over. He lets you see the rushes and take it again. Mehrjui is more professional. He knows exactly what he wants. In *Sara*, the protagonist comes up the stairs and turns and goes up the other stairs and turns – two meters by two meters. He wanted to use a 85mm camera. I said ‘it is too close. When she goes up, she will be 50 cm out of focus’. He said, ‘Not important. The audience will see it only for a second’. He wanted the close-up, so he cut the hands, the feet. I never worked with someone like that before. He taught editing.

Each director has a special method for his work especially with the camera. One most important point in cinematography is that the cinematographers are like the eyes of the directors. You must think of the vision they have in mind and get close to what they want. When you shoot one plan and finish and they say cut and you turn the key of the camera, they ask ‘how was that?’ You must answer. It is very important. They don’t mean the light or composition; they mean the acting, the feeling, the sense of the actors and you must answer that it was good. You cannot say my profession is to take pictures. When you see the rushes, you must answer. In Iran, we do not have the technique to see while you shoot as they do in other countries. It may come in two-three years. But there is something special in my country that comes from the early days of cinema. First films were shot and edited by cinematographers. The directors needed more help. They are careful about cutting. You can see it in their films. It is important when you work in that kind of cinema.

Do you have an anecdote to tell? A moment you will never forget?

It happened in Turkey during the shooting of *The Time of Love*. I have a special character to make connections with people. We were working in a small house near a railroad. We put one light outside and, at night, we shot from inside with the train in the background. We had to ask the people living in the house to go out. They had a beautiful daughter. Some guy said something to the girl, her brother got angry and took a knife and, during the scuffle, they threw down our light. Makhmalbaf was angry. I said, ‘no problem’ to calm the situation and make it easy for the director.
How do you work around the restrictions imposed on cinema by the government?

Ours is a very special situation. We cannot show hair. Your picture is completely different. Back light, different composition. Just the face. You cannot use many compositions. The hair can make different forms especially in close-ups. In lighting also, with hair, you can do many things. This problem makes us think about special ways of aesthetics for the portrait and we usually find it; black all around the face sometimes helps or concentration on the eyes.

During *The Time of Love*, we talked with Makhmalbaf about the relationship of the girl and the men in her life and how to portray this on screen without causing problems with the censorship. At first, we thought it was better to make the composition in long shot and go out so small that the audience could not see because we wanted to show the film in Iran. Ten days before shooting, Makhmalbaf decided to go to Turkey and shoot it there. How could we go so close that we would see nothing, a super close connection, super-tele-photo? We went so close to people to see nothing. If you take a wide-angle lens and do it from far, this is one way. But when we went so close, we could take beautiful shots. Each time we had to show relationships, we did the same. I think this was very interesting for me. We were obliged to find different ways to show different sensibilities and learned from it.

Tell me about *Gabbeh* and the use of colours. The film has been compared to Paradjanov films because of the exuberant images.

We used natural colours and super ‘excited’ colours. How to explain the colours to the audience? I said I must use more filter to exaggerate the colour so that I could get close to the colour of the carpet – to work out the imagination from the natural. For me, it was two months of interesting experience travelling with the people from the north of Iran to Yasudj in the south.

What about your own film, *Cloud and the Rising Sun*?

With *Cloud and the Rising Sun*, I tried to recount a memory of the cinema itself. It is a memory that like everything else has undergone transformation in the course of time and gradually has taken the shape which conforms to one’s thoughts and ideas. I believe that over and above any critical analyses, it resembles me.

What do you think of digital film-making?

Digital is coming slowly to Iran; film-makers are thinking about it. It is easier and more available and it can work with poor light. There is more choice for correction in colour or special effect. But I think this is not pure cinema but like a game – a computer game. What about the sense of the negative? One can feel the depth with the negative. Digital is a little bit soon for me.

*Nantes, November 2000*

**Notes**

1. *film farsi* etymologically means Iranian film, but it has a pejorative connotation. The term was invented by the film critic Houchang Kavossi to refer to commercial films of mediocre quality. The trend began in 1953 with the influence of Egyptian cinema and continued using the formulas of Indian, Egyptian and American films, adapting these to Iranian costumes and traditions.

2. *cinema-ye azad* (free cinema) was founded by Basir Nasibi in 1969 for amateur film-makers to encourage and promote Super-8 film-making as a serious means of artistic expression. The first
annual cinema-ye azad Film Festival of Super-8 films was held in Tehran in 1970. Films made by the members received major awards at various amateur film festivals, such as the Asian-Pacific Festival of Young Film-makers held in Shiraz in 1972 and the 1st International Festival of 8mm Films in Paris in 1974. The first International Festival of Super-8mm films, sponsored by cinema-ye azad was held in 1975 with co-operation of National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) and continued until 1977.

Bio/Filmography
Mahmud Kalari was born in Tehran in 1951. After graduating from college, he went to New York to enter the world of photography. When he returned to Iran, he began his career as a professional photojournalist and worked for the Sigma International Agency for some time. His first work as a cinematographer was with The Frosty Roads, by Masud Jafari Jozani. He continued to work as a cinematographer on numerous film projects and won several awards before shooting his first film as director, Abr-o Aftaab/Cloud and the Rising Sun (1998).

Feature films
1998 Abr-o Aftaab/Cloud and the Rising Sun
2001 Dancing with Dreams

ABBAS KIAROSTAMI

‘Famous French filmmaker Francois Truffaut once said, “A filmmaker only makes one film in his lifetime; and he cuts it to different pieces every so many years”. For this reason, it is essential to have a comprehensive retrospective of a filmmaker before understanding his work. Just like looking at your old photos and new ones. It is always a continuation’, says the Palm d’Or 1997 winner Abbas Kiarostami.

He does not think Ta’m-e Gilas/Taste of Cherry (1996) is much different from Khaneh-ye Dust Kojast/?Where is the Friend’s House? (1987), Zendegi va digar Hich (a.k.a. Va Zendegi Edameh Darad)/Life and then Nothing (a.k.a. And Life Goes on) (1992) or Zir-e Darakhtan-e Zeytun/Through the Olive Trees (1994), which comprise the triptych that won him world recognition. ‘If you take out Where is the Friend’s House? and replace it with Taste of Cherry, nothing would change’, he comments. ‘It would even be better. They all take place in a single location. Their roots are intertwined. They are based on my experiences of observing people, for instance, how eager people are to continue their lives after the earthquake. The underlying concept is life against death’.

Kiarostami is one of the leading representatives of the ‘new cinema’ that found a new idiom framing episodes of ordinary daily life with national heritage of film and poetry during the turbulent years after the Islamic revolution when the state endorsed an Islamist cinema with strict adherence to fegh-based ideology (Islamic jurisprudence).

At the end of 1979, on the eve of the Iran-Iraq war, he made Qaziyyeh: Shekl-e Arval, Shekl-e Dowvum/Problem: Alternative One, Alternative Two (1979) exposing the ineptitude of various social institutions, including the clergy. The film was banned but Kiarostami, who defines himself as a
secular film-maker, was not deterred. With *Mashq-e Shab/Homework* (1990), he denounced the brainwashing of children. With *Ta’m-e Gilas/Taste of Cherry*, he drew attention to suicide, which is against Islamic law and with *Bad Ma ra ba Khod Khahad Bord/The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), he even questioned the existence of an afterlife.

I met Abbas Kiarostami for the first time in 1997 during the Thessaloniki International Film Festival where *Taste of Cherry* was screened along with an exhibition of his latest photography of Iran’s central-north regions that often served as locations to his films. Our dialogue continued informally over continents; Pusan in South Korea in 1997, Montreal in Canada in 2002, Nantes in France in November 2004 and led to another meeting in December 2004 in Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala, India.

**LIFE AND NOTHING BUT …**

You have made a film about suicide. For reasons unknown to the viewer, the hero wants to end his life. Moreover, he wants to share this experience with someone.

My interpretation of the protagonist’s definition of life is whether life is forced upon us, or whether we have an option. So many essential elements in our daily life are forced upon us. We do not choose our religion, our sex, our nationality, our culture, our parents or our date of birth. With so many limitations, it is as if we are thrown into a movie theatre without choice. The film is bad, the seat is uncomfortable, the air conditioner does not work; only the EXIT sign holds you there. Even if you like the film initially, if you are forced to stay, you may not like it after all. The motto is that small EXIT door. Remembering this motto gives you an option in life.

I suppose you have been asked several times why Badi wants to kill himself.

It is a difficult question and I do not know the answer. Even if the person would tell you his reasons, this may or may not be true. The idea came to me from a real experience. When I was 48 years old and going through a difficult period, I thought life was not worthwhile. The film draws attention to Shirvan’s philosophy: ‘Without the possibility of suicide, I would have killed myself long ago’. For me, this means that life is beautiful.

Three characters get into the car of the protagonist: A soldier, a student of theology and an aged man who works in the Museum of Natural History. Even their origins are open to interpretation: a Kurd, an Afghani and a Turk.

These characters represent parts of the protagonist’s life; all three are also connected with death. They are present in the environment. However, there is another option of looking at them metaphorically. You see the soldiers passing at the end. I used that scene to refer to the protagonist’s own life when he was serving the army. He could be one of the soldiers. Some journalists think that soldiers are offering flowers instead of guns. It is an open-ended film.

You as the film-maker appear in the last episode of *Taste of Cherry*, as if to remind the audience that it is only cinema. Can we take this as a Brechtian distanciation device, or is it perhaps the influence of the tradition of *ta’ziyeh* in Iran?

There is no similarity with *ta’ziyeh*. *Ta’ziyeh* is a passion play, a religious ritual like theatre. The story is about the conflict between Imam Hossein and Yazid, in other words, the Good and the Evil. The audience concentrates on the original story and does not pay attention to the details. I would like to share with you my last experience of watching a *ta’ziyeh* performance in a remote village in Iran.
While the two principal actors were fencing, the sword of the one playing the Imam was bent, so the other one, playing Yazid picked it up, fixed it and returned it to him and they continued fighting. People were still crying. The Imam had a lion, which was played by a very old man who became tired and went to sit in the sun. He saw someone smoking a cigarette, so he asked for one and began to smoke. No one questioned the fact that the lion was smoking; they just kept on crying. In ta’ziyeh, the basic is the story.

It has been said that *Taste of Cherry* has two versions. Did you edit your film after the screening at the Cannes Film Festival?

I was worried about the ending. After the screening in New York, a woman asked me why I added the video scene. She said that up to that point, she was crying, but then she realized that it was not true. Someone else in Italy said the same thing. After several comments from the viewers, I decided to screen two different versions in Italy with two different endings. It was not a question of censorship. In either version, it is not clear, why the protagonist wants to commit suicide. I did not want the version with the video ending to be the integral one and I did not want a dark film either. Initially, I planned the film to end in doubt. When we were children, adults always added something to the stories they told us just to end them in a happy mood. That is what I tried to do. *Clouds above earth below*, just like a nursery rhyme. To show that life goes on. On a daily basis, so many people try to commit suicide. It is not important whether the protagonist commits suicide or not at the end of my film is not important. The important thing is the relation of life to death and not the relation of death to life. Ommar Khayyam says ‘You cannot enjoy life without the threat of death’. Death is a reality. One cannot fight against it. When the time comes, it comes. The important thing is to enjoy life. If you choose to live, you have to live well. This depends on your wisdom. The problem is that some people are stranded in the middle.

Are the repetitions in dialogues an artistic choice?

The repetition is used to highlight a point and not for the sake of it. In a book, you can write certain phrases in capital letters, leave space in between, underline…In cinema, you can do this by repetitions.

What about the repetitious questions?…

Sometimes this is a means of communication. You have to ask questions when you are in your car and people are passing by. If you are telling the story of a couple, there is no need to ask so many questions; but for the type of narrative that my films follow, it is necessary for people to get to know one another. If you have limited time, you ask more questions and more rapidly. There is no threat. You will pass by.

How much of your films are written in advance?

I take note of everything but I do not take paper to location and I do not give the script to the players to memorize. They read nothing. They improvise.

How do you choose your actors? And, how did you find the leading character in this film?

I search with an idea in mind. When I find the person, instead of changing him, I change myself. It is the difference between ready-to-wear and tailor-made. If you buy ready-made, it may not fit. I saw the actor playing the lead in *Taste of Cherry* on the street when I was driving around looking for interesting faces. He seemed to be very pre-occupied with his thoughts. I called him over,
introduced myself and told him that I might have a part for him in the film. He said he would be very happy to act but his happiness was not visible on his face. I thought he would fit the role. Even now, whenever I return to Iran from various film festivals and I tell him about the success of the film, I cannot see the signs of happiness on his face.

What is the departure point when you launch a new project?

My office is my car. I spend a great deal of my time in my car. Most of my research is done while I am driving. Best time to meditate is when you are stuck in a traffic jam. For me, a car is not just a car, but private space, almost like your own living room. The fact that you are in motion facilitates interaction with strangers. You may exchange words for a few moments and never meet again. Actually, the car is not much different than cinema. Big screen in front of you, two screens on each side. You can even go up the hill like on a crane. The car is a moving cinema.

The car is an important factor in almost all of your films, but in this film, it is indispensable.

This is very true. In *Taste of Cherry*, there are three elements: The camera, the driver and the passenger. I am all three. During the shoot, the crew remained in the desert having tea. When we ran out of film, we went there to get some more. I was the one who held the camera. The actors never came face to face. I was the character, the cameraman and the invisible actor. The joy is in holding the camera in your own hands. The same feeling is experienced when one is taking photographs. In Palermo, Italy, where the first exhibition of my photography was held, someone said that each photograph was like a short film with perhaps only one character. When I look at my photographs, I feel pleasure that I created something dear to me with only one actor! A film without a love story – only the joy of silence. But cinema is more complicated. You have to work with a group of people. You put pressure on them both in front and behind the camera. For this reason, cinema is difficult. When I take pictures, I am alone and at ease. Taking a good picture is just as satisfying as making a film.

We see the same images of ‘nothingness’ in your photography as in your films.

I am not the only one searching for ‘nothingness’. Think of the haiku of Japan or the minimalist movement. It is not really a search for nothingness, but rather eliminating from life. When you eliminate, nothingness becomes full of things. You can find yourself in privacy. Like a blank canvas, it has possibilities. You cannot judge nothingness by itself – always a pair of eyes is watching nothingness. Nothingness and the audience are everything. The interpretation of haiku!

Does the success of your films lie in their simplicity?

I do not work for form or success. Of course, simplicity must play an important role. I am influenced by simplicity. My aim is simplicity. Simple work, simple people affect and influence me. In the complex world we live in, simplicity is the best solution. I must ask you this question: why do you like a film, which has nothing to do with the successful films of the past? I was in Thessaloniki six or seven years ago when only American films seemed to draw the crowds. Last night, I saw many young people lining up to see an Iranian film. I thought it was perhaps an American film playing, not mine. I do not know whether acceptance of my films is an option in my country since American films are in principal banned in Iran. Interestingly, my audience is becoming larger where an option exists. *Taste of Cherry* has been screened in Korea, Japan, England, France, Italy, Greece and Canada. The largest audience was in Italy, fourteen times more than Canada. I feel that all over the world, the tendency is to turn to simple films including my own. Iranian films have had considerable
success in recent years. Because of limitations, film-makers have found a new medium to express themselves and this arrived at a time when the world was beginning to get tired of Hollywood. Without good audience, you cannot have good films.

*Taste of Cherry* shared the Golden Palm with *The Eel* of Imamura at the Cannes Film Festival but its participation was not announced, not even in the catalogue.

The film arrived late. No one knew if it would arrive or not. However, when it arrived, just like jumping on a bus, which is already moving, we received attention.

**Does the Iranian government support films financially?**

The government subsidizes films that interest them. There is no help for independent cinema. The truth is, the biggest help is when they do not help!

**What about the influence of Hollywood?**

American cinema is practically banned. The government took this decision without good intentions, but it has given a chance to national films. The audience has no choice but to support the national cinema. The negative side is that we are not able to see many good films. The smuggled video cassettes are of a very poor quality. I see many foreign films when I travel.

**The image of Iran projected in your films is very different from the image that circulates in the West through the mass media. Wherein lies the reality?**

Different images are manipulated for political reasons. When I look at my country from far away, an image is formed in my mind, which I do not have when I am in Iran. I use this disparity to explore. I do not want to defend my films but I would like to live among the kind of people that I represent in them. I cannot say that this is the reality. Those who come to Iran as a tourist see a different image than what they receive through western mass media. What the artists want is also different from what the politicians want. Artists search a way to converge diverse elements. Our joy is to find a meeting point. On the other hand, politicians look for diversities.

**Is there a new film on the agenda?**

My new film is about a peculiar ceremony. Nevertheless, it is similar to what you have already seen. There is always a continuation. Just like what Truffaut once said, ‘All films of a filmmaker are parts of one single film’.

*Thessaloniki, November 1997*

**REALITY WITHOUT INTERRUPTION**

You have recently made several films using the digital technology — *ABC Africa, Ten, Five*. When did you first start working with the digital camera?

I started eight years ago while shooting *Taste of Cherry*. The final part was destroyed in the lab. I used the rushes from the DV camera of my son. The first part of the film was shot in the fall and then, six months later, when the trees were in blossom. It was not possible to re-do the shooting. Digital camera was suggested to me during that film. I discovered that people were very comfortable in front of a small camera. During the 30 years that I have been shooting, I have tried to make people comfortable. I worked in real locations with real people but because of the huge cameras, to work with non-professionals was difficult. The second time was *ABC Africa*. UNESCO proposed me to
make a film about the children in Uganda who had AIDS. I went there with a friend carrying a normal camera and a DV to take notes. The plan was to go back later with a 35mm camera. When we edited the rushes in Tehran, we thought that to have natural faces in front of the camera would be very difficult, so we used the digital images and made *ABC Africa* with these notes. Martin Scorsese said that in this film, the camera was turning 360 degrees around itself. Everything that was reported was based on real facts. With the 35mm camera, if you move a little, a shadow may fall. Recording real facts was an experience. Reality without any interruption!

**What about Ten?**

*Ten*, a film I shot in Tehran was my third digital experience. Because of the digital camera, I was able to use non-professional actors. When I finished *Ten*, I thought that the best camera to make films was finally invented. With this camera, one could record private moments such as the dialogue between the mother and her son. I was so excited that I started to talk about the digital camera at every seminar I gave and people thought that I got money from Sony. I thought that cinema was about to die one hundred years after its invention, but now has found new power. Unfortunately, it did not work that way. Digital medium did not create better cinema. The young film-makers could not understand what it was. Hollywood was against this kind of cinema. Cinema was divided into two categories: Home movie and Hollywood. Hollywood said, this is good but you should use it at home. More than ninety per cent of the films around the world are story and technique. Young film-makers find the digital camera simple and destroy what it really is. To shoot digital, first you must think digital and not use it because it is cheaper, and you can escape the heavy shadow of the producer or the censorship. However, I admit that it is appreciable in countries such as Iran and for students who have problems to find a producer. But you must have the pre-requisite experience. Fifty such films were made in Iran; none was good enough to show. I started to work on *Ten* one year before I shot it. People just record and edit without preparation. You press the button and it starts recording, so anyone can think they can make a movie. After three or four such films, the producers do not want to invest in digital films.

**Many notable film-makers are against using the digital medium. Also, the quality of the image is not the same.**

We should listen to what they say without prejudgment and we should not compare these two cameras for quality. We gain and we lose. My next film will be in 35mm. The quality is much better, but it is not possible to shoot every film in 35mm. *Five* and *Ten* had to be shot digitally whereas *Taste of Cherry* could only be shot in 35mm. I made *Five* myself without technicians, with one camera and natural moonlight. I placed my camera in a fixed position near a lake and the moon was reflected on the lake. I think there was a dialogue between the moon and the animals (fox). It all looks simple, but I worked on this film for two years before shooting it. This kind of film-making would be my first and last experience.

*five* is a difficult film for the audience.

When you make a film, you do not know what kind of audience will see it. Two weeks ago, MOMA (Museum of Modern Art in New York) showed *Five* as the opening film and this was encouraging, but the audience of MOMA is not enough. Film-makers need good reactions around the world. *Five* is very difficult for the audiences to watch because they are used to Hollywood. For me, it was an experience to demonstrate that if you use the digital the right way, you can make good films. Many action films are screened at the Cannes Film Festival; people go to see those. Sixteen viewers left the theatre when *Five* was shown and for me even one is too much. As film-makers, we are worried...
about the audience. But if you work for a big audience, you have to make entertainment. There is no solution. I need to have a big audience but for me this is difficult. Unfortunately, I do not think of the audience when I make a film. I have so many problems that I do not have the time for the audience or for myself, but if I see that the audience is unhappy, I get upset. If one person leaves the theatre, I keep thinking of that person. Now I stopped sitting inside the theatre. I thought this was only my problem, but Ingmar Bergman said he gets fever when someone leaves the theatre. On my way here, I saw a big queue in front of a theatre. I am sure it was not a good movie, but people like it. To tell you the truth, I was jealous about that queue. All my audience of thirty years put together could not surpass that queue.

Let us return to the beginnings. From what I have been reading, cinema was not your first choice.

I did not study cinema at the university. I studied painting. I entered the film industry making film titles and advertising. My first experience in film-making was shooting short advertising movies. I never worked as an assistant to another film-maker.

When did you make your first film?

In 1970, Bread and Alley, a film for kids. When I reflect about those days, I think of this film as an experience. I used to worry about telling a simple story in a most effective manner. This film has many technical flows but also good points that are amazing, and this story continues until my last film. It is difficult to think about technique and cinema at the same time. I talk of moments higher than cinema. Certain moments have happened for me in cinema that are difficult to imagine I created them. For instance, in Ten, some instances when we have the camera on the boy are spectacular.

What is cinema for you?

I do not know what cinema is. We have been discussing digital cinema but I am wondering why we should talk about it so much. Is it so important for a writer to use a pen or the computer? The image that remains is the main thing for me.

Does your talent for painting influence your film-making?

It has helped – not because I know composition and colour – but from the point of view of involvement in a work to create something from reality. I think art is like music; if you learn the notes, you can play any instrument. Right now, more than film-making, I am interested in photography, and cinema can help me to make better photos as photos can help me to make better cinema.

What are some of the difficulties facing the Iranian film industry?

We have some difficulties as well as some advantages. American films are not shown in Iran, which gives a chance to national cinema. Unfortunately, independent films are not appreciated. Television has made people lazy and has accustomed them to boring films. This is not only the fault of the government; our fault, too. The government’s fault is not making an effort to change the attitudes of the people.

Censorship still is a big problem.

This is a very difficult subject and it often leads to misunderstandings. Censorship is very bad but sometimes it can be good if it helps the film-maker to eliminate what is not necessary. Two or three films of mine were censored a long time ago. When I watched them again, I realized that nothing much has changed. Now I try to censor myself while I make the film, so that they do not have to do
it afterwards. They wanted to take out parts of my last two or three films, but I did not agree, so these films are not shown. Actually, none of my last four films are shown in Iran. They have the power. They wanted me to cut the poetry of Omer Khayyam from The Wind Will Carry Us. I did not, so it is still not shown. I said ‘I am ashamed. You can censor me but not Khayyam’. They asked me to take out 40 minutes of Ten. The film is 50 minutes long. Furthermore, the government has announced that they do not like digital cameras. They do not like to have young artists and film-makers. For me, the digital camera means freedom. But I hope that the young would use it to make good films.

Could you talk about the film you made in Italy recently?

I made Ticket with Ken Loach and Ermanno Olmi. Ticket is one episode of the trilogy. The producer is British; the actors and the technical crew are Italian, but the cinematographer is Mahmud Kalari from Iran. I cannot say if it is a good film – foreign director, foreign language and foreign people. Language is not so important if you feel the real characters and, I believe, to shoot in another language is possible, but this film is not Iranian. I am Iranian and I want to be an Iranian director. I like to continue my job as a film-maker in Iran, but if not, I should have the chance.

Rumour has been circulating that your next project will be realized in France.

MK2, which has been distributing my films in France, suggested that I make a film in France. I am closer to Italy. We have more similarities. I watched Italian neo-realism for many years. When I was ten years old, all cinemas in Iran used to show Indian films, but later they changed to Italian. I feel a certain affinity to that culture. I do not know French. I could make mistakes. If necessary, I could, but I prefer to work in Iran or in countries with similar cultures.

Thiruvananthapuram, December 2004

Bio/Filmography

Abbas Kiarostami was born in Tehran in 1940. At the age of eighteen, he left his family to provide for himself. Between 1960 and 1968, he made commercials and designed credit titles of several films, including Gheysar (1968) by Masud Kimiai. While a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Tehran University, he worked as a clerk in a local police station and spent all his free time going to the cinema. In addition to Italian neo-realists, Yek Ettefaq-e Sadeh/A Simple Event (1973), the first feature film of fellow Iranian Sohrab Shahid Saless, also made a strong impression on him. After graduation, he began working as a graphic arts designer for film posters. In 1969, he co-founded the Filmmaking Department of the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. He made many award-winning short fiction films for young audiences there, among which Nan va Koutcheh/The Bread and the Alley (1970), his directorial debut, and Hamsarayan/The Chorus (1982) are well known. One of the most influential film-makers of the post-revolution Iranian cinema, Kiarostami has written the screenplay for almost all his films and also contributed as screenwriter to the works of some of the younger talents. Kelid/The Key (1986) by Ebrahim Foruzesh, Badkonak-e sefid/The White Balloon (1995) and Talay-e Sorgh/Crimson Gold (2003) by Jafar Panahi and I斯塔g-e matrouk/The Deserted Station (2002) by Ali Reza Raissian are some examples.

Among the numerous prizes that Kiarostami has won are the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival, the UNESCO prize for Taste of Cherry, the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival for The Wind Will Carry Us, as well as the Pier Paulo Pasolini Award (1995) and Federico Fellini Award (1997).
Feature films
1972 Mosafer/Traveler
1977 Gozaresh/The Report
1985 Avvali-ha/First Graders
1987 Khaneh-ye Dust Kojast?/Where is the Friend’s House?
1990 Mashq-e Shab/Homework
1990 Nam-y Nazdik/Close-up
1992 Zendegi va Digar Hich/Va Zendegi Edameh Darad/And then Nothing/And Life Goes on
1994 Zir-e Derakhtan-e Zeytun/Through the Olive Trees
1996 Tam-e Gilas/Taste of Cherry
1999 Bad Ma ra ba Khod Khahad Bord/The Wind Will Carry Us
2002 Ten

Majid Majidi

I came to visit you today. I wanted to talk to you. Yet, I knew you would only watch me in silence, saying not a word. I wish to do something for you; but I can read it in your eyes; no one can cure a foreigner’s nostalgia in a foreign land. I have been seeing you for years: some days in the streets and squares and some months in towers and skyscrapers. Your fingerprints have been laid on every brick in every building. I love to hear you, talking of your life, of the war wounding your soul, of homelessness and loneliness. I want to make a film about Afghan immigrants. You smile! I knew at last you would respond. Do you like to play a part?…

Thus wrote Majid Majidi, one of the distinguished names of the new Iranian cinema, in his diary dated 30th May 1999. The presence of the Afghani refugees has been a serious socio-political problem in Iran, particularly during the ruthless reign of the Taliban. The subject has found its way to a number of Iranian films from The Peddler and The Cyclist to Kandahar by Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Delbaran by Abdifazl Jalili, and Majidi’s Baran/The Rain has become one of the most successful films of recent years gaining special significance after the September 11 events in New York when the destinies of thousands of Americans became entwined with the destinies of people from a remote country called Afghanistan.

The Rain treats the issue of illegal Afghani workers in a delicate manner through the story of adolescent love. Latif, a brazen adolescent, works on a construction site, doing easy jobs such as buying bread and serving tea. When Najaf, an Afghani worker, breaks his leg, his son Rahmat is brought in by an elderly Afghani, named Soltan, to save the family from starvation. Latif sees the boy as a rival, especially when he loses his easy job to him. His spite turns into infatuation when he discovers that the fragile boy is actually a girl called Baran. When building inspectors chase away all illegal Afghans, Baran returns to her village to carry stones from the riverbed to support her family. Latif buys crutches for Baran’s injured father and trusts his wages of a whole year to the elderly Soltan to give Najaf under a pretext of disability pay. Soltan uses the money to re-enter Afghanistan. This time, Lateef sells his identity papers endangering his return home but, ironically, the money he gives Najaf is used for the return of the family to Afghanistan. As the cart pulls away, Baran flips her coat over her head like a burqa, the traditional head-to-toe covering for Afghani women. We hear the
soft sound of the wings of the pigeons heard earlier when Baran was feeding them. Lateef may never see her again, but her memory will stay with him as a spiritual guiding light.

Although the rich symbolism of Majidi’s previous work is just as strongly present here, the narrative of The Rain is much more intricately woven. The title has double meaning: as the name of the girl and as rain in Persian, which is the symbol for springtime when Baran leaves Iran and Lateef reaches spiritual maturity. Before Baran disappears from Latif’s life, a rain shower fills the footprint she leaves in the mud.

Iranian critics point to the strong influence of the writer and journalist Seyed Mehdi Shojai in the formation of Majidi’s directorial style. Belonging to a group of post-revolution film-makers with strong religious and political tendencies, Majidi has established himself as an artist of exceptional talents without compromising his religious commitments with successful films such as Pedar/The Father (1996), Bacheh-haye Aseman/Children of Heaven (1996) and Rang-e-Khoda/The Colour of Heaven a.k.a. Colour of Paradise a.k.a. Colour of God (1998-99) that focus on the predicaments facing children in a world of cruel, indifferent or helpless adults.

In 2005, Majidi surprised his viewers with an ‘adult’ film focusing on the precarious world of a pious middle-aged blind man who falls into temptation and loses his faith when he re-gains his sight. Beed-e Majnoun/Weeping Willow, which stars Parviz Parastouie of The Lizard fame, is also the first film in which Majidi has cast professional actors.

The following interview took place in Montreal in August 2001. The interpreter was Montreal-based Fuad Nahas, the co-producer of Baran.²

REFUGEES IN LOVE AND LIFE

Baran is quite different from your previous work. The two protagonists are older. It takes place in the city and only at the end, the scenery moves to the country. The rhythm is faster. Firstly, why did you decide to move on to the period of adolescence? I have noticed that Jafar Panahi, who also had made a couple of films with children, focused on grown-up girls in his latest film, The Circle. He told me that the problems of his characters also grew as they grew older.

In my films, I try to build a bridge between the past and the future. This quest for truth regarding the essence of life passes through experiences of my past that have touched or taught me. I always search for the purest feelings and the most beautiful gifts such as kindness. In this respect, no other world is more simple, pure, and magnificent than the child’s world. I take the world of children seriously because their world is closer to reality. In The Children of Heaven and Colour of Heaven, there are the children but also the father and the mother. Baran is a story about adolescents. I did not have a pre-determined idea to make a film about this or that, it just happened that way. The story is about love, so I have adolescents. Furthermore, children and adolescents just as non-professional actors, have no preconceived notions about how they should be acting in front of the camera. Therefore, the result is much more authentic. Sixty to seventy films are made each year in Iran and only four or
five are about children. Since these go to film festivals, the West has been having the impression that most of our films are about children.

I was thinking that perhaps the recent relaxation of the laws of censorship has encouraged the emergence of more mature protagonists (and especially women) in recent Iranian films.

It is true that since President Khatami took over, to make films on various subjects and, particularly, love is more acceptable. Love stories happen to all of us. These things are in Iran as elsewhere, but the form is different. We have different experiences of love stories.

What are the subjects that are still ‘difficult’? As we are discussing your film here in Montreal, one of your colleagues, Tahmineh Milani, is held in jail on grounds that her latest film, *The Hidden Half*, is portraying a favourable picture of the counter-revolutionaries.

Some subjects are still not looked upon favourably, but I cannot pinpoint which ones. I had problems earlier in my career, particularly with my first film, *Baduk*, because of the grim picture I presented of the child abuse among the refugees. As for the arrest of Tahmineh Milani, Iranian artistic community has reacted strongly to this unacceptable event.

The Iranian émigré community in Montreal has criticized the Iranian delegation attending the Montreal World Film Festival, including you, and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, who is here as a member of the International jury, for presenting a propagandistic face especially in regards to the news of Tahmineh’s arrest.

I do not think there should be limits to artistic freedom, but I believe that artists express themselves best through their art and not through direct political action.

Getting back to *Baran*, the second differentiating aspect of this film is the city landscape. In an earlier scene, Lateef looks painfully out of place when he goes to the city to buy bread. As he is fixing his hair on a glass door, a well-dressed man comes out and gives him a condescending look as if to remind him that he does not belong. Then the camera moves to the outskirts of the city, to the construction site where the Afghans are complete strangers. The film treats the issue of the alienation of people from a larger perspective than solely a refugee problem.
Many workers, just like Lateef, come from eastern provinces. They do not belong in Tehran; they are derided. They are not home. They are all ‘refugees’, even those who are Iranian citizens.

In the construction sight, several languages are spoken among the workers, which broadens the atmosphere of alienation.

I used different languages, accents and cultures – Turks, Azeris, Kurds and Lors (or Lours of Louristan) to stress the hardships facing these people, but also to show that people from different cultures can live together even in hard circumstances. Incidentally, different accents do not pose a problem for Iranian audiences who can tell the difference, however, sub-titling was a challenge.

The theme of lack communication is an integral part of the film. Not only that the female protagonist, Baran, never speaks but Lateef can never express his feelings. I kept wondering why he did not simply go and ask the father for her hand.

The cultural environment makes it very difficult for people to communicate, particularly on a private level. For those coming from small villages, it is even harder. In the city, Latif cannot express what he feels. He is closed to himself. He would never ask the father.

In your previous film, The Colour of Heaven, the boy was blind. Here the girl does not speak. You seem to portray the young as somewhat handicapped. Is that your belief?

Baran symbolizes Afghanistan that cannot express itself. Afghani people cannot speak. In The Colour of Heaven, the boy is physically handicapped but the father is mentally handicapped. Physical handicap is not what I have in mind. I try to show the two ways of being handicapped. The father looks normal but he is not; the little boy is blind but he is able to communicate in a different way. There I wanted to express the talents of the disabled. We tend to think that they are not normal, but they can stand on their own. They are autonomous. I spent two years with the children and one year with the hero, the blind boy, to decipher his attitude, his vision. Before learning to read, he did not have a close relationship with nature, but afterwards he began to understand. He thinks flowers and trees have their own language and tries to decode the language of nature.

What about the rhythm of Baran, which is faster than your other films?

The theme of Baran is a slow theme, he is looking at her; the gaze is slow. I wanted to have a contrast that would accelerate the rhythm. This way, despite the fact that the story seems to be moving at a slow pace, when you look at it, a great deal is happening.

The film works on three levels: a story about an actual socio-political problem such as the burden of Afghani refugees on Iran’s shaky economy; a hopeless love story between two young people who are victims of bad politics and a parable, which illustrates that the road to spiritual purity must pass through self-sacrifice. How did the idea for the script come about?

The idea of Afghanistan was always at the back of my mind since I made my first feature film, Baduk, in 1992 about the Baluchi boys. The title ‘Baduk’ refers to a local term for ‘goods’. A person who smuggles goods at the Iran-Pakistan border is called a ‘Baduki’. When we were shooting at the border between Afghanistan and Baluchistan, we saw many Afghans crossing the border illegally during the night to escape the draughts. Trucks that were smuggling illegal items would drive without lights not to be seen and, in the morning, there would be dead Afghans on the road. The notion of facing death to escape from Afghanistan to come to Iran made a big impression on me, especially the plight of the children who became adults before their time. Some had to run for miles
each day. I noticed little girls dressed up as boys to shoeshine on the streets because they had no other way. The character of Baran is inspired by this experience. Now, increasingly, more Afghans leave their country to come to Iran. The problem has grown. In 1979, Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Union. Their withdrawal in 1989 was followed by the eruption of internal conflicts, which forced many Afghans to flee their country. We had many Afghans before the Islamic revolution but many more after. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees, Iran hosts the largest population of refugees in the world. Most of the young generation were born in Iran and have never been to Afghanistan.

You have been quoted as saying that *The Rain* is about mercy and compassion of the Iranian people towards the refugees and, yet, the film does not paint a pretty picture of their lives.

What I wanted to show was that the hardships experienced by the Afghans are not only peculiar to them. The Iranians go through hardships as well. Officially, one and a half million Afghans work in Iran, but another one and a half million work just like what you saw in the film, unofficially, in a country where work is already scarce. Not much attention is paid to that issue. I wanted to focus on these problems.

At the end of the film, after the departure of Baran, Lateef looks for the shoe repairman that he saw earlier, but cannot find him. Then he enters a mausoleum. Could you explain the significance of this scene? I was surprised to see a colourful picture of a saint on the wall. I thought human images were forbidden in Islam.

Lateef has lost everything. To see the tombs in the graveyard gives him a sense of death. The curtain that sways with the breeze is symbolically calling him to death. He hears sounds – voices of prayer or voices of the dead people – and he surrenders. In a way, he renounces Baran. He leaves his cap behind, which is an indication that he goes beyond material things and becomes a spirit. As for the picture on the wall, it is that of Mohammad. For the Shiites, it is not forbidden to have his image as it is for Sunni Muslims.

I understand the film was shot at a real construction site near Tehran under difficult conditions.

It was extremely cold. The building had no windows. The wind was coming in from everywhere. The smoke was a big problem. The workers you see in the film were actually working in that building.

Quite a diversion from the strikingly beautiful landscape of *The Colour of Heaven*!

_*The Colour of Heaven*_ was filmed in the mountains and forests of Northern Iran. I had in mind to present nature at its best and chose the season of spring. Eighty per cent of the film is shot outdoors. Naturally, we were at the mercy of the weather. At one point we had to postpone the shooting for a month due to unfavourable weather conditions. The village in the film is actually the combination of several villages. Some of the successive sequences were filmed in different and often very distant places, several of which did not have paved roads. At times, we had to carry our equipment on horseback. It took us four and a half months to finish. Working with a blind adolescent, a weak old woman and several local people also proved to be difficult. I started writing the script for the film in 1995, conducted research in blind institutions and spent some time with blind children to get to know them better. The beauty of nature was very important to represent two different characters. The father closes his eyes to this beauty and lives in darkness and destruction – cutting trees, etc.
The son is in touch with nature though he cannot see. In fact, the film tells two stories; one is the ‘external’ story and the other the ‘internal’ one, which is multi-layered. To find the location that corresponded to what I had in mind, to deal with the actors or to find them in the first place were major challenges. The grandmother (played by Salmeh Feizi) took the longest to cast. The man who played the carpenter was actually blind.

Do you choose your actors after you write the script?

That depends. I had Lateef in mind when I wrote the script for Baran. The other actors were found after the script was written. It took a long time, especially to find Baran. She was living in a camp near Mashad for fifteen years and was in the eighth grade of the high school there. The first time she got out of the refugee camp was for the film. With the money the family got from the film, they bought a house. Lateef worked with me before in The Father. He was a twelve-year-old kid who quit school to work in a fruit shop. After the success he had with The Father, I encouraged him to continue studying. He is in the tenth grade but still works in the fruit shop. I remember an episode I would like to share with you. Lateef was very happy with the success of the film The Father, not because he was famous, but because people would come and buy his watermelons because he was famous! For Baran, it was very difficult to work with non-professional actors, especially with the Afghans who were not familiar with cinema or acting. To get what we wanted we worked three months with them and altogether it took eight or nine months.

I suppose working with non-professionals is not as easy as it appears.

My approach to working with non-professionals is as time consuming as any other approach, but I feel that non-professionals can act their real life, instead of learning to act someone else’s life. I crave for this authenticity.

Once you start shooting, do you improvise the script?

I work very much on the script. I like to follow it strictly. I make some changes, but nothing major.

Symbolism plays a vital part in your films. In the Father, as Mehrollah washes himself on the way home, the photo of him with his dead father falls into the water. At the end of the film, when his stepfather lies motionless in the desert, the family photo is in the water swimming towards the boy. The Colour of Heaven begins with a portentously foggy forest, foreshadowing the inescapable fate of the protagonist. One of the most significant symbols in that film is the wounded bird that the boy saves which eventually returns to the nest. Some critics have referred to the rather unfavourable father image in your films and interpreted the feelings of the sons, specifically, Mehrollah of Baduk and Mohammad of The Colour of Heaven, as Oedipal. In Baduk, the father is killed under a debris; in The Father, the father is already dead when the story begins, and the adolescent protagonist considers his stepfather as an obstacle to the affection of his mother; in The Children of Heaven, the protagonist must live in hard conditions because his father is weak; in The Colour of Heaven, the father who considers his blind son as an obstacle to his new marriage is portrayed as the evil force who disrupts the divine world of his heavenly son. The names of the protagonists in Children of Heaven and The Colour of Heaven are also laden with religious symbolism.

Rather than elaborating on these images, I prefer to leave it to the audience to come up with their interpretations. Briefly, the return of the bird to the nest in The Colour of Heaven anticipates the boy’s
return. When the grandmother returns the fish, the act signifies her return to her son. The turtle is stuck in the wood and this could be a bad omen but it is not because when the hand moves, there is light on it. The light on the hand could denote material life or have spiritual connotations.

In Iranian cinema, is there a director you consider as a model? Someone who has influenced you? As a very young man, you have collaborated with Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Your performance in his Boycott is considered as a turning point in your career as an actor. Critics have pointed out to certain similarities between Colour of Heaven and Makhmalbaf’s Silence. The protagonists of both films are blind children, who take similar paths and find their way through intuition although your film ends in a more religious or metaphysical note.

I have great admiration for many Iranian directors, but if I look at American cinema, John Ford is the one. Ford carries a message for all generations. His cinema is so fresh and so relevant after so many years. For the moment, I do not have much interest in following current cinematic trends of the West. I do not want to be influenced that way. What interests me is to watch daily life, the lives of simple people.

What made you to decide to become a film-maker?

I began to act in theatre when I was thirteen or fourteen. I was fascinated by acting. Growing up in poor districts of Tehran, the path of my life was changed when I met a local theatre group. The head of the group was a religious-revolutionary youth who was killed during the revolution, but his influence remained. I worked with Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Mohammad Kasebi (actor in the films, Boycott and The Father) at The Art Centre, played in several propagandistic social and religious films and made short films. I liked acting but making movies fascinated me more. Finally, the chance came up and I made my first feature, Baduk. In Iran, we have an important tradition of performing arts and theatre as well as cinema. Last year, we celebrated the hundred years of Iranian cinema, which was imported by Mozaffar Eddine Shah, the big dignitary of the Kadjars who ruled the country before the Pahlevi dynasty. He brought a camera from Paris and filming never stopped.

Montreal, September 2001

Notes
2. Fuad Nahas comes from a prominent film family in Egypt whose Nasar Studios were confiscated by the Egyptian government following the revolution of the 1950s. The family moved to Lebanon and Nahas settled in Montreal in 1990. His meeting with Majidi during the screening of The Father in 1996 led to his collaboration in Baran for which he raised the funds from various sources in the Middle East. He also co-produced Weeping Willow in 2005.
3. A documentary focusing on behind the scenes of The Colour of Heaven was made in 2000 by Massoud Madadi.

Bio/Filmography
Majid (Talesh) Majidi was born in Tehran in 1959. He studied drama at the Tehran University and began his cinematic career in 1980 as an actor at the Art Bureau of the Islamic Propagation Organization appearing in Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s earlier films, Boycott among others. He made several short- and medium-length films in the eighties before directing his debut feature Baduk (1991), which won him several national awards and was presented at the Directors’ Fortnight of Cannes Film Festival in 1992. His second film, The Father (1996), received the Jury Award of San
Sebastian Film Festival. He won the Grand Prix of the Americas at the Montreal World Film Festival three times in five years. The first time was with *Children Of Heaven* in 1997; the second with *The Colour of Paradise* (a.k.a. *Colour of Heaven*, a.k.a. *Colour of God*) in 1999 and the third, in 2001, with *The Rain*, which shared the top prize with *Torzok/Abandoned* by Hungarian Arpad Sopsits. With *Children of Heaven*, he became the first Iranian director who won an Academy Award Nomination for the Best Foreign Language Film.

During November of 2001, Majidi visited two major refugee camps in Afghanistan. In March 2002, he went to the city of Herat and visited Maslakh, the largest and oldest refugee camp in Afghanistan. During these trips, he was emotionally overwhelmed by the terrifying living conditions of the refugee families. The outcome was a documentary, *Rang-e Omid/Taberneh ta Harat/Colour of Hope/Barefoot to Herat*.

### Feature films

- **1991** *Baduk*
- **1996** *Pedar/The Father*
- **1996** *Bacheh-haye Aseman/Children of Heaven*
- **2001** *Baran/Rain*
- **2005** *Beed-e Majnoun/Weeping Willow*

### Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Mohsen Makhmalbaf, one of the most prominent film-makers of Iran today, was more than twenty years old when he first set foot inside a cinema hall. As a child, he refused to talk to his mother when he found out that she had gone to the movies. In the absence of parents, he received his religious education from his grandmother and his aunt and political education from his stepfather, a devout follower of Ayatollah Khomeini. By the time he reached puberty, he was already deeply involved in politics by forming a religious activist group to fight against the regime of the Shah. At the age of seventeen, he was arrested for disarming a policeman, following which he spent several years in prison. ‘I got fed up with leftist ideology when I was in prison’ he reminisces. ‘People were becoming Marxist by reading Gorky’s *Mother*, or religious by one religious book. When I turn to dust one day, what does it matter whether I am a socialist or a capitalist? I have always been a guerrilla, but after the years in prison, I chose the road to culture’.

*Baykot/Boycott* (1985), a traumatic tale of imprisonment set during the Shah era, belongs to that period of his career when he was committed to making revolutionary films. For *Dastforush/The Peddler* (1987), German film-maker Werner Herzog once said he had never seen such a sensitive and delicate interpretation of death. *Arusi-ye Khuban/Marriage of the Blessed* (1989), a shell-shocked photographer’s return to society after the Iran-Iraq war, criticizes capitalism. *Nobat-e Asheqi/Time of Love* (1991), a reflection on infidelity in an arranged marriage, and *Shabha-ye Zayandeh-rud/Nights on the Zayandeh-rud* (1991), an elegy to the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war created polemic when they were screened during the 1991 Fajr Film Festival in Tehran and the artist who was once thought to be the mouthpiece of the Islamic revolution was almost blacklisted. *Nun va Goldun/Bread and Flower Pot, a.k.a. A Moment of Innocence* (1996), which could be a sequel to *Salam Cinema* (1995) – starting with auditions conducted with select players of the earlier film – is in fact a coming to terms with a crucial event of the film-maker’s youth, the scuffle with the policeman. The story is told from the point of view of the film-maker as well as his opponent. In the real incident both were wounded,
their cinematographic encounter ends up with amicable reconciliation confirming the film-maker’s evolution from aggressive militancy to peaceful resolution.

In the years following the two interviews here, Mr Makhmalbaf made a controversial film, *Sokut / Silence* (1998), which he shot in Tajikistan with post-production in Iran. The film uses minimal dialogue relying mostly on visual imagery to reveal the budding love between a blind boy who is guided by his acute sense of hearing and a sensitive adolescent girl. Sensual close-ups of the girl, particularly the scene when she dances in front of the camera – most probably the first such scene in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema – did not go unnoticed by the censors who literally cut the sequence from the negative. Makhmalbaf had to take his negative to France to re-edit the film there. He was not given a work permit in case he would put back the objectionable sequence.

*Kandahar* (2000), which is the story of an Afghan journalist living in Canada who returns to her homeland to search for her sister whose life is in danger, was shot before the Sept 11 events. However, it gained a deeper meaning when the world became aware of the Afghan issue overnight following the tragedy of the twin towers.

Makhmalbaf returned to Tajikistan in the fall of 2004 to shoot *Loves of Dushanbe*, a philosophical look at love through the story of a relationship between a choreographer and his trainees. Although the technical crew is Iranian, the actors are Tajik, and some had previously appeared in *Silence*. Members of his family, his wife, Marziyeh Meshkini, and his daughters, Samira and Hana, also helped the project.

Iranian film critics in general divide the dramatic career of Mohsen Makhmalbaf into four periods: In the first period, he is concerned with political and ideological problems along with issues of life and death, but less interested in the medium of cinema. In the second period, his films are governed by his *id*; the mind and the social and political background override the individual. He perceives art as a tool to express social and political commitments. In the third period, he follows the ‘logic of the heart’ and not the ‘logic of the reason’ and this is the principle he calls ‘relativity’ as compared to ‘dogmatism’. In the fourth period, he is drawn to poetry and pure cinema, which does not mean that his work is devoid of political, social and philosophical tendencies.

Some years ago, he established Makhmalbaf Film House where he has trained all members of his family to be film-makers. Then, he helped Afghan film-makers to re-gain their strength after years of war. His latest project is to set up an organization called ‘Film-makers Without Frontiers’, similar to ‘Physicians Without Frontiers’ or ‘Journalists Without Frontiers’ to give support to film-makers from less-advantaged countries.

The first interview took place during the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in 1995 where a comprehensive retrospective of Mr Makhmalbaf’s work was held. Iranian film historian and producer Bahman Maghsudlu was the interpreter. The second interview...
happened at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1996. Maani Petgar, an Iranian film-maker based in Australia who has made a documentary on the shooting of *Salam Cinema*, was the interpreter.

In our first meeting, Mr. Makhmalbaf began the interview himself with a storm of questions: ‘How many of my films have you seen? Which ones are better for you? What do you know about Iranian cinema? What do you think about Iranian films?’ Only after he was sufficiently satisfied with the answers, I could proceed with my questions.

**PORTRAIT OF THE REVOLUTIONARY AS AN ARTIST**

- *Take One*

It is difficult to say which of your films is the best one. The style of each one is different. I liked *The Cyclist*, but also *The Peddler*. *Once Upon a Time Cinema* is on a different level. As for other Iranian films, in the 1990s, several comprehensive retrospectives were held in Europe beginning with the Pesaro Film Festival in Italy followed by the *festival des 3 continents* – Nantes in France. What is curious is the fact that Iranians, especially the Diaspora does not like the films that the westerners like. They find them artificial. And removed from reality. Why do you think this is so?

Iranian cinema has grown up, you know.

Even those who follow these changes have misgivings about, for instance, some of the films of Abbas Kiarostami, such as *Close-up*, about a desperate film buff that impersonates you. The exile community in Montreal found the court scenes entirely far-fetched.

I think one of the reasons is the rhythm of these films. The other is the way Kiarostami shows reality, which is rather different from the reality of our lives. He imagines one story and tries to show it in a realistic way. The foreigners who do not know the reality of Iran accept this as reality; but Iranians know that this is not the actual reality. *Close-up* was well received in Iran because it is based on a real story. The court scene takes place in a real court. Foreign tastes, especially the French, also influence Iranian tastes. This could be another reason why now Iranian people are beginning to like certain films of Kiarostami. The danger is that some film-makers try to satisfy foreigners rather than insiders and this fact has been influencing Iranian cinema.

**Does Salam Cinema complete the trilogy, which you began with *Once Upon a Time Cinema* and continued with *The Actor***?

The trilogy was my gift for the 100th birthday of cinema: *Once Upon a Time Cinema* deals with Cinema and Power; *The Actor* with Cinema and the Artist; and *Salam Cinema*, Cinema and the People.
I have heard that there are several versions of *Salam Cinema*.

Four. The first, the thirteen-hour version, was made for Iranian television, but was never shown. The second is the three-hour version shown during the Locarno Film Festival, it was meant to be for foreign television audience, but no one bought that either. The third version was prepared for Iranians, but it also remained on the shelf. The final 75 minutes version (I had to cut fifteen minutes of it for the Cannes Film Festival) is the one that has been going around to many festivals. It also had commercial release in France. Not only that the Iranians are looking at what the rest of the world is saying, but the entire world is also looking at Cannes. If *Salam Cinema* were not shown in Cannes, it would have been buried.

**How did you come about this project?**

This project grew out of two experiences: the first one is my experience in selecting actors for my previous films and the second is my experience as a writer and novelist. I have written several novels, short stories and 35 scripts that are the base for my works or works of others. I transferred these experiences to the film while I was shooting.

**Perhaps this is not so important and we should accept the film as it is, but I cannot help wondering how much of *Salam Cinema* is improvised. What is fiction and what is real, particularly in the scenes with the two level-headed girls?**

Although some French critics have different theories, I believe that up to the present there have been two kinds of documentaries: raw documentary, such as how to make a table or build a house, and constructing a story based on a real event. Mine is the third kind of documentary. There is a true story and we are shooting in the *cinema verite* or documentary style. While this is happening, I involve myself in the story to convert it to something else, which becomes fiction. Nothing has been re-done, but I have somehow involved myself in leading the simple documented event to fiction. My voice and my action reveal that I am involved in the hiring process, but my involvement in this scenario is not very deep. It is only what you see in the film. I tell my assistant to go and bring the candidates, or to take them back.

**It may be a documentary, but don’t you think that those who come to see you are acting, especially the two girls, which brings us to the question of ‘what is documentary?’ When there is a camera present, people act.**

This subject is happening at that moment. In fact, some elements, the players and the scriptwriter, are mixed. I do not tell them what to say. Each player writes his/her own dialogue. If there is no script, why is it not a documentary?

Suspense is created by the fact that we do not know who will be chosen to play a part in the upcoming film. In front of the camera, I do three things: acting, writing, and directing. The most basic element of my involvement in this film is that I can defeat the reality facing me, write and direct my film.

At the time of the shooting, I did not know where it would all lead. Using my own background and experience, I was trying to bring the event to a point of suspense to make it interesting for the viewers. Every story needs a major character that is looking for something, for a confrontation with a problem. The writer tries to make the character interesting and the subject attractive in the way he shows whether the character can reach his goal or not. I create the confrontation, which leads to suspense here during the process of interviewing. Almost 5000 people participated in this project.
wanted to have one of the players as the leading actor throughout the film and tried to create suspense about hope and despair by the comings and goings and the challenges that existed between the characters and me. If everyone is doing some sort of acting, it becomes a television show. This border is very thin and delicate. None of the events you have seen was prepared. Everything happened at that moment.

**Why are you so cruel to your players? There is so much emotional cruelty in the film.**

There are three symbols in this film: 1) *The table*, which is the symbol of authority in our culture. 2) *The mirror*, which symbolizes cinema reflecting the reality of the other side; this mirror is placed in front of the people. 3) *The circle* drawn on the floor in which people are asked to stand, which is the symbol of limitation. When they stand inside the circle, the table can control them.

I tried to show how anyone who sat behind the table would become an authority and would try to unveil those inside the circle. To prove this point, I exchanged my position with the players. When they sat behind the table, they also became authoritarian and tried to impose their opinions on others. This is a story of authority and the people and the confrontation between the two, a cultural problem, which is the outcome of long years of authoritarian governments in Iran. It cannot be changed overnight because it is integrated into the culture and it remains heavily in the minds of the people. I do not agree with the western view that good and bad people can exist in the same culture. Like oxygen in the air, authority is embedded in the culture. People who sit behind the table change their behaviour. This is how I see it.

We can apply the same idea to cinema. American cinema has the power today because it has captured more than ninety per cent of the cinemas of the world. Just like the way I tell my players to laugh and cry, American cinema tells the rest of the world how to behave. If European Community were to sit in the same seat one day, they would do the same thing just like the two girls who exchange places with me. This is about authority and power and it is a universal story. I try to show it in the country I am living, but you can see the same in your own country as well.

**Those two girls are angry with you, but they are willing to do what you want because they want something in return. In other words, people are willing to bow down to authority to survive. Your view is very pessimistic.**

After having been told that they are the winners, they do not listen to me anymore. I do not tell them what to ask the other players. I even caution them not to be cruel. Yet, when they sit behind the table, they become cruel just like me. I tried to show that human beings are all influenced by the same elements of culture.

**Why do you stake being human against being an artist?**

This is only a question to elicit some answers. It is not my ‘voice’. Originally, I gave an answer, but it was too direct, so I cut it. There are times when a person can be caught between being human and being an artist. For example, when the government tells you, ‘you have to make propaganda films, or nothing’, you have to choose between the two. I choose being human. I live on film-making, but I would prefer to drive a taxi. In such a situation, you have to choose your own way.

**I just had the opportunity to watch Time of Love. Mahmud Kalari’s camera captures the magic of Istanbul in a much alluring way than any Turkish cinematographer has ever done. Why did you shoot this film in Turkey?**
Two of my films were made in countries other than Iran: *The Cyclist* in Pakistan and *Time of Love* in Turkey. The government told me, ‘If you want to make films on these subjects, you have to go to another country because we do not have these subjects in our country’. Poverty and Love!

When *Time of Love* was invited to Cannes five years ago, it was not allowed to go. The film had permission to participate in this event only in 1995. Subsequently, a French company purchased it along with *Salam Cinema* and *Gabbeh*. *Gabbeh* was initially conceived as a documentary recounting the legends surrounding the traditional Gabbeh carpet of the semi-nomadic tribes of Southeast Iran. At the end, I used this element to enhance a fictionalized story.

**Which is the other film that was banned in Iran?**

*Nights on the Zayandeh-rud*, a fiction film – Zayandeh being a river in Isphahan – has been banned for six years. I was accused of making a film against the martyrs of the revolution; in reality, the film was made for them.

**What will your next film be?**

Good-bye, Cinema. Maybe!

**You are too young!**

This is the subject. I do not intend to say good-bye to cinema, but cinema itself may disappear.

**One last question: If you were not a film-maker, what do you think you would be?**

If I were not a filmmaker, I would have been a politician. What I want to be now is SHA’IR, a POET!

*Thessaloniki, November 1995*

-**Take Two**-

When we met in Thessaloniki last year, you said you wanted to be a poet. Having seen *Gabbeh*, I think you are also a painter. I was struck by the poetry of colours in that film – the red, the yellow and especially the blue. You have used the blue extensively in the *Marriage of the Blessed* as well. It seems to be an important colour for you. What does it signify?

In our culture, blue is more about depth and the divine. Red is a kind of a warning, but also love. Yellow is knowledge and happiness.

**Is the actual story of *Gabbeh* based on the legends of the area? I have read that the film was originally conceived as a documentary.**

The story is mine, but some connection may exist with the legends of unfortunate or unattainable loves that circulate in the area. I never intended the film to be an actual documentary. I said that it was a documentary to avoid hassles with the regime. In Iran, you do not need much government approval to make a documentary. Contrary to *Salam Cinema*, which documents real events as I try to interweave my ideas with the present reality, *Gabbeh* takes off from a fictional story, which ends up looking like a documentary. I would consider the genre of *Gabbeh* as poetic realism.

*Salam Cinema* was a strong indictment of power. Power is also part of the narrative here as the patriarchal authority interferes with the happiness of the young lovers.
In *Salam Cinema*, I dealt with absolute fascism. There is still hope in *Gabbeh* although the film does not really have a happy-end. The father does not kill the lovers, but he kills the hopes of the sisters who may dream of escaping.

**I would like to know why you decided to make* A Moment of Innocence*, which we have seen here last night, twenty-two years after the incident that sent you to prison and a policeman to the hospital. Is it coming to terms with an important event of your life?**

I needed to reconsider what has changed, either in me or in the society I live in. One of the things that has not changed is the fact that a policeman is still a policeman, but Makhmalbaf is not the same Makhmalbaf and the society is not the same society. I also wanted to find out why at that time I had decided to solve the problems of the society through the means of violence. When I attacked that policeman, was he for me an obstacle to reach justice, or was he one of the outcomes of the lack of justice? Of course, this happened during a period of many militant actions against the regime of the Shah and mine was not an exceptional case. Just the same, I wanted to find out what had caused me to think that way and what was the result of that action. I think I have found the answer in the film.

**What have you learned through the experience of making this film?**

The interesting point was that I had two months – the period it took to shoot the film – to think about something that happened in a few seconds. This gave a new dimension to the event. Twenty-two years ago, I was thinking that I got the truth and that the answer was in my head, now I realize that there are different reasons, different realities and different solutions according to each person’s point of view. Truth is like a triangle with more than one angle. It is not an absolute entity, but rather a relative thing.

**The film ends with the idea of reconciliation. Instead of the knife, the bread and the flower are offered. The European title of your film is* A Moment of Innocence. This is rather ambiguous; is it innocence that could have been, or a moment that you could hold in your hand, which had passed, or a wish for lost innocence?**

Unfortunately, I am not happy with this title. The distributor, MK2 chose it. For me, the title is still *Bread and the Flower Pot*. Bread for me is justice and the flower is the symbol of love.

**How is bread the symbol of justice?**

The discussion of justice and love is one of the concerns of our society. Many people think that you have to sacrifice love to reach justice. For me, the debate of whether it is possible to have both was the main concern. In order to reach bread, which we need to survive and to distribute it fairly among the members of the society, are we going to sacrifice love? Alternatively, should we attach love to bread? Naturally, this is not an issue, which is exclusive to Iranian society. Former Soviet Union tried to enforce that kind of justice, which resulted in destruction of love and affection. For me, justice and love supplement each other. Unfortunately, in many cases, we have not been able to have both.

**Earlier you have said that you were disappointed with politics and decided to turn to art. Don’t you think that art is also politics? For me everything is political.**

I agree totally that everything could be political and that politics could create and affect culture. I used these terms to distinguish between two things, which interact. For the same reason, this film, which in my view is an artistic statement, has become a political issue in the eyes of the Iranian government. That is why now they question the whole entity of the film.
In the history of Iran, we have had two important persons who somehow created two different ways of looking at things: One of them was a prime minister called Amir Kabir who had lived about a hundred years ago. He was a revolutionary in the sense that he opened universities, schools and brought the question of education and science to Iran. Another one, who also lived around the same period, was Mirza Reza Kermani who tried to kill Nasraddin Shah because he thought that by eliminating someone, you could change things. I believe we still have this second approach in Iran today. Many opposition movements that try to get rid of the government seem to think that by changing the government or by killing people, they can bring change. I feel much closer to Amir Kabir who tried to change the minds of the people. I believe in change through changing thought patterns. That is why I said I prefer art. I believe cinema can change people’s way of thinking.

Also being politically aware or committed is different in the West than in the East. In the West, it mostly means finding out about elections, or to be aware of what is happening in the society. In the East, it is a question of getting involved, violence and doing things in terms of violent actions.

There are supposed to be two cameras in your film, the camera of the policeman and the camera of Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Of course, there is also your camera as the director. How did you work this out?

When I talk about cultural problems in Iran, that is exactly the point of your question. One of the biggest problems of our culture is that it is very extremist. Everyone thinks truth can only have one angle. It is often forgotten that the angle could change according to one’s position. For me, the main ingredient of democracy is that you must accept that truth may have several different angles. As long as we cannot accept this, there is no debate. Therefore, your question about the cameras, for me, is a question of pointing out all these different angles – the visual performance of the essence of democracy.

In film-making as well, when you show something with one camera, it is still somehow showing the extreme – one view of the film-maker. That is why in that kind of film-making, we have heroes and antiheroes, good guys and bad guys. The kind of film-making I am interested in is showing different views to remind people whatever they have is their view of the truth. In a sense, this film is very similar to *Time of Love*, which repeats the same story from three different points of view.

*Bread and the Flower Pot* was banned in Iran after the screening at Fajr Festival. What was found objectionable?

They still have not announced the reasons officially. What I have heard is that the film has questioned the whole revolution.

How would this ban change your future projects?

I do not know what will happen. Now I have five films that have had problems – from *The Cyclist* to *Bread and the Flower Pot, Time of Love* and *Nights on the Zayandeh-rud* are still forbidden in Iran. I am not sure but I think several well-known Iranian film-makers are thinking of the possibility of emigrating overseas these days. If things do not change for the better, I might think of doing the same.

What would you say is the main problem with the Iranian cinema today, economics like in many other countries or lack of freedom?

Lack of Freedom!

Locarno, August 1996
Notes

Bio/Filmography
Mohsen Makhmalbaf was born in 1957 in a poor neighbourhood of Tehran. During his youth, he was a member of an Islamist organization fighting against the Shah and was sent to prison for five years for wounding a police officer. He continued his political activities following his release after the Islamic Revolution, but soon turned to writing publishing a number of books. In 1981, he founded the Propaganda Centre for Islamic Thinking and Arts (*Hozeh*) in collaboration with other Muslim artists and published a large number of his short stories, novels and screenplays there. He wrote and directed his first film, *Tobeh-ye-Nasuh/Nasuh’s Repentance*, in 1982. Heavy censorship on several of his films forced him to shoot some of his work abroad. *The Time of Love* was shot in Turkey, parts of *The Cyclist* in Pakistan and *Silence* in Tajikistan.

Makhmalbaf received the Fellini award of UNESCO in 2001 for *Kandahar*, the story of an Afghan immigrant in Canada, who returns to her country to search for her sister in the city of Kandahar, the headquarters for the Taliban.

Makhmalbaf Film House, which he has created, received the Special Prize at the Festival of Iranian Films in Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts in 2000.

Feature films
1982 *Tobeh-ye-Nasuh/Nasuh’s Repentance*
1983 *Do Chashm-e Bi-su/Two Sightless Eyes*
1984 *Este’azeh/Fleeing from Evil to God*
1985 *Baykot/Boycott*
1987 *Dastforush/The Peddler*
1989 *Doucharkhe Savar Bicycle-ran/The Cyclist*
1989 *Arusi-ye Khuban/Marriage of the Blessed*
1991 *Nobat-e Asheqi/Time of Love*
1991 *Shabha-ye Zayandeh-rud/Nights on the Zayandeh-rud*
1992 *Naseroddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema/Once Upon a Time, Cinema*
1993 *Honarpisheh/The Actor*
1995 *Salam Cinema*
1995 *Gabbeh*
1996 *Nun va Goldun/Bread and the Flower Pot a.k.a. A Moment of Innocence*
1998 *Sokut/Silence*
2001 *Kandahar*
2005 *Loves of Dushanbe*

Dariush Mehrjui
Dariush Mehrjui is one of the prominent representatives of the Iranian new wave. With *Gav/The Cow* (1969), his second feature, he became the first Iranian film-maker to be noticed in the West. The film, which shows the influence of Italian neo-realist but also carries characteristics of Latin American magical realism, takes place in a remote village where a handful of inhabitants live in very primitive conditions and are under the constant threat of attack from a mysterious and eerie trio of
foreign marauders that usually appear as shadowy figures. The only
cow in the village belongs to Mashd-Hassan, a simple farmer whose
attachment to the animal that provides him his livelihood goes
beyond concerns for survival. When the pregnant cow dies, Mashd-
Hassan retreats to the barn and assumes the animal’s identity. The
villagers have no choice but accept him on his terms and begin to
treat him as if he were a cow, which ties up with the earlier
allusions in the film to superstitions and paranoia that engulf small
village life.

The Cow was funded by the government of the Shah and then
banned for its portrayal of the miserable conditions in the
countryside during a period of vigorous westernization. Permission
for its release was given a year later with the condition that a
statement should be added indicating the story took place half a
century ago. When the export permit was still refused, friends of
the director smuggled a copy to Europe and, in 1971, the
international critics at the Venice Film Festival chose it as the best
film of the year even though they had to see it without sub-titles.

Following the Islamist revolution, Ayatollah Khomeni praised The Cow after having seen it on
television. Today it is considered a cult film.

In 1975, Mehrjui exposed the illicit blood traffic in Tehran with Dayareh/Mina’s Cycle. The film was
co-sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, but faced opposition from the Iranian medical
establishment and was banned until 1978. Unable to continue to work in his country, Mehrjui
returned to California where he had studied before becoming a film-maker but re-entered Iran after
the revolution and directed The Backyard (1980). However, he found the atmosphere as repressive as
before and, in 1981, moved to Paris. He made Voyage au Pays de Rimbaud/Journey to the Land of
Rimbaud (1983), there, a feature-length semi-documentary for French TV. He returned to Tehran in
1985, and with the relative relaxation of the working conditions, resumed his career.

From 1992, he began to focus on women and their plight in an androcentric Muslim society in
transition to modernity. Banoo/The Lady (1989) was banned for several years; Sara (1993), which is
an Iranian version of Ibsen’s A Dolls House, had international praise, whereas Leila (1997), the story
of a modern urban woman who, torn by the guilt of her infertility, consents to her husband’s second
marriage, created polemic both in Iran and outside. Most of his films are inspired by literature.

In several polls taken at intervals over the years, Iranian critics have always chosen The Cow as the
best Iranian film of all times. However, despite such appreciation and despite censorship on his
works by two opposing regimes, some Iranians consider Mehrjui a ‘state film-maker’, amazingly,
both before and after the revolution. Regarding, The Cow, they question how the Ministry of Culture
could invest on a young film-maker who had recently returned from the U.S. whose first film was a
failure and how he could make a film from a script by one of the best Iranian playwrights, Gholam-
Hossein Saedi, and a cast of very important stage actors: Ezzatollah Entezami, Ali Nassirian, Jamshid
Mashayekhi, and Jafar Vali. Such criticism ignores the cultural policies of the Shah in the early
1970s, which encouraged foreign-educated film-makers to make films that would win accolades
abroad to show the government in a favourable light. Ironically, The Cow introduced Iranian cinema
to the world, but the picture of an impoverished countryside that it exposed was far from what the
Shah had envisioned. After the Revolution, Mehrjui was criticized for Hamoon (1990), claiming the
film adhered to the Guiding Policies of the authorities, but the same authorities banned his next

The ‘intellectual filmmaker of Iranian cinema’, ‘philosopher filmmaker’, ‘director of women’s
films’, Dariush Mehrjui accepted to have a chat with me during the International Film Festival of
Asian Cinema in Vesoul, France, in February 2005, where we both served on the jury.

FROM SOCIAL REALISM TO DRAMAS OF THE INTERIOR

*The Cow*, which we saw here in Vesoul last night is definitely one of the most
important works of the Iranian cinema and, although, only your second film, a very
important one for your career. I have been wondering about the village fool and
Mashd-Hassan, the owner of the cow. There seems to be some connection. The fool is
tied up and pulled around by the villagers in the beginning of the film and Mashd-
Hassan meets the same fate at the end. In a manner, he becomes the fool.

You have thought of a very good connection. No one has mentioned it before. In a way, there is a
connection. When Mashd-Hassan is stuck in the mud and it is a dead end for him, Islam is hitting
him and saying, ‘animal, you move’. They have tied him to save him from himself and they pull him
the way they were pulling the fool by the rope at the beginning. It is the same destiny.

The fool has many connotations, particularly in literature. The ‘holy fool’ or the wise
jester is part of all dramatic literature, ancient as well as modern, and all mystic
traditions.

Shakespeare?

In Shakespeare, the fool becomes a tool to probe melancholy and madness as he
exploits his talent of speech to forewarn the hero against destiny.

Each village has an idiot, someone who is out of society. I am interested in your impression of the
film. Do you think that it carries its modernity after so many years?

‘Minimalism’ has become a household name today. *The Cow* is a perfect example of a
minimalist work. The influence of Italian neo-realism is there as well although some
episodes are pure magical realism. I also liked the design of the generic; the black
silhouette of the man and the cow is reminiscent of *Karagöz*, the shadow play
indigenous to our region. The eerie shadows of the three intruders (who are almost
like the chorus in a Greek tragedy) also enhance this mood.

It was my idea but a friend of mine did the drawing of the shadow in naive art form.

Cinematography plays an important part in all
of your films. I have heard that you are very
meticulous when you shoot. Mahmud Kalari,
with whom you have worked in several projects,
told me some anecdotes about the shooting of
*Sara*.

In *Sara*, I wanted very strong lighting and, at the same
time, very sombre decoration. The background is in
general very dark or dark blue. In Leila, which was also shot by Kalari, the dominant colour is dark red. We started by hanging a canvas on the wall with the colours we wanted. The idea was to capture the reality of the film and not the reality of the house. Kalari is a master of light. I like it when people I work with do their utmost. My job is to create the situation.

While shooting Sara, the scenes on the stairs were problematic for Kalari from what he told me.

Bedrooms are upstairs and the kitchen is downstairs. She goes up and down many times. We put a huge mirror on the stairs. I think Kalari was afraid that the mirror would show the camera. Another staircase goes to the basement – the dungeon where she does her jewellery.

You exploit the stairs to the maximum to give an imposing and intimidating image of the husband and accentuate the fragility of Sara.

The husband was often on top of the stairs, but when the roles gradually reversed, she began to climb. The location is very important in a film, as important as the characters. Each location has its own peculiarity. Each one expresses a certain feeling. I spend considerable time to find locations to express my ideas. For The Pear Tree, I searched around Tehran for three months to find the house and the garden. I had a childhood memory about living in one of the houses in a certain neighbourhood, but the location seekers could not find this house. I found it with the aid of my childhood memories. Then there was the problem of getting this house. All the villas around it were taken by the government because the owners ran away after the revolution. This particular one remained but he thought that if the house came out in the spotlight, pastaran would capture it. We had friends in the pastaran; they are the intizamad, the body in charge of security. It turned out that the head of the pastaran was a great fan of my films and me. When I talked to him, he said he would arrange it for us. The next day, he said everything was OK. We could do whatever we wanted. We found out that he said to the owner, ‘if you co-operate, we don’t touch your house, but if you don’t, we’ll come and get it’. We painted the house, put away the furniture, etc. without any problems.

It must have been difficult to find the house in Sara. When she is leaving her husband, to have the right angle for the husband to come out and see the taxi disappear in the alley is very important. He actually has to come out of the gate and turn the corner to face the alley. And he only has a bed sheet around him, which makes him look helpless and pitiable, if not somewhat silly. Furthermore, the narrow alley only gives a limited and momentary view of Sara.

That was a very special case. The gate and the alley are in south of Tehran and the interior is in the north. We searched a long time for that house and that garden.

In Leila, the house is very important. Each house – Leila’s, her parents and her in-laws’ – is a clue to the characters that live there or a forewarning of the events to come. The high walls of the house of Leila’s father seem to serve the purpose of protecting the traditions. Such walls are typical for the bourgeois gardens in Tehran, but I do not think it is incidental that the traditional meal of ashura, which is an occasion for Leila and her future husband to meet and also reunite after years of separation, is prepared inside these high walls.

The house of Leila itself was pivotal to the film for showing the clash of tradition and modernity. If you look at this house with its arches, etc., the architecture is very traditional but, on the other hand, the construction is very modern. These houses are the prevailing style in Iran and they are
very interesting. Old architecture and materials are exploited to give a modern structure. My ex-wife is the specialist in designing such houses.

**Important decisions in Leila are taken in confined spaces, when men are not present.**

It is a women affair. Men are put aside. The father and husband are in the margin.

**You use a distancing device. Now and then, people talk directly to the camera, especially the women such as the mother-in-law.**

In Bemani, people who are making a film about the self-mutilation incidents talk to the camera. In Leila, I used that effect by having her talk to herself. She looks at the mirror very often and when she sees herself in the mirror, the voice-over comes.

**What really is her psychology? She is a modern woman. It is very hard to believe that someone in her situation would accept her husband to take a second wife. Sometimes, it sounds as if she is playing a game to test her husband’s love; other times, it looks as if she is having deep psychological problems and, perhaps, wants to punish herself, feeling guilty for all the comforts and happiness bestowed on her, which, she may think that she does not really deserve.**

It is a mixture of all these feelings. There is immense love in the film, conflict and love. The story has the characteristics and depth of a Greek tragedy. It is not one-dimensional. In one sense, she is forced into accepting a second wife for her husband and she wants to please her mother-in-law. On the other hand, she is expecting her husband to react more powerfully. But her husband does not understand what she really wants or he doubts if she loves him. He also doubts her. He says, if you loved me, you would never allow me to take a second wife. His weakness has another reason. Now he is suspicious about Leila.

**The story is very unusual for their class in Iran.**

Which class?

**The upper class.**

That is true. In the lower classes, such things happen all the time. But why should such a beautiful couple do that? And, finally, the child that arrives is not a son but a daughter. Fate!

**Why did you choose to have the husband’s family from the merchant class and, Leila’s, the intellectual class?**

Both of them are upper class, but the son’s family are more bazari and, therefore, more traditional. The family of Leila are more refined and more literate. The house of Leila’s mother where the uncle – the man with the beard – recites poetry is actually my house.

**Workingwomen in Iranian cinema appear probably the first time in your films. In The Tenants, the engineer is a woman but, perhaps, you started showing women with real jobs even before that film.**

In Mina’s Cycle, there is a nurse, but The Tenants is the first one. Actually, my concentration on women is with five consecutive films. One of them, Banoo, was banned for nine years.
For what reason?

For a ridiculous reason! They said that I was trying to show that the poor people were bad and the rich people were good. Actually, I wanted to break all these assumptions. They are all human beings caught in a situation. We worked very hard and prepared the film for the Fajr Film Festival of 1991. The last night of the festival, when all tickets were sold and the cinema hall was packed, we were told that the film would not be shown. The person in charge of the cinema said, ‘we won’t show the film. People may attack the cinema’. He was trying to sound as if they were protecting the film. ‘In order to save the film, we’ll hold it, ban it for the moment!’ Maybe it was because I won all the prizes the previous year with Hamoon, and if Banoo came out I would win prizes again. What was hard was that in order to save the film, we were told it would be held for a year. But this man was gone within a year and the new one who replaced him did not release it either. And it went on for nine years until Hatami was elected as president and it came out to the light along with many similar books and films.

Ironically, you had problems with the censorship even before the revolution.

The ideological stigma that is put on the product is very hard to accept. Before the revolution, I had problems with the Shah’s regime. They banned The Cow because it showed poor peasants when the Shah was trying to present an image of a prosperous westernized country. I had problems after the revolution for opposite reasons. Two of my best films, Banoo and The School We Went To, were banned; the latter, which is about children in a school who revolt against the principal, was banned for eleven years. It was made right at the beginning of the revolution for the Institute for Young Adults and had a political tone to it but, a year later, it was banned. After the revolution, the situation changed so much that they banned it.

Despite all difficulties, the conditions are a little better now.

Still, there are many serious problems. For instance, the films of Jafar Panahi are usually banned. At least, they are given permission to be screened outside the country. Mine were totally banned. Hassan Yektapanah’s latest film, Story Untold, was actually made three years ago. Abdolfazl Jalili has made many films and won awards in the West. Nobody knows about these films. The cinema that the foreigners know is the cinema insiders are completely ignorant of. Unless some critics have heard about the film here and there, Iranians are ignorant of the cinema shown outside. Kiarostami’s films are another example.

His last four were banned.

Not really banned because they show them once, but such films do not find theatrical release; distributors do not want to take a chance. Cinema halls are designated to commercial films.

Many Iranians feel that the films shown outside Iran do not reflect Iranian reality. Some even go further and claim that such film-makers receive money from the West to show Iran in a bad light.

Following the idea of The Cow, before the revolution, it made sense to go to these poor regions and try to raise the question of poverty and make a social critique of the government. The country was run by big bourgeois officials – the aristocrats – and the poor were ignored. But after the revolution, it did not really make much sense to make such socially engaged films, at least in the beginning because now the poor people were ruling the country and they themselves pretty much knew how to deal with the plight of the poor. It was not really up to us to comment and criticize; so I automatically turned my point of view to the middle class and the upper middle class because I
thought that now the problem was not really the social issue as we thought before but political. Everything depended on the political change. Now we have had the revolution and nothing has changed. It was not pleasant at all. In my career, I do not want to go back to the same style such as *Mina’s Cycle*, a sharp critique of the Shah’s regime. This film deals with the scandals concerning blood donations. (They usually show it in my retrospectives.) That film was banned for three years during the Shah’s regime. Through the story of a young man whose father is in the hospital, the film exposes the corrupt and chaotic blood transfusion system and how the poor and the addicted sell their blood – a very interesting film that won so many prizes. After the revolution, I decided to concentrate on the individual, the subjectivity and our psychological mentality. I thought that something was wrong with the way things were. No matter what government we chose, things were always the same. Something was very wrong with our existential psyche. *Hamoon, The Tenants, Banoo* came out in this period.

**With Bemani you return to some of the social issues of your earlier films.**

After twenty years, I was suddenly confronted with a horrific drama. All these young girls are killing themselves, but no one seems to care. I thought that if I made a small intimate humanist film, it would help the cause. I made it purely for that reason. Just like *Mina’s Cycle*, I made it with the same intention of revealing this secret. After *Mina’s Cycle*, the government became very conscious of the problem and the situation of the blood transfusion has improved. The blood transfusion centre was built. *Bemani* was the same thing. We went there and did the research. It was so tragic – a vast region called Ilam, where history goes back before Islam, the area of Kurds and Lore; the rate of self-burning was the highest among young girls and boys there. I started researching and then the story was built up. After two or three years, the rate of suicide has diminished so much although the film was banned in Iran, even its cassettes were forbidden, but everyone saw it.

**Bemani was produced by Tahmineh Milani and her husband, Mohammad Nikbin. How did this collaboration happen?**

We were in Bahman Farmanara’s house and I said I was looking for a producer for a very small budget film. I had a loan from the government but I needed a producer to back it up. Tahmineh and Mohammed said they were ready. We made it fifty-fifty.

**I was surprised knowing how militant Tahmineh is on women’s issues. Once she told me that male film-makers in Iran who were making films about women were not the voice of women.**

She had seen my other films and she knew that my angle was not prejudiced. I tried to raise consciousness about the issues of women. That was how it was made and they were very nice. We stayed good friends.

**When we come to Tehran during the Fajr Film Festival, we are shown the most recent films and each year several first time film-makers emerge. What do you think about the presence of the new generation in Iranian cinema?**

A very interesting and unique phenomenon! Nowhere in the world would you find that each year several newcomers enter the field. This year, I was on the jury. The festival had 45-50 offers of first and second films among which fifteen were chosen and almost all of those fifteen were supported by some government branch here and there. These were small low-budget films because the film-makers usually do everything themselves and the government helps them. Some very good films were shown in our section, the competition. Out of twenty-one films, two-three were first films.
One or two won many awards. We saw films with very intelligent and beautifully written screenplays that worked. In our country, cinema has filtrated young people’s lives. One way or the other, they are struck by this phenomenon of cinema. Everyone loves to make films. Now that you can make films with a small digital camera, everyone is experimenting. One thousand short films are made each year. This year the short film festival received 800 films. Among which they chose 40-45 for competition and as jury members, we had to see all of them. Some were very brilliant and beautifully made. I think in Turkey the situation is similar although the influence of American cinema is more evident there.

Turkish cinema was stagnant for a long time but, in recent years, some new film-makers appeared on the scene although their numbers are not so large. Two or three are very talented. Things have begun to happen, but slowly. Regarding the films of the young Iranian film-makers, what I have noticed is a lack of a sense of direction. They want to go somewhere but not know exactly where. Do you get this feeling?

Because of the success of certain Iranian films in foreign countries, this genre of looking for exotic situations and poor people has become a custom. The film-makers who start their career pick up this genre so that they can be invited to foreign film festivals. This has more or less has become a mode. Sometimes it shows that it is fabricated. They look like a tourist attraction. Now the subject matter is poverty.

And the border issues. So many films take place at the Afghan border or with the Kurdish refugees. Some of these do not reflect the reality at all. The protagonist may live in the poorest possible conditions but wear false lashes and tons of make-up reminding me of the 1950s commercial Turkish films made by people who were not familiar at all with the rural life. I have noticed several such films in the national program of Fajr Film Festival this year. Now that it is possible to have close-ups of women and to show their charm and beauty is no longer a taboo, the film-makers become too ambitious and overdue it.

Yes, I remember one film with a woman in the desert wearing a beautiful red dress. That was amazing. The girl had such a thick make-up. A woman living alone in her house would not wear make-up. Her hair, dress, the red were all very nice but too much for the desert.

The year before, almost every film was about drug addiction. They looked like poor imitations of American B-movies. Shooting with the needle was shown in real time with or without reason. Apart from one or two good film-makers, most newcomers seem to be searching for their way.

And they may not succeed because you have to be choosy and select your material well. Most of these young film-makers do not know cinema. They are not aware of the capacity of the medium. Sometimes they have good ideas but these are mistreated, damaging the film. Main problem is the craft. They do not pay attention to the craft of the film. For me, the film is a huge tableau; you have to work on details and composition to constantly create and not just show. Majority of these films are naturalistic not realistic in a sense that they capture whatever you have there rather than making a good composition and creating a new reality. They show the reality per se.

At the end of 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s when you were starting your career, naturally, the technical possibilities were limited but from the point of view of atmosphere, how was it different for a new filmmaker?
When I started my career, cinema was a medium of expression for me. It was like a novel; I had to work on it to make sure that the themes and the ideas were relevant and they had a critical point of view. My main intention was to criticize my society as a young intellectual and to raise consciousness and awareness about the plight of the disadvantaged and somehow create a powerful experience for the audience, an experience that I had myself when I went to the cinema and got overwhelmed and even shocked by exceptional works of art. This was the extension of our feelings at that time when we were surrounded by all the great masters of Italian cinema, French cinema, English or even American cinema. That feeling and atmosphere are gone, I should say, for twenty years, after the death of all the great masters. And because of the prevalence of the image everywhere – television, cable TV, satellites – people are overwhelmed and overshadowed. Out of this chaos, to create meaningful images is very difficult.

Another important issue is that in our post-modern society, the intellectual is not very popular.

Intellectuals are pushed to the margin, or in another sense, everyone has become an intellectual and that is why I do not want to have anything to do with intellectuals. The French philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard, who has actually inaugurated the idea of post-modernism, claims in *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir/The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) that one of the characteristics of post-modernism is that it is an era, in which the great narratives, the important ideas, the momentous are gone. Lyotard defines the postmodern as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives,’ where metanarratives are understood as totalizing stories about history and the goals of the human race that ground and legitimize knowledge and cultural practice.  

The two metanarratives that Lyotard sees as having been most important in the past are history as progressing towards social enlightenment and emancipation; and knowledge as progressing towards totalization. In, *The Post-modern Condition*, modernity is defined as the age of ‘metanarrative legitimation’, and post-modernity as the age in which metanarratives have become bankrupt. Through his theory of the end of metanarratives, Lyotard concludes that post modernity is an age of fragmentation and pluralism.

We no longer have existentialism, Marxism or communism. It is the death of all ideologies. All the ‘isms’ are gone. That is why we do not have a big prophet or a great master in any field, not even in philosophy or literature or cinema. The era of great masters is gone. The great narratives, the great ideas or ideologies are gone. This is the era of multi-culture; there is not one culture or one big idea dominating all the others but there are variations of ideas and variations of cultures and each one of them working with the other and interacting or integrating into the other.

Unfortunately, multi-culturalism does not necessarily create more harmony.

But it does.

Perhaps on a personal level.

Los Angeles, where I went to study forty years ago, is a good example. Although I was in Beverly Hills and UCLA, which is very upper class, prejudice against coloured people – Blacks, Mexicans, etc. was horrendous. There were so many clashes. That is why so many movements happened; the Black movements, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Black Tigers came out to regain their rights as individuals. The result is that after two or three decades, some things have become much better. You
know that in each film Hollywood makes, they are forced to have several coloured people; otherwise, the syndicate would not allow the film.

**Those are the token Blacks.**

Sometimes all of them are Blacks!

**The bad guys are almost always Black!**

There are some good Blacks, too.

**The token ones! Speaking of America, now that President Bush is threatening Iran, which he calls the ‘axis of evil’, how does it feel to live with daily coercion? What is the sentiment of the Iranians towards America and its aggressive stance?**

Just like everywhere else in the world, in Iran as well, everyone is attracted to the American culture, which is everywhere the same way you see it here in France. Our lifestyle is no different than in Canada or America; we live amidst huge freeways, cars, apartment houses. The American cinema is there, the American video is there, the satellites, the fast food, all of these things are everywhere. People are attracted to this culture. Americans were in Iran before the revolution and Iranians have a good memory of Americans. The enmity, which started with the hostage crisis, is profound but, at the same time, people do not take it seriously. They even get a kick out of the idea that the government may be pushed to change if threatened by outside forces. Every time you get into a collective taxi, everyone is talking about this issue and criticizing very openly. These are good signs but, on the other hand, being bombarded daily with the possibility of destruction threatens your security and you worry if things will stay as they are or change. In that respect, there is anxiety, especially among families who want stability and security. Recently, it came out in the news that the Americans have said that they have to flush out all the pastaran headquarters and then hit the 300 different atomic constructions they have detected underground or on the ground.

**They actually said that?**

It just came out in the news in Iran that George Bush said that. This was a big threat. At the same time some people were happy that now it will be all over. It would be a horrific bloodshed and destruction. Iran is not a small country. If they start war, it would take so many years to destroy everything. There would be a fantastic chaos if it happened. I think the prophesy of Nostradamus would probably come through. He prophesied that at the beginning of the millennium or towards the end of the second or third millennium there will be a huge explosion – a destruction in this part of the world. He mentioned the Middle East. Perhaps the prophecy came true with Saddam and the war in Baghdad but if they attack Iran, it could be the extension of the prophecy. I hope it will not happen.

*Vesoul, February 2005*

**Notes**


**Bio/Filmography**

Dariush Mehrjui was born in Tehran in 1939. As a child, he was interested in music and painting, playing the piano and santoor and drawing miniatures. In 1959, he left for California to study cinema at the UCLA (University of California in Los Angeles), but was disappointed with the
program that gave more importance to technical aspects of film-making than the meaning of film as an art form. He attended a number of film courses, namely with Renoir who taught him how to work with actors, and then, switched to philosophy graduating in 1964. On his return to Tehran, he began working as a journalist and screenwriter for television and taught English, literature and film aesthetics. After his debut film, Diamond 33 (1967) a parody of James Bond, he made Gaw/The Cow (1968), which is considered as one of the most important works of Iranian cinema.

Mehrjui faced many difficulties with the censorship of the Shah but also the regime of the Ayatollahs. He spent several years in France in the 1980s and after returning to Iran, made two important films, The Tenants/Ejareh neshinha (1986), a social satire and Hamoon (1990), a psychological study of an intellectual at an impasse.

He is widely known in the West for his women’s films, among which Sara (1993) is the most outstanding.

**Feature films**

1967 Diamond 33
1969 Gaw/Cow
1970 Mr Simpleton/Agha-e Haloo
1972 Postchi/The Postman
1975 Dayareh Mina/Mina’s Cycle
1980 Madreseh e keh miraftim/The School We Went to
1986 Ejareh neshinha/The Lodgers
1990 Hamoon
1991 Banoo/The Lady
1993 Sara
1995 Pari
1997 Leila
1998 Derakhte Golabi/The Pear Tree
2000 Mix
2002 Bemani/Stay Alive
2004 Mehman-e Maman/Mom’s Guest

**TAHMINEH MILANI**

Much like there was a war genre in Iran, which spoke to the existing social conditions, a woman’s cinema needs to take shape today. I don’t mean merely hiring more women in the film industry — having more female directors, writers, camera people, actresses, etc. Sex is not important here.
What is important is to make movies that reflect women's perspectives and experiences. Movies today simply aren’t attempting to show or discover what Iranian women in today’s society are thinking.

This is what Tahmineh Milani, the director of Do Zan/Two Women, a film, which radically criticizes the status of women in Iran, told the students during her speech at the University of Tehran in December 1999. Milani had to wait for eight years before the script of Two Women could be approved. Produced during Mohammad Khatami’s presidency, the film drew over three million viewers nationally despite the fact that advertisement of the film on television was banned. Two Women depicts the lives of urban middle-class Iranians from the perspective of a woman. The film is very pertinent when it comes to socio-economical circumstances that thwart women’s attempts at self-determination.

Tahmineh Milani was arrested on 26 Aug 2001 on charges of defaming the Islamic Revolution with her film The Hidden Half. She was released a week later with pressure from the president and a heavy bail. To this date, she remains the only Iranian film-maker who has focused on the counter-revolution opposition groups without presenting them with hatred.

In 2005, Milani made the headlines again with a very provoking film, Zane Ziyadi/Unwanted Woman, which deals with a taboo subject, extra-marital affairs. Although several viewers (mostly men) thought that she was caricaturing man, with the immature, egotistical and totally macho male protagonist, it was to her credit that in this film, she gave the man a chance to speak. As she pointed out to me during our discussion in Tehran, in her story she also tried to give a chance to people from different social, economical, political and cultural backgrounds, especially in the underdeveloped countries, where to talk about ideals, complexes and desires is culturally and traditionally suppressed or subject to limitations.

Our first meeting was during the Montreal World Film Festival 1999 where Two Women was screened, following which we met regularly in Tehran but also in Calcutta and Rotterdam.

**The Real Identity of Women**

Western audiences are familiar with the films of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, another female film-maker from your country. However, we do not seem to know much about your work. What have you been doing before Two Women?

I have made five films. The first is Children of Divorce, which received the Best First Director award in Tehran. After that, I made The Legend of Sigh, a philosophical film that had more than fifteen screenings outside Iran – Creteil, Chicago, Houston, Harvard, Lincoln Centre, Germany, Austria. This is the story of a rich woman writer who goes through depression after losing her husband. Unable to continue her writing, she tries to commit suicide. When she sighs, an imaginary character appears and asks her what she would like. She says she wants to be a happy woman. After going through different personalities and social levels, she understands that the problem does not stem from different situations but rather is mental regardless of the kind of life she may have. Having understood the real problem, she begins to write.
Women as intellectuals are rare in Iranian cinema. Did you have difficulties releasing such a film?

For more than six months, the High Council of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance refused to grant the film a release permit. They declared that the characters in the film did not provide appropriate role models for our youth. I think the main objection of the council was to the fact that I showed an individual, and furthermore, a woman, capable of choosing her own identity.

What about What Else is New?

This film is about motherhood and the traditional type of life – an evaluation of our society. It was the Critics’ Choice for Best Film in Iran and it did well at the box office. It was also shown in Chicago, Lincoln Centre in New York and Harvard. Then I made Kakada, which is about the environment. It was banned because an eight-year-old girl appeared in it without a scarf. After Mr Khatami was elected as president, it was released. Lastly, I made Two Women. I wrote the script for this film eight years earlier, but I did not have the permission to make it. After Mr Khatami came to power, permission was given. The film was shown in Iran. The religious authorities hated it and boycotted the film. We have five TV channels; the head of television declared that he would not permit me to show advertisement about this film on television. Outside Iran, it was shown first time in Taormina in Italy and now this is the second one in Montreal. We got the Best Actress prize for Niki Karimi in Taormina. After Montreal, we will go to Geneva to participate in Cinema tout écran. Then we are in competition at the Hamburg Film Festival.

With the new government, you have fewer restrictions. Nevertheless, following the May 23rd presidential elections, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Dr Ataollah Mohajerani, whose responsibility, as I understand, is to control, support and guide the country’s cultural and artistic life, made it clear that old rules of filmmaking, such as the ‘dress code’ were still in effect. Specifically, what are some of the restrictions regarding clothing of women and men and women relations?

With the previous government, the restrictions had no regular bases except the ideas of the people who held control. You still cannot show women naked or without hejab and you cannot openly show relationships between men and women and sexual acts. Now it is more open in terms of colours and social relations, but the private life is still a taboo. This is the law. In Iran, you cannot have private relations in public.

What period in Iranian history does Two Women begin?

The story begins after the Islamic Revolution when all universities were closed for three and a half years. During this time, some women who had started the university got married. When they had babies, the husbands said, ‘Now we don’t need you to study’. This is a story of one of these women, a truly intelligent girl. According to our laws, if the husband says, ‘I don’t let you study’, it is the law; we must obey. We cannot ‘disobey’. There is no objection to the husband. I believe learning is a human right and basic to all human beings and we should not need permission to read, but this is the law.

Were you a student at that time? What were you studying before the university was closed?

I was one of those students whose education was halted with the closure of the universities. I am an architect like the narrator of Two Women.
A bit autobiographical…

But I had the possibility to work in cinema. I was free for three and a half years and this was a good time to learn film-making. During that period, I worked as a set designer and assistant director. I had to do this for ten years before the ministry of culture could permit me to make a film.

Who were you assistant director to?

I was the assistant of Masud Kimiai in *The Red Line* (1982) and I continued to work with him for seven years. He is one of the forerunners of the new wave of Iranian cinema. After him I worked with Mr. Tahmahi, Hassan Hedayet…I have been making my own films for ten years.

How did you make the decision to move to cinema from architecture? A very talented young Turkish woman director, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, is also an architect by training. Her film, *Güneş Yolculuk*/*Journey to the Sun*, has won several international awards.

Before the revolution, ninety per cent of those who worked in cinema were unpopular. Families did not allow their children to see their films. I compromised and chose architecture. Architecture is a kind of art and close to cinema. In other words, the decision to choose architecture was made before the revolution. After the revolution, I was allowed to enter cinema and do what I like. The basics of architecture and cinema are the same: composition, perspective, texture, shadow and light.

Your film has a symmetrical structure that works on oppositional binaries: a happily married career woman of average talents versus a socio-economically victimized pretty and intelligent woman; modernity versus tradition; victim versus perpetrator; female vulnerability versus male violence. Could it also be that the two women are the two sides of the same woman?

The film is about two women. One is not very intelligent but in a better social position; the other is intelligent but poor. This is their situation in society. The other meaning inherent in the title is the two faces of one woman. Do you remember Fereshte? What she thinks and what the society wants her to think are very different but her environment does not allow her to go the direction she wants to go. The other woman chooses her direction. If Fereshte had the same environment as the other woman, things would have been different.

Even in her restricted environment, Fereshte is a rebellious character. She does not win but she still carries the fight. Is it realistic for a young woman in her situation to air opposing views and argue passionately with the male authority figures – her father at home and the judge at court?

Some people do it, but it is very difficult.

I remember when I was growing up in Turkey we could not talk back to our father, certainly not in that manner. Our mothers would say, ‘You are a girl, you shut up’!

Yes, exactly. Shut up! I was lucky because my father is a doctor. We had many problems but my friends always thought that my situation was great although it did not look so great to me. Other women had it much worse. There is a range. We have general education but, like in Turkey or even like in America, there is a range.
I watched a documentary called *Divorce Iranian Style* and I was amazed to see women arguing vehemently with a male judge regarding their rights to divorce and custody. Considering what we in the West think about women’s rights in Iran, such filmic episodes, if they reflect real life, are revelations.

These women believe that they will change their destiny. **At least they are given the chance to speak.**

I think we have strong women in Iran. When you look at the results of the entrance examinations for university, fifty-two per cent of winners are women. But after graduation, the husband says, ‘I don’t need your money’ and that is it. This is the sad reality.

You have effectively shown how socio-economic circumstances deter women’s attempts at independence. Are there many women fighting for their rights or do most of them choose the comforts of domestic life and conform to the norm?

We do not have organizations but all women fight.

I am always shocked to hear the fundamentalist women in Turkey claiming they choose such a lifestyle. Young girls fight to be able to attend the university wearing the Islamic dress mode.

I believe what is important is the mind and not the sex of the person. Some women think like men. They think like male chauvinists. It makes no difference that they are women.

The man who was bothering Fereshte was a painfully familiar face for me. I have memories of several similar experiences from my childhood and youth in Turkey. These desperate characters would chase you no matter what and then your parents would punish you even if you have done nothing wrong. It is always the story of the tarnished honour of the family, the opinion of the neighbours and the fear of rumours. No one ever pays attention to the feelings of a young girl who lives in constant fear in a world where she is terrorized daily, both inside the home and outside. To put such an antagonistic character that is not able to control his chaotic feelings of love and hate at the centre of your film, you must have had other ideas.

I had and I have. I think I bothered some men in Iran and some of them hate me. They feel insulted. It is their problem.

Yes. The film won at the box office even without advertisement – from mouth to mouth. I believe ninety nine per cent of the women love me, really love me!

Do you use the character of the stalker to represent a certain type of a person in society? Certain young men bother young girls persistently claiming a kind of ownership by the sheer fact that they belong to the ‘superior’ sex. This is a fact, but I believe you use him to represent something symbolical.

All characters in my film are typical as characters. They represent the general atmosphere of the country.
What does he specifically represent?

Bad education. Such characters believe what they do. They are trained to be like this. Their actions stand as a symbol of living in an atmosphere that makes them behave in that manner. They are victims themselves. Victor and victim are the same. These people do not have the chance to form relationships with others.

Do you think that sexual restrictions, not being able to date openly, etc., also have something to do with this kind of behaviour?

Sexual aspect is not considered because there are more basic problems such as the problem of identity. Each person has his/her own identity, which should be respected. In this society, people do not respect each other. This is shown in the film. It is not a matter of sexual relations, but rather pure and humanistic relations between human beings, male or female. We see in the film that if people do not have friendly relations in their life, they do not have sexual relations either. Husband and wife, for instance, if no true relationship exists between them, there will not be a good sexual relationship either. Fereshte bears children when she is not ready. It is imposed on her without her being prepared. In some cases, it is worse; women have abortions or give up the children. Fereshte feels socially responsible for her children despite the reality that they were imposed on her.

Are there many abortions in Iran?

It is not popular and it is not allowed by law.

I suppose like in Turkey, it is the only birth control for many women.

We do not have sex education, which is very bad for women. Many of them do not know when they are pregnant. It is bad to start a situation you do not want.

Why did you place the film in the 1980s after the revolution?

The situation of the universities being closed for three and a half years fitted the story of someone getting married and having children and not being allowed to continue her education afterwards.

The story takes place almost twenty years ago. Are you saying that socially very little has changed for women?

During the last two years, it is better since President Khatami, but not enough. We want more.

What about cinema? Iranian films have been very successful around the world. There is practically no festival that does not show one or two Iranian films. I have read that in ten years, 2500 festivals have shown Iranian films and more than 250 awards were received. However, censorship problems are still a big menace to the creativity of the film-makers. What direction is Iranian cinema going for you?

I think it is much better. I was not allowed to make this film for eight years. After Mr Khatami, they gave me the Best Script prize. I cannot believe it!

Still, many Iranian film-makers do not feel free to express their ideas. For instance, Jafar Panahi, Majid Majidi, Abolfazl Jalili, Parviz Shahbazi and Abbas Kiarostami often use children to practice indirect, allegorical storytelling. Women and their concerns hardly appear in their distinguished works. Furthermore, most of their stories take place in rural settings. Women like you are the ones who are taking up adult issues in modern urban settings and particularly issues of women.

Like Rakhshan (Bani-Etemad). I think we need different kind of films.

The sex of the film-maker is not so important to speak about a social problem. What is important is what the person is trying to express. Mehrjui is not expressing the problems of women. He is a man who makes films about women; he is not the voice of women. He makes films about women, which is OK. We have others such as Ali Shakhan, who has made a beautiful film about village women.

In my opinion, Mehrjui’s women are larger than life.

Just the same, they are not strong. I believe women are stronger in Iran. Except Sara, his heroines are all passive reactionaries.

Leila is a good example of a ‘passive reactionary’. She looks for a wife for her husband so that he can have a child. I read in an Iranian journal that motherhood is a very popular virtue in Iran; motherhood means to be socially accepted.

Don’t believe it! Women accept these situations, but it is not human. That film shows that the husband has the right to take a second wife but, according to me, he has no right.

But such things exist!

It is not believable in her situation.

Your leading actress, Niki Karimi, is very talented. How did she prepare for her role in *Two Women*?

To make her understand the character, I had to form a close relationship with her for three months, going to exhibitions, etc. Little by little, it helped her. In some cases, I played to show her what I wanted.

Which Iranian directors do you like?

I like some films of some of them.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf?

I like two of his films, *The Cyclist* and *The Pedlar*.

What about the world cinema in general?

Sydney Pollack, Liliana Cavani but my favourite films are *High Noon, Julia* and the Russian *Hamlet*.

Asian films? Women directors?

We love a thousand movies! I really love Kurosawa. I believe he is different and has a good point of view.

Are you preparing another film?

About a woman trying to express her deep feelings to her partner.

Montreal, September 1999
Notes
1. On 23 May 1997, Mohammad Khatami had a landslide victory in the presidential elections. He was the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in the 1980s.

Bio/Filmography
Born in Tabriz in 1960, Tahmineh (Bita) Milani began her film career in 1979 at the Free Film Workshop as a researcher for screenplays and worked as script girl and assistant director. In 1986, she graduated in architecture from the Science and Technology University in Tehran. Her first feature film, Bachehha-ye Talaq/S Children of Divorce, was the co-winner of the Best First Film award at the 8th Fajr Film Festival in 1990. Milani’s international breakthrough came with Afsaneh-ye Ah/The Legend of Sigh and Do Zan/TwoWomen as a director and screenwriter. In 2001, she was imprisoned for defaming the Islamist revolution with her film Neemeh-ye Penhan/The Hidden Half and was released on bail following pressure from international artistic community and the president, Mohammad Khatami. While pending judgment on her trial, she co-produced with her husband, Mohammad Nikbin, Dariush Mehrjui’s Bemani/Stay Alive (2002).

Feature films
1989  Bachehha-ye Talaq/Children of Divorce
1990  Afsaneh-ye Ah/The Legend of Sigh
1991  Digeh Cheh Khabar?/What Else is New?
1994  Kakadu
1998  Do Zan/TwoWomen
2001  Neemeh-ye Penhan/The Hidden Half
2003  The Fifth Reaction
2005  Zane Ziyadi/Unwanted Woman,

JAFAR PANAHİ

Jafar Panahi explored the limitations of traditional societies through the eyes of children in his two award-winning films, Badkonak-e sefid/The White Balloon (1995) and Ayneh/The Mirror (1997). With his third feature, Dayereh/The Circle, he challenged the social system in a more political and direct style exposing what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society. The film begins at a maternity
The controversial subject matter of the film, including exposure of prostitution and police corruption resulted in many difficulties for Panahi. He had to wait for one year to obtain a shooting permit. The final product was withdrawn from the Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran by the authorities on grounds that the film was ‘offensive to Iranian Muslim women’.

Panahi’s next film, *Talay-e Sorgh/Crimson Gold*, written by Abbas Kiarostami is also banned in Iran. A crime story that juxtaposes the lives of people who are in opposite poles economically, the film uses the vertical images of high-rises viewed from the horizontal perspective of Hussein, the pizza delivery man on a motorcycle, to display a different kind of vicious circle, which leads an ordinary man to crime and suicide. Hussein feels comfortable in a rich environment. Unlike *Children of Paradise* of Majidi, we do not have to imagine how the rich live behind their high walls, but see it concretely when a lonely man invites Hussein inside to keep him company. The arrests of the partygoers give the film a political twist although Panahi claims that he is not a political film-maker. Once more, the city of Tehran is an important character.


A PLACE ON THEIR OWN

*The Circle* begins in a hospital and ends in a prison. These two places look very similar.

The first refers to coming to the world from a dark place and the second, going to a dark place.

In the hospital, there is a small window to look inside, and in prison, another small window to look outside.

This is the form, the circle.

The circle you draw is a vicious one. The women are in constant state of panic, hiding behind cars, in dark alleys and under their chadoors as if trying to be invisible.

Absolutely. These women can enlarge the circle but not go out of it. You have noticed that each woman is named after a flower: Nargess, Meryem… The one who gives birth to a girl in the opening scenes is Solmaz – meaning always fresh, never fades away. She is the one who screams, the one who is never destroyed. She is the one we do not see. At the end of the film, we understand that she also escaped from prison. In the last scene, the guards ask if she is there. She is not. She escaped and did not return. The film begins with Solmaz and ends with her completing the circle. Different women you see in the film can also be rolled into one woman. What happens to each one of them can happen to any woman.

In addition to the small window, the first and the last scene are also connected with frozen colours and certain immobile objects. Can you elaborate on this?

I tried to adapt the form to the content. The film starts with a scene that is all dark, which is the birth. Right after this scene, I have the light scene when life starts. This is the beginning. It gradually gets dark and light disappears completely. I always wanted to have the colour to correspond to life
so that the artistic content espouses the content and themes of the film. The camera work is also synchronized to match each of the characters. When filming the eighteen-year-old girl, it follows her moves closely in a hand-held style. When it is diverted to older women, it loses momentum. In the last scene on the bus, the camera is fixed.

**Following the hospital scene, the camera traces the older woman as she comes out and then moves to the three young women as if it is distracted for a moment and this is the first time we see those three.**

I wanted to raise a question right in the beginning as to why there must be so much sadness when a girl is born. In the remaining 86 minutes of the film, I talk about other restrictions these girls will face. Originally, I intended to begin the film with the guards naming the three girls coming out of prison. However, fifteen days before shooting the film, I had doubts about that scene. Then I remembered an incident: When I was a student, the day I was presenting my theses, my wife gave birth. I ran to the hospital and found out she had a daughter. The first woman I saw was my mother. She said, ‘Jafar, don’t worry, it is not a shame, but you have a daughter’. I said, ‘Why should I be disappointed’? Even my mother wanted me to have a son despite the fact that I already had a son. The moment of birth is the moment that establishes the difficulties of a woman’s life; it symbolizes it. That is why I decided to begin with that moment instead of the guards naming the girls going out of prison.

**How do you respond to comments by some Iranians that your film does not draw a real picture of Iran, or that the difficulties encountered by the women in your film apply to only a certain class of women?**

The film is shot in the southern part of Tehran, which is poorer. However, whether you are more or less privileged, the laws are the same. Any woman from any class, if she is under eighteen, cannot travel alone or check into a hotel by herself. The laws apply to all although some may escape it. Perhaps I focused on the more underprivileged, but this was what interested me.

**In several other countries – such as Turkey – a young girl cannot check into a hotel by herself.**

There is no law against it. It is true that limitations exist everywhere. We all live within a circle of constraints, whether it is smaller or larger depends on the situation or the time. One can give some examples from Europe where women cannot wear a veil. There were demonstrations in France on this issue. I focus on restrictions in Iran, but I consider that these vicious circles are everywhere.
Women in Iran seem to be changing the rules in the last few years. We have seen *Dokhtari Ba Kafsh-Haye-Katani/The Girl in Sneakers* (1999) by Rassul Sadr-Ameli, about an adolescent girl who runs away from home when she is reprimanded for speaking to her boyfriend in the park. According to an article published in the *New York Times*, many Iranian girls run away from their repressive homes.

I do not know to what extent the fact that these girls run away or the fact that I make this film can change society. They may question the attitude, but to change laws is much more difficult. Only history, time, social reforms that may or may not come will prove whether there has been an impact. A small article I noticed in a newspaper one day said that a woman committed suicide after killing her two young daughters. No reasons were stated for her desperate act. Perhaps the newspaper did not see the need since women are the most deprived in many communities. Their freedom is so limited as if they are in a big prison. This is not only true for one particular class. Each woman could replace another one in a circle. One can go further and say that Iranian artists as well need to free themselves from the circle. I hope that I have succeeded doing this to a certain extent by showing taboo subjects such as prostitution and women in prison.

Recently, we see more films about women’s issues coming out of Iran. In addition to *The Girl in Sneakers* and your film *The Circle*, one can also mention *Two Women* by Tahmineh Milani, about an intelligent young woman who has no control over her life; *Dakhtaran-e Khorshid/Daughters of the Sun* (2000) by Mariam Shahriar about a girl who shaves her head to get a job in a weaving workshop in rural Iran and is subject to the attention of another girl and *Rouzi Ke Zan Shoudam/The Day I Became a Woman* (2000) by Marzieh Meshkini, which shows a young wife facing divorce for participating in a bicycle race. The last three are by women directors.

Each year between sixty to seventy films are produced in Iran. Among these, there are films about women’s issues. Commercial films lack artistic merit and therefore they do not draw as much attention. They treat a social problem, as it has always been treated – before and after the revolution, but in terms of aesthetics and artistic approach, they are different. The discrimination comes from the quality of the films rather than the subject matter.

*Just the same, films on women’s issues and, particularly, by women directors, seem to be on the rise.*

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Tahmineh Milani are from a generation – the older generation – that has always concerned itself with women’s issues. They haven’t really changed; they just make better films and we see more of them. The new generation is new and has a better exposure. I do not think the theme was not tackled. For instance, Bahram Beyza’i has been making films about women for the last thirty years. Most of the thematic films of Dariush Mehrjui are about women. In my first films, I worked with children and young people but I began to think of the limitations facing these girls once they grow up. In order to visualize these limitations and to have this constraint better projected visually, I went to a social class, which has more limitations and to areas that are more underprivileged, so that this idea could come out even stronger. It is very difficult to generalize. Someone like Kiarostami never did a film about women, and he still does not intend to do so. I do not think that there is a big trend about women’s issues; it just has happened that established women directors are more established now and the young ones have arrived who tackle issues closer to them.
You mean it does not have something to do with the election of moderate Mohammad Khatami as president and the relaxation of the laws.

It could be, but this is one of the many reasons. Evidently, under a more open regime, artists who have thought they could not tackle certain subjects, dare a bit more. The fact that they think they have more freedom encourages them, but this is one reason among many.

Can we find a thread running through The White Balloon, The Mirror and The Circle?

My first film, The White Balloon, was an exercise for me. I completed my studies, acquired some expertise and wanted to put it all in practice – to apply what I learned and learn from it – one step towards better learning. I consider The Mirror, my second film, an experiment. The idea for The Mirror came to me when I was attending the Pusan International Film Festival in 1996 in South Korea. I noticed a woman sitting in a park holding a bag tightly in her arms and staring at empty space. Her memory stayed with me and made me realize that I had seen the same image countless times in Iran, but never paid much attention to it. I chose a free-spirited precocious child and placed her in a situation where she is left to her own devices. Everyone she meets on her journey is wearing a mask or playing a role. I wanted to throw away these masks.

With The Mirror, I tried to break my style and move into a different style, which was the preliminary work for The Circle. Finally, The Circle is more representative of what I have wanted to do in form and style. In all my films, I am concerned with social issues. In my first film, I lowered my level to a child’s level and through the eyes of a child, explored how a child would perceive constraints and cope with them. The characters have grown up; their difficulties are now more sophisticated. Their vision and experiences require a more acute and precise perspective. What are the real issues? It all starts with an innocent, sweet and soft look at life but, with time, bitterness settles in. As I gradually became interested in social problems that were more acute, I wanted to get away from a child’s view – from the primary concerns – to issues that were more complex. Therefore, the characters grow older with each film.

In both, The White Balloon and The Mirror, the plot is constructed around a frantic quest from a little girl’s perspective. In some ways, Razieh of The White Balloon is a pre-cursor of Mina of The Mirror. Both are level-headed with a mind of their own. Just as little Mina is capable of rejecting what the adults have planned for her, little Razieh also has the courage to disobey the warnings of the grown-ups as in the episode with the snake charmers.

That is one of my favourite sequences. This is the first time Razieh does not obey the warnings of the grown-ups, which she has heard repeatedly: ‘It is not good for little girls to watch the snake charmers’. As soon as she is on her own, she is drawn to the forbidden attraction. She wants to find out what is not good for her to watch.

I must admit I never understood why your first film was called The White Balloon when it was about a red fish! The only white balloon we see is attached to the stick of a street vendor. And he is a minor character who appears only at the end.

I choose my titles not symbolically but in reference to the other. I wanted people to think why I chose this title. Very early on in the film, I give a blue balloon to the child. The film starts with a blue balloon but after it is about a girl who is concerned about her fish and many people think there must be a mistake in the way the title is translated. My concern was not so much with the linear story of the girl to buy her fish but with all her encounters with different people during the film. In
reality, when I say 'the white balloon', somebody, an unknown man, is my main subject – the one you see only a second, the anonymous person on the street.

**An Afghan refugee!**

He is carrying the white balloon the way a white peace flag is carried. He also wants to have a place of his own in the world. In that film alone, I have people from ten different regions. It does not matter whether they are from Azerbaijan or Afghanistan. My vision about them is human. Also, I want to show the diversity of the human race. How diverse the human race can be but still be one human being.

**The fascination with the streets of Tehran is in all of your films.**

My knowledge of the city comes from forty years of experiencing it. I observe all details. Everything from a raindrop to a ray of sunshine is very close to me. I try to capture what I know and live on a daily basis.

**What about the fascination for cinema?**

This is a long story. My father, who was a house painter, loved cinema, but he would not let me go to the movies. Sometimes when I visited him at the construction site, he would ask me to watch the workers because he had something to do. I knew that he would be going to the movies. With the money I managed to extract from him, I would sneak into the movie house to find out what it was that I was not allowed to see. The pre-revolution films did not really have much to offer to youngsters of my age. One day, when the lights came on for a break, I saw my father sitting two rows in front of me. The beating I received that day was a kind of a blessing. After that incident, I tried to avoid the films he was frequenting and discovered a different kind of cinema. The films of those years were *salon films* – love stories between a rich girl and a poor boy or a rich boy and a poor girl – or song and dance films, whereas *Kanun* (Institute for the Development of Children and Young Adults) was showing different kind of films. There, I was introduced to films that reflected the daily lives of ordinary people. *Bicycle Thieves* of Vittorio De Sica impressed me the most. I said to myself, ‘Here is a film that does not lie to me’. I thought I could relate to a film that was not telling me lies. I still think that *Bicycle Thieves* is one of the most beautiful films I have seen. Those days, no one wanted to pay to see such films. That is why they were only shown in children’s organizations, which gave the opportunity to a twelve-year-old kid like me to be introduced to world cinema. After that, I played in some films and tried my hand in making short films.

**In the future, will you make a film about the ‘closed circle’ of old age, as you get older yourself?**

I don’t know what will be the next human subject that will attract me, but I have no objection to what seduces me. Perhaps I should also grow up, learn more languages, have more words around me and travel more. Then other subjects would appear. It is nice to go to different places and meet new people. Watching old people telling their stories in a city park, like the famous one in Tehran, can offer an interesting subject as well. Whenever there is human emotion that can be universal, I am interested.

*Rotterdam, January 2001*
Bio/Filmography
Jafar Panahi was born in 1960 in Mianeh in Iran. As a child, he regularly attended Kanun, the Institute for the Intellectual development of Children and Young Adults, where he discovered Abbas Kiarostami’s films. Having graduated from the College of Cinema and TV, he contributed short- and medium-length documentaries to Iranian television. In 1992, he directed a fiction short, Doust/Friend, which was a tribute to Abbas Kiarostami’s first short film, Nan va Kucheh/The Bread and the Alley, 1970. He worked as assistant director to Kambozia Partovi (The Fish, 1990) and Abbas Kiarostami (Zir-e Derakhtan-e Zeytun/Through the Olive Trees, 1994) and Kiarostami wrote the script for Badkonak-e sefid/The White Balloon (1995), Panahi’s first feature, which won the Camera d’or at Cannes Film Festival and Talay-e Sorgh/Crimson Gold (2003), the winner of Un Certain Regard Jury Award of the same festival.

Feature films
1995  Badkonak-e sefid/The White Balloon
1997  Ayneh/The Mirror
2000  Dayereh/The Circle
2003  Talay-e Sorgh/Crimson Gold
2006  Offside
Turkey

ERDEN KIRAL

Erdem Kural belongs to the middle generation filmmakers who started their careers in a political climate of turbulence. Kanal/The Channel (1978) and Bereketli Topraklar Üzerinde/On Fertile Lands (1980) carry the influences of Yılmaz Güney, but Kural’s best films are made in the 1980s, among which, Hakkari Bir Mevsim/A Season in Hakkari (1983), about an urban writer exiled to a remote Anatolian village who has to overcome culture shock and discover his real self while discovering others, is considered his chef-d’œuvre.

Mavi Sürgün/The Blue Exile (1993) is based on the autobiography of a Turkish intellectual who was condemned to three years of exile for writing a story about deserters in World War I who were executed without a trial. The leitmotiv of ‘exile’ is not a stranger to Erdem Kural who left Turkey in the 1980s when two of his films were banned. Kural worked in Germany for many years, but succeeded to use foreign capital to make what he calls ‘Turkish films’ such as Ayna/The Mirror (1984), Dilan (1987) and The Blue Exile (1993), which marks his return to motherland.

The first interview took place in Montreal on 5 September 1993 during the Montreal World Film Festival. The interview on Avcı/The Hunter happened in his flat overlooking the Bosphorus in August 1997. In addition to numerous faxes and phone calls, we met regularly over the years in a popular artists’ café at the centre of Taksim Square in Istanbul each time I visited Turkey and had long discussions on future scripts, Turkish film industry, the future of cinema or the humankind as we sipped our çay while Erdem Bey chain-smoked. In 2005, during the Istanbul International Film Festival where Erdem Kural’s recent film, Yolda/On the Way, competed, we met again. Based on his personal experiences with legendary Yılmaz Güney, On the Way continues the theme of exile and explores diverse aspects of freedom and imprisonment, physical as well as spiritual and metaphorical.

EXILE’S RETURN

‘To stay like an ordinary person…Not to complain…to be someone from this world…’ That is all the Fisherman of Halicarnassus wanted from his life. However, destiny had planned it otherwise. When journalist and intellectual Cevat Şakir (1890–1973) returned home from studying at Oxford for many years, he was faced with the social and political turmoil of post-liberation Turkey. In these turbulent times, he published a story about the deserters of World War I who were shot without a trial and he was sent in exile to Halicarnassus (today’s Bodrum) for three years. You have already dealt with the theme of exile in your earlier works such as A Season in Hakkari (1983). What draws you to this subject and especially to exile that leads to coming to terms with oneself?

If you think of a film-maker who has to emigrate to another country as a ‘voluntary exile’ because he can no longer make films in his country, I think you can understand my pre-occupation with this theme. The act of exile not only leads to a settling of accounts with oneself but also with one’s society. This is unavoidable because the exile learns to look at himself and his society with a distance.
The main theme of *The Blue Exile* is the life of an exile rather than the reasons for his exile. And a coming to terms with the childhood and early adulthood of the protagonist, Cevat Şakir, during his long journey, on the one hand is the actual journey from Istanbul, through Ankara to Bodrum with the reality of time and space and on the other hand, an interior journey towards his own self. When he arrives in Bodrum, he calms down. He gives himself to nature; he turns his face to earth, trees, birds and animals. He marries a local girl – he chooses someone from nature. He changes his name. He becomes the Fisherman of Halicarnassus. He struggles to erase his past and to cleanse his soul. The episode when he throws buckets of water on the walls of his house is a manifestation of this purge.

I think this was the turning point.

A catharsis. He is a deep and sensitive person – a Dostoyevsky type. To change one’s name and to refuse to return to big cities is very significant. The Fisherman of Halicarnassus is the authentic Turkish intellectual who can become one with people. I did not want to dwell on his ecological accomplishments and how he founded today’s Bodrum. These are already known. I wanted to show his lesser-known side and the truth about the incident with his father. This aspect may be difficult to accept by his admirers. My aim was to show the reality of Cemal Şakir, of a Turkish person – especially an intellectual – and of Turkey.

The film begins with a tableau of a whirling dervish – a circle and this motif is repeated throughout.

Everything revolves as in real life. The wheel turns and the man turns around his life story. I saw the film as a spiral, which became a symbol and affected the form. The significance of the dervish becomes clearer later when the protagonist says, ‘I meditated on a nail on wood for days. I wanted to fill the darkness in me with light, but could not succeed’. The abstract opening image becomes concrete.

During the very long train journey to his destination, the past of the protagonist haunts him; memories of his affectionate and protective mother, his distant and cruel father, his Italian wife and the burden of his father’s murder. The landscape that the window pane frames slowly changes from desert brown to warm green as the protagonist tries to come to terms with himself. How did you work with the numerous flashbacks and associations in terms of editing? As stylistic as they are, in few instances, narration is somewhat obscured, although you maintain the flow by returning to the central motif – the circle (of life, of the universe), symbolized by the whirling dervish of the opening scene.
I believe flashbacks are a weakness in the art of cinema but in this film, they were unavoidable. I wanted to give the voyage to the past within the framework of the voyage to the present. There are recollections, dreams, associations... I tried to place these within the space of the train not to confuse the viewer. I could not start from his childhood and build up to 1925 in a chronological order. It would be very boring. I do not think it is unusual for a man to think of his past while travelling on a train. The difficult part was to blend actual images with the images of his interior world. The editing took three months.

Liberation Courts that were formed during the first years of the Turkish Republic (1923) and their repressive practices had been a taboo until recently.

There was a film called Kurt Kanunu/The Law of the Wolf by Ersin Korkmaz based on a Kemal Tahir story.

Kelebekler Sonsuza Dek Uçar/Butterflies Fly to Eternity made by Mesut Uçakan, one of the advocates of Islamist cinema and released the same year as The Blue Exile, provokes the official history by presenting an anti-Kemalist point of view. The Blue Exile’s point of departure is also an actual event that took place during that period, but the film does not attempt to open a dialogue about the Liberation Courts.

Liberation Courts, if necessary, should be questioned by all sorts of factions. This is essential to create a society where dialogue is possible. Exile or prison as punishment for thinkers goes back to the Ottoman Empire. During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid, many of our intellectuals were confined to the fort in Bodrum. One of the most important writers of Turkey, Namık Kemal, spent time in the Magosa prison. The period after the founding of the Turkish Republic was a difficult period with Kurdish rebellions, fundamentalist uprisings in Konya and an attempt on the life of Kemal Atatürk. Ankara became very tenacious; Liberation Courts had absolute authority. We have read about many cases of people tried and condemned without a defence lawyer. I tried to create the oppressive aspect of that period without brandishing the flag. In 1925, Cevat Şakir writes a story about World War I, How Do Those Condemned to Death, Facing Their Fate, Walk to the Gallows? And he is sentenced to three years of exile. I think for an intellectual to be forced to take a six-month journey with two gendarmes to a place no one has heard before is very strong. Remember the degrading episode when the warden orders him to undress. During this journey, he meets Marie, etc. but, ‘do not forget, viewer, this is an exile’ was what I wanted to emphasize without approaching the issue directly. I was more interested in why a person would kill his father and submit himself to such agonising remorse. I also wanted to show how he could convert his punishment to reward by making a life for himself in Bodrum.

A Season in Hakkari was also about exile and a settling of accounts with oneself.

Yes, but that film is more about the culture shock of an intellectual. There, the writer finds himself in his search for the others, or in his search for himself, he finds the others and understands that his salvation is possible only through their salvation. He learns to look at himself as if in a mirror. The ‘exile’ is a vehicle. A Season is more symbolic and metaphoric.

In A Season in Hakkari, a large part of the dialogue happens with the eyes. The language of an intellectual is very rich, but he learns to understand simple people by observing them and to speak with the gaze.

I like the idea of speaking with the gaze. If you can deduce this from that film, it is a wonderful feeling for me.
The protagonist and the villagers are from different worlds, but they understand each other by close observation. Your picture of primitive rural life is very precise.

The story of that film somewhat closes in on itself. It is quite different than The Blue Exile. In The Blue Exile, I foreground the flow and give importance to editing. For this reason, the voyage has more weight. The two films may have common elements naturally, made by the same hand, but I think I have achieved cinematographic poetry the most with The Blue Exile. I deal with poetry in cinema, which means refusing to be commercial. I am curious about writing poetry with the language of cinema. I think I came close to it in Ayna/The Mirror (1984), which had a metaphysical story in the style of Latin American magic realism – the dead comes back to life and the woman believes she is in love with the dead. The hidden message is under extreme feudal oppression, one can only love the dead. Dilan (1987) was a film on waiting. The West waits for Godot; Dilan waits for her lover who never comes. The world of a waiting person is static. I tried to reflect this in the film and capture the poetry of the woman and the violence.

I am interested in cinematographic poetry. I tried to build a poetic world in The Blue Exile. A poetic visual journey to inner self is a slow, arduous process. At any other speed, I would not be telling the same story. Unfortunately, the film has the potential to be easily condemned for its virtue, its languid pace. In our time, viewers are more attracted to dinosaurs and calamities. I also tried to use a minimalist, economical and unobtrusive mis-en-scene. I am on the side of simplicity in cinema and in art in general, but you have to travel a long road to reach that point. I am interested in and closer to the issues of the mature person, an intellectual. The intellectuals are abused and alienated; they are forced to conform to the system or live in the margins. In Turkey, we are going through a period when all values are upside down. The most important value is money. This is why I chose the story of an intellectual.

Let us talk about the actors. The main roles are divided among talents outside Turkey.

For the main lead, I looked for a good actor who could carry this heavy burden. I saw Can Togay in Werner Schroder’s Malina. He was excellent despite the fact that Isabelle Huppert, who was the lead, was doing a one-man show. Togay is a Hungarian director and actor with Turkish roots. With his Slavic features, he was not an ideal representation of Cevat Şakir, but I think he excelled in the role of a sensitive man caught in the web of his memories. Özay Fecht previously played in Tevfik Baser’s 40 m2 of Germany and received the West German National Film Award. In Turkey, a big potential for actors exists. Recently, several theatre actors have entered cinema, which is good and bad. To direct a theatre actor in front of the camera requires special attention. Theatre actors are trained to have their voices heard by the last row; the tone of the voice is stronger; the gestures are bigger. Therefore, they may not be aware of the possibilities of the camera. I began my career with two very good theatre actors, Erkan Yücel (who passed away) and Genco Erkal, and got excellent results after working very carefully. Genco continues to work in cinema.

Hanna Schygulla?

When you are involved in a co-production, the country that participates expects you to use a player who is well known. The role of Marie that Hanna plays depicts a woman from theatre, who is at ease with herself – an experienced woman of the world. Marie is Levanter – a non-Muslim. Hanna is theatrical and abstract even in her own life. She fit this role easily. In 1987, I had a project to make a film with Hanna called Storm in Venice; Menahem Golan was going to be the producer. But I was not happy with the script that was written without my consent, so I cancelled the contract. Hanna
and I always wanted to work together and this was an opportunity. She worked with enthusiasm even though it was a small role.

The film industry has been going through a crisis: there are festival films for the critics and American films for the public. What type of viewer do you envision for your films?

This is a difficult question. We are in a dilemma: the fast consumed, easily forgotten American productions on the one hand and the festival films on the other. We use the festivals to enter the cinema halls to reach the viewer. If a film wins an award at a festival, it catches the attention of the viewer although it can never compete with the worst American film.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of co-productions with foreign countries? Cevat Şakir once said, ‘The East has the eternal truth…but the West had swallowed the East because of its technological advantage’.

To make films outside Turkey is much more difficult than making films within Turkey. The problems are different. In Germany, where I have been working, films are made by funds from semi-governmental organizations; therefore, cultural policies of the government and the leading political parties may affect the decisions. Bureaucracy is amazing. From the time the funds are raised to the actual appearance of the sum in your account, it may take two or three years. Such things kill creativity. The positive side is that you can take advantage of all technical facilities and material without reserve. I try to tell our stories with the foreign capital that I bring to Turkey. I use Turkey like a plateau. Post-production is done abroad, therefore, the technical quality of my films has improved and I think this is evident in The Blue Exile. Another issue is that Europe is living a dichotomy: the producers want to invest in films that deal with the issues of their societies and to see their ‘image’ on the screen, whereas, the viewer is enchanted by the exotic-eroticism, or perhaps just the exoticism of the East. I have tried to make films using this dichotomy to advantage.

What about working outside your country? Tevfik Başer, who made his fame with 40 m2 of Germany, has found it difficult to be funded in Germany for films that do not deal with similar issues – Turkish guest-worker community and their problems of integration.

I went to Germany in 1983 when I could no longer make films in Turkey. On Fertile Lands (1980) and A Season in Hakkari (1983) were banned for five years. When I started making films in Turkey, the infrastructure did not exist; the studios were insufficient; editing was primitive and funds were very limited. Even in these poor conditions, I made my first films independent of Yeşilçam (Turkish commercial cinema). I raised the funds for my first film and for the second one, artist or writer friends helped. Since I did not ask for investment from Yeşilçam, I did not have to use their stars or their formula stories. I shot the stories I chose with the actors I chose, which made it easier for me. But there was censorship. Our films could not reach the audience, which is the most important factor for my settling in Germany. When A Season in Hakkari found a large audience in Europe, German producers wanted to collaborate with me. The Mirror was a German co-production and Dilan was a co-production between Switzerland and the German TV. Rightly or wrongly, I chose to enter the film world with small budget films. In Europe, this can quickly become a tradition. Because of small budget films, I was able to make sincere films. The Blue Exile had a very large budget but, in the future, I plan to go back to small budget films with relatively unknown players. Big budgets and mega-stars mean compromises to the producers. The final product is often quite different than the one the film-maker started with.
I want each of my films – no matter how laden with symbols – to be understood by the viewer. I want to continue working without losing my confidence in the viewer. Even a small audience who understands my films is enough. Evidently, I do not want to be a film-maker whose films are only shown in cinématheques. I have an audience potential in Europe, which has been built since A Season in Hakkari. I do not expect The Blue Exile to compete with American blockbusters, but if it is shown in the cinemas and the television and if it receives good reviews, I think it accomplishes its aim.

Montreal, September 1993

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A mountain (A Season in Hakkari), a mirror (The Mirror), a legendary heroine (Dilan) and a very long journey (The Blue Exile). Your new film, Avcı/The Hunter seems to have an element from most of your previous films.

The story belongs to the grandfather of Osman Şahin, the screenwriter, but over the years, it has been transformed. When we listen to different people today, we see that they create different versions. This is what attracted me to make the film. The main theme is that truth has several faces and it changes with different people. If you look at the Susurluk scandal that we have experienced in Turkey recently, those who died in the accident are heroes for some and accused murderers for the others. The film alludes to these realities. The major one is lies. Everyone lies in the film; when the soundtrack says something, the visual says another. The eyes interpret the feelings. I chose players who could act with their eyes. In this film, the gaze is more important than the body language. But the gaze should not be very long, or the magic would be lost, or too short, the viewer may not understand. Then there is the idea of fidelity. This idea, fidelity to a woman, to an ideal, is questioned. The film tries to go deep into the roots of violence. Why violence dominates? Violence is not inside us but inside the others, is the idea. Violence is a learning model. Violence breeds violence. The most important issue is suppressed sexuality – which I think is eroticism – and where it would lead at the extreme. I tried to go to the extremes of human feelings and thoughts. A husband and wife meet a hunter in the forest and the events spread like a forest fire. I used a non-linear narrative. The characters gradually recognize their feelings and their bodies, and face their realities, but this may only happen at the end of their lives. Still it is a gain, I think. The Osman Bey character, the husband is very selfish; he does not show his feelings. He has megalomania and paranoia at the same time. He thinks he is very important and imagines conspiracy behind his back. When he catches the hunter and his wife exchanging glances, he begins to watch her. Zala, his wife, did not make a love marriage. She was sold to this man at an early age. She loves him because he is her husband. But the hunter evokes the eroticism in her and, perhaps, for the first time, she finds satisfaction.

In the second episode, the hunter rapes Zala threatening to kill her if she resists. When he cannot have an erection, he uses violence. The woman complies to save her life and becomes part of the event. This is extreme but just like some women fantasizing about being raped. After this event, she leaves the two men to their fate – to death. The hunter has a falcon with whom he has become one. I asked the actor, Fikret Kuşkan, to act like the bird, to imitate its sudden, nervous jerks. In the first episode, the hunter falls in love with the woman and desires her, which is something beyond sex. In the second episode, he wants to possess her. Same characters act differently in each episode.

I was very influenced by what Jacques Derida once said and it determined what I wanted to do in this film. ‘Each moment of decision, the decision itself, the action and the responsibility assumed carry conflicts that cannot be resolved by logic.’ The characters of the film carry the same conflicts.
The impotence of the man leads him to violence.

The way a man can resort to violence in such a situation is projected as it happens in real life. There is also the implication that sex is pain. The woman liaises to save her life and at the end, one can say that they make love. There are no borders to human relations in the film. There is no passage from one event to the other. A bit like in real life.

**Personal terror could also be interpreted as a metaphor for political or social terror.**

I am interested in the idea of terror, which includes political terror. I did not intend to shoot metaphorical scenes but if the critics find metaphors, I would be happy. I built a simple world and tried to show where people can reach if they act with their feelings and urges. I told Jale Arıkan, ‘I am Zala’ because I felt her psychological condition, the waves rising in her and I built the narrative not from the point of view of someone who loves but someone who is loved. This is Zala, the hero. Just like in all of my films, the woman is the central character.

**Loved or desired?**

Loved and desired. In the first episode, there is only love, but in the second, degeneration. A man cannot have an erection and resorts to violence. He knocks out the husband, puts him in a well and threatens the wife with a knife. On the other hand, the woman, because her husband despises her even though she is innocent, throws the rope on both of them. That is how the second episode ends. During a boat journey on the lake, an old woman and a blind man recount a story that happened a long time ago to a man from the city, going to the bird sanctuary with his camera and binoculars. His reaction is different. He is very realistic. The child who listens to the story is deeply touched and sees Zala inside the water, but the man only sees a frog. Some say Zala still lives in the water; others say she committed suicide and the legend grows. A newly wed couple travels all the way to throw a stone to where Zala is supposed to dwell. They search for a long time and finally find a grave immersed in the water, throw the stone and make a wish.

**The legend is placed within the frame of a voyage although one cannot call The Hunter a road movie like The Blue Exile.**

We cannot call it a road movie but at the end of the journey, some people reach some places and cognize their feelings and thoughts. They are not there only to tell us the story. The travellers have their own stories. The old couple is not happy, they never agree on anything and yet the relationship continues. The urban man is sceptical of legends and superstitions. The little girl is very vulnerable to what she hears. I tried to put life itself into the film.

A well and a woman in water easily evoke multilayered interpretations.

Discerning viewers may see symbols and metaphors. Cinema is a very concrete art but, at the same time, very abstract. This may sound like a paradox. You cannot say shoot an image of a tree. You can say shoot an image of a pine tree. The tree is a concept. You cannot shoot a concept. If people want to find symbols and metaphors in the images, the film is open.

I do not think you will make many friends among women after stating that some women have fantasies about being raped. Most women, especially the feminists, believe that such an idea is male fantasy.

I say what I know. There is a masterpiece called The Night Porter.
It is rather two ways in that film.

When Liliana Cavani is researching for that film, she encounters an Auschwitz survivor living in the United States who spends her annual vacations in the camp. This is a marginal event but it exists. I cannot make a film under the pressure of feminists or machos. I made it using my imagination and I did not show it as a positive act. I pushed human feelings to the extreme. I pushed my borders too. From the point of view of realization, it is my most difficult film. That is why it is effective. It affected me.

Turkish culture has so many proverbs about *yalan*, the lie; the word that is also used to refer to what is false such as *yalan dünya* (false world). ‘Mirrors don’t lie’ is another Turkish proverb. And you have made a film called *The Mirror*.

You would find a mirror in each film. Here, they hold a mirror to the sun to search for gold in the bottom of the well, but there is no gold there. Perhaps lies or lying is a kind of banality but it interests me and interesting things make you think. What is false? The film searches the answer. When I was shooting *A Season in Hakkari*, I met so many people who told lies, but then I understood it was all the power of the imagination. To tell lies, one needs the imagination. The lies told in the film are in fact white lies that do not hurt anyone. I tried to show that the syntax was in conflict with the gaze. The eyes give one away as I said earlier. The gaze and the dialogue are in conflict in the film. I am also trying to discover how far one can go with the lies.

**Does the camera assume the role of a mirror to reflect the conflict between the gaze and the dialogue?**

I tried not to have too many camera tricks. The film has many takes – 500-550, I think, to hold the interest of the audience. The camera had the job of reflecting the events.

The issue of lies is very interesting. For instance, the child lies to his/her parents; when s/he is older, s/he lies to the teacher, then to his/her lover, to colleagues at the workplace. To survive, s/he lies. These lies gradually become part of his/her life and become truth. For instance, in many Eastern cultures, when the word is pronounced, it is not a lie anymore.

The persons involved may assume the physical responsibility of a murder but give the responsibility of customs and traditions to the murdered. In the summer of 1993, in Sivas, 36 intellectuals were burned alive in the name of Allah. One cannot remain honest until the end. In cinema, it is the same because you start with a pure and innocent idea – a story – but so many factors go in between – other people, distributors – and at the end you are very far from where you began.

**To extend the metaphor of the camera and the mirror, certain mirrors distort the image.**

In that sense, there is distortion. Because something that happened in the past is distorted and given a new form. I used the camera like the distortion cameras in the circus.

**Actually, the Turkish proverb is wrong in saying mirrors do not lie. Whatever is seen depends on the one who looks.**

Yes. First of all, it is a reversal.
Tell me about the shooting experiences.

A difficult but beautiful experience. We travelled three hours each day working on a hill of 1800 m, in a forest between Mengen and Eskipazar. It rained and deformed the road. We had to practically re-build it and construct bridges. Then I had to dig a seven-meter well which took twenty-two days to complete but, after two weeks, it collapsed, we had to do it again. We needed a large well to work in it. To shoot inside was an arduous task. A seven-meter ladder was used to bring down the actors. You can interpret the well as a metaphor as well!

A Freudian metaphor for sex?

Quite possible.

Tell me about the players.

The energy was positive. The fact that the acting style of each one was very different helped the film. Ahmet Uğurlu (the husband) plans ahead and follows it; Fikret (the hunter) and Jale (the wife) improvise and work with their diaphragms. I tried to build an open and simple film language to bring forth the talents of the players. Normally, I give nothing to the actors but I want to receive all. We had a very long planning. I worked with Fikret for over a year and, with Jale and Ahmet, we spent many long nights. On the set, I had time for the cameraman, Jürgen Jürges. I was lucky to work with a good cameraman and good players. I think to reflect the feelings of people is possible with *mis-en-scene* if you build the correct one. *Mis-en-scene* and the camera should not be obvious to the viewer, or the film would be too theatrical. In the scenes inside the hut, Jürges used light and shadow.

*In The Blue Exile*, the colours were very important. The film began with brown and slowly turned to green and finally blue.

In the beginning, the camera and the *mis-en-scene* were also nervous but calmed down when he reached the sea. In *The Hunter*, the focus of the first episode is fire and water. We used the red for the fire and, in the forest, dark green, and brown to match the tree trunks. What separates the different colours of the first and second episode are the two images I shot at the Manyas Lake Bird Sanctuary. We decided to work against the sun. Therefore, you see more atmosphere than details.

As I mentioned in the beginning of the interview, one cannot help thinking of a thread running through your work, considering the fact that *The Hunter* includes several motives from your other films: a mountain (*A Season in Hakkari*), a mirror (*The Mirror*), a legendary heroine (*Dilan*) and a very long journey (*The Blue Exile*).

I have never made any of my films with the audience in mind. A yardstick does not exist for the audience. The films that are made having the average viewer in mind are not very successful, I believe. I tried to build a world but I did not want to make a film like marginal jazzmen. I wanted it clear and open. I begin all my films with the same idea but somehow the critics find metaphors in them and sometimes surprise even me. I think this film has an easy flow and will appeal to audiences from all walks of life. If a film can make the English, Turkish or Indian audience cry or laugh, then it is a good film. I tried to present feelings that may be familiar to the audience. For me, while watching a film, what is important is not the relation between the viewer and the screen, but the tension between the viewer and the other viewers.
Cinema has left its centenary behind. What is your opinion about the world cinema, European and American cinema?

In the world cinema, worse films are made than Hollywood. Hollywood has very good actors, cameramen, musicians, screenwriters. I do not see this energy in the European cinema. From time to time, exceptional films appear, but this is rare. I see myself as part of the European cinema. When The Blue Exile was nominated to represent Turkey at the Oscars, the newspapers in Los Angeles wrote that I was very European. Some of the critics here at home say the same thing. The Europeans say that they deduce from my films that I love my country very much. Where do I belong? I do not know how to place myself, or my cinema. I admire the speed and rhythm of the Hollywood cinema but also the world of ideas of the European cinema.

Some artists like Peter Greenaway want to cross borders and go beyond frames. What is your opinion on this subject?

I can say, Good Luck! I watch Peter Greenaway closely. He is an interesting film-maker but I look at cinema from a different perspective. One should not abuse cinema. You can write a novel with more compromises and technical possibilities, but the possibilities of cinema are limited, it is difficult to reach the depth of a novel with a film. To force would deform cinema. For instance, those who tried to do in cinema what Brecht did in theatre were not very successful. Abstract and meaningless films that did not take the viewer to what Brecht foresaw were made that alienated the audience. One should not force the art of cinema. When cinema is freed of theatre, literature or painting, then it is strong and is real art. I have told you previously; cinema is not the sum of painting, theatre and literature, but an original art. Therefore, to ask the aid of another art form is not necessary. One should be faithful to the art of cinema and go deeper. Art does not progress, science and technology progress. Cinema turns in itself and gets deeper. Technology advances every day. One should pay attention to this distinction.

Last week, in Paris, there was a colloquium on this subject.

I find this with my life determinism. Where is an Antonioni, de Sica? Does La Notte get old?

One part of the discussion in Paris was on the fact that art does not have steps to learn.

This exists in science; otherwise, one could go to the moon 2000 years ago. Thought develops gradually. Peter Greenaway abuses the art of cinema but the stone that he lifts may make him slip and he may end up not being able to make films at all – like Jean-Marie Straub. When I published a film journal, I did a special issue on him but today he is at an impasse. During a conference we organized in Berlin, he claimed that he was the only film-maker. One may reach that point.

Critics compare The Hunter to Rashamon of Akira Kurosawa.

Without seeing it! The structure of Rashamon is in many novels and films – an episodical structure that allows a story to be told in different forms. When we began the interview, I said the story is based on a legend that grew from a real event that happened to the great-grandfather of Osman Şahin, the screenwriter of the film. Osman Bey is that man. I decided to make the film after having heard the story from the peasants and from Osman Şahin, who heard it from his grandfather, but this neither reduces the value of my film or changes the fact that Rashamon is a masterpiece. I did not make this film under such an influence. After A Season in Hakkari, some said it looked like Francisco Rossi’s Christ Stopped at Eboly. Rossi started from a novel, so did I, a novel written by Ferid Edgü. If
it reminds one of another great film, I would be happy. There are not many original stories in the world and this is not an issue of being first. I am open to influences and I am on the side of exchange of ideas. I am curious about life and I investigate it.

Istanbul, August 1997

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The hero of your new film Yolda/On the Way is the legendary film-maker Yılmaz Güney. Just like in A Season in Hakkari and The Blue Exile, your focus is the intellectual.

I am pre-occupied with the intellectuals and their place in our society. The film illustrates that, once again, the intellectual is shunned and alienated.

Alienation of the intellectual has become a sad fact of our times. During a recent interview, Dariush Mehrjui, one of the leading figures of Iranian new wave said: ‘Intellectuals are pushed to the margin, or in another sense, everyone has become an intellectual and that is why I do not want to have anything to do with intellectuals’. According to Kyrgyz writer and thinker Chingiz Aitmatov ‘Intellectuals form a part of society that takes everything to heart and suffers more than the others do… However, the ideas of the intellectuals can also take a wrong turn, or they may not even be wanted… The intellectual is a catalyst, the catalyst of historical movement and changes although these changes may not work well with his ideas. Today intellectuals are not even on the path of history’.

I tried to show the struggles of the ordinary people and especially the intellectuals under totalitarian regimes. The year is 1981. The junta is in power. Curfew is on. The film is about imprisonment and freedom, but these are relative. The language is multilayered. The relationship between the master (Yılmaz Güney) and the emerging director (myself fictionalized as Sedat) can be compared to that of the lion and the lion tamer. I also wanted to give a message to the young generation: One cannot create without admiration of great masters and their works, but admiration slows down the thinking process. You can become a master only by killing the master. The relationship between the master and the apprentice is a complicated one. There is also the abi (older brother) culture. Everyone calls Yılmaz abi. You cannot find this concept in the West. The film narrates complicated relationships within the context of socio-political issues.

Feelings and thoughts are often transmitted through eye movements. During scenes of tension, the gaze draws continual triangles. The emotions are so overwhelming that the words are rendered helpless. Only the eyes express what is felt.

Little happiness is squeezed into limited moments during the arduous journey – an exchange of glances or holding of hands. I tried to reflect the pains of an imprisoned film-maker, who is under duress. He is a legend. He gives his dreams to young film-makers that he trusts and they accept unequivocally but, as a result, his dreams are taken away from him.

‘My dreams are captive in the hands of others’, he says, ‘this is imprisonment’.

Furthermore, his health is deteriorating and he is planning his escape. Despite all difficulties, he is in control; he is well trained in the art of prison and he knows how a prisoner behaves. Yılmaz was very pensive and irritated during the actual journey we made together. I took this experience and fictionalized it adding dramatic effects.
When Yılmaz is transferred to another prison, his wife follows him behind in a car driven by a trusted prison friend. She gives support although she is angry. These scenes are charged. You have drawn a precise portrait of a great artist, for whom his art comes before his family and loved ones. I do not think there is an artist who is not an egoist. Art is possible by giving all and cleansing oneself of all. This is very important for the character of Yılmaz. In addition, there is his deep devotion to his country and his people. Such passions supersede his love for his wife and child. He is an egoist and he loves his country. You cannot make a film without being merciless. He is an exceptional film-maker and artist. Also, his character has its ebb and tide. He passes from one emotion to another very fast. His wife is a realist. She says, ‘nothing will change’. She wants a normal life like all other ordinary couples. She wants habits. She is tired of following him from one prison to another.

You have broken unwritten taboos in attacking the memory of a legend. These are sensitive issues that are only discussed privately. Furthermore, local critics think that those who are not familiar with the story would not understand the film, referring to the saga of Yol, which was originally called Bayram (the religious holiday), and entrusted to you, but finally shot by Şerif Gören when Güney was not happy with the rushes. I personally think the film has more potential in the West, where the audience can evaluate its merit without prejudice and pre-judgment. After all, this is not a documentary, but fiction. And it is not the first time that you break the taboos. In The Blue Exile, you drew attention to the repressive Liberation Courts of the regime of Kemal Atatürk and the dark past of the Fisherman of Halikarnassus. In this film, you present a legend in a way never dealt before, such a legend that when he sits handcuffed in the back of a car, sandwiched between two policemen, a gendarme comes over to say, ‘the way you looked in your last film, abi, broke our hearts’.

I broke taboos. In The Blue Exile, I wanted to understand the world of Cevat Şakir. Why would a man kill his father? His father seduces his wife; they take the train from Rome and make love in the sleeper, but this is not the reason for the murder. He kills his father for cheating on his mother whom he loves dearly.

Just like in A Season in Hakkari and The Blue Exile, exile is the central motif.

Güney is transferred to another prison for inciting prisoners to rebellion. This is a kind of an exile. I used closed spaces to reflect this motif.

What about the documentary passages in the beginning of the film?

I took those from the television. They show the suppression of the rebellion at the Çorum prison. The images are blurred.

Just like several other things in the film. For instance, the camera is often behind the windshield which somewhat distorts the image merging the real with the imagined. The fog that obscures the view serves as an effective trope for the psychological state of the characters. The steam on the glass of the hotel windows blur the view but also draw attention to blurred emotions of Yılmaz as he hears a passing train and thinks another person has just walked out of his life. The camera work was very proficient.
The third camera assistant of *The Blue Exile* is responsible for the cinematography. It was his first film. I did not take the camera outside. We brought a very small camera from Europe for this purpose and shot towards the back, not from the side or front. During the scenes shot inside the car, the viewers feel themselves as part of the events. The feeling of a voyage is always there and the idea of being lost in a labyrinth. They are all passengers in the same boat.

**The fog scenes reflect this idea very effectively.**

The political police imprison him but also imprison themselves. The policeman who resents Yılmaz the most is also the one who admires him the most. This is his vicious circle. Imprisonment is the key issue. This is not a film about one person.

**After the death of Yılmaz, the young director phones his mother regularly pretending he is the son. I think this episode enhances the finale. He has cut his ties and attained his freedom but still carries the image of his master inside him. Some viewers thought this scene was not necessary. For me it is a matter of transfer.**

Transfer and transform. In real life, also, Yılmaz did not want his mother to know about his death and a policeman called her. But I showed this symbolically.

**What is the significance of the scene when the young director tells his master, ‘I pity you’, which results in Yılmaz breaking a chair. You have received considerable criticism for this sentence and offended the admirers of Güney.**

This is based on a real event. When Yılmaz was in the İzmit prison, I decided to quit the *Güney* journal that I was editing. Before the *Yol* project and before the military regime, about ten issues were published. But trouble started when the contents gradually focused on politics. I told my intentions to Yılmaz. İzmit was a prison beside the sea. He looked towards the sea and cried and I felt sorry for him. He was helpless. He could not say ‘no’. He said nothing. I pitied him but did not retract my decision. In the film, when the young director says, ‘I pity you’, it does not mean he condescends. He feels pity because his conscience is not at ease. He is rebellious like in a father-son relationship. The burden he carries inside him has to come out. The real story is like this: He sent a message asking me to go and discuss another project or for me, to realize my own project, but I did not go. Instead, I wrote him a letter. Had I gone, I would not make this film. If we continued shooting, it would be an Erden Kıral film; it could have been better than *Hakkari*. Perhaps that is why he wanted to stop it. He respected my talent and me. I was told that in Switzerland, he said, ‘I did not use his rushes. Erden knows the reason’. Once he phoned me to Berlin from Paris after having seen *The Mirror* and said you have brought a novelty to Turkish cinema.

**What about the old man who carries the coffin of his grandson on top of a minibus?**

He is a man whose grandson was hanged – a true story. Yılmaz sees his own death. This is his last voyage.

**The old man says to the young director, ‘The falcon is a hunter because it is alone’.*

Yılmaz also was alone. He always said it. But I gave a key. ‘In Kayseri prison, a guardian smuggled a little pencil for me’, he says. ‘That pencil was the continuation of life’.
Film critics and historians find Latin American ‘magical realism’ in Hakkari and The Mirror.

And for On the Way, a local critic said, ‘Anatolian surrealism’! The intellectual is always the main theme. Av Zamanı/Time for Hunting is a warning to Turkish cinema. The Blue Exile begins with a real story but moves on to surreal just as Hakkari and The Mirror. Magical realism could be true. But for the scene when the policemen are looking for the prison to transfer Yılmaz and they keep turning in circles, someone here says ‘This is Turkey, one can always ask for the address’ or ‘Why are they counting numbers in a village when none of the buildings has a number?’ The film also created polemic. Fotoş, the wife of Yılmaz, looked for herself in the film and said, ‘This is not us’. I did not let the actor who plays her go and meet her for preparation although she wanted to. I did not want that kind of influence. And I tried to make a film that would not hurt anyone.

Halil Ergün who plays Yılmaz is older and has the calm, reflecting appearance of a philosopher, except for the scene when he breaks the chair. I do not think his general composure reflects the nervous energy of Yılmaz Güney.

The age is correct and his behaviour stems from being a prisoner. Choosing the main lead, rather than someone who physically looks like Güney, I searched for someone who would believe what he says and understand the character. I had other offers but I wanted a credible actor.

For The Hunter, I remember you said it was your most difficult film. What about On the Way?

I am very happy with this film. My hands did not sweat. The shooting took 26 days. We were on a small budget. The editing was done by Şerif Gören (the director of Yol). His name is mentioned as Ş. G. in the generic. I was told that when he saw the film he cried, ‘for Yılmaz, for Fotoş and for Erden’.

For researchers on Turkish cinema, it would be important to watch the version of Yol or Bayram as it was called then – that you shot. Where is the negative?

In Switzerland. Cactus Film is involved.

To see your first films is not possible either. The VCD of The Channel was on sale for a while. Remember, an offer for a comprehensive retrospective came from India and we could not obtain the copies. It is sad and infuriating that a country does not acknowledge its culture.

They made the VCD of The Channel because famous male actor of Turkish cinema, Tarık Akan, plays in it. The negatives of Bereketli Topraklar Üzerinde/On Fertile Lands are in the Berlin cinemateque and the Swiss have Dilan.

What is the most important legacy of Yılmaz Güney for Turkish cinema?

Our generation got off the phaeton of Umut/The Hope. Camera stepped out to the street. Yılmaz Güney brought the realistic cinema to Turkey. He destroyed theatrical and abstract acting and changed the concept of performance introducing a new concept. Turkish cinema has not produced another actor like him who could play with a silent gaze.

Istanbul, April 2005 (translated from Turkish by the author)
Bio/Filmography
Erden Kıral was born in Gölcük, Turkey, in 1942. He studied ceramics at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul. He worked as a film critic and publisher and directed numerous commercials in addition to four short films before launching his career with feature films. In 1983, when it became difficult to make films under the military regime, he went to Berlin, returning to his country several years later. He made The Mirror in Germany. He received the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival with A Season in Hakkari. He is a member of the Academy of the Fine Arts in Berlin and Film/TV Directors Association of Germany.

Feature films
1978 Kanal/The Channel
1980 Bereketli Topraklar Üzerinde/On Fertile Lands
1983 Hakkari Bir Mevsim/A Season in Hakkari
1984 Ayna/The Mirror
1987 Dilan
1988 Av Zamanı/Time for Hunting
1993 Mavi Sürgün/The Blue Exile
1997 Avcı/The Hunter
2005 Yolda/On the Way

Ali Özgentürk
Ali Özgentürk is a prominent voice among the middle generation film-makers. He started to work in the film industry professionally in 1974 as camera assistant and then assistant to Yılmaz Güney and Atıf Yılmaz. His first two films, Hazal (1979) and At/The Horse (1982), carry the tradition of Yılmaz Güney. Hazal, which is the story of a young woman from the Eastern mountains, who is forced to marry the eleven-year-old brother of her dead fiancé as custom dictates, brought him international fame and several awards. The Horse focused on a migrant worker whose dreams of educating his son in the big city end in tragedy. During the post-production stage of this film, he was arrested by the military regime of the period and kept in custody for one year without trial.

With his third film, Bekçi/The Guard (1985), about a Balkan immigrant with fascistic tendencies, Özgentürk began to search for a new idiom. Su da Yanar/Water Also Burns (1987) is a very intimate film on the dilemmas of a film-maker in a personal and political impasse. The film passed the censorship board but was banned by the Istanbul prefecture for trying ‘to expose the life and ideas of a communist poet in exile, Nazım Hikmet, who is indicted for treason’. Özgentürk was brought to trial with a possible imprisonment sentence of six years. After demonstrations in Istanbul and a strong international petition, the charges were dropped but the film remained banned.
Çıplak/Nude provokes traditional concepts of nudity and shame and draws attention to the degeneration of morals in liminal societies faced with modernism. ‘In the Islamic culture, the body always stays Muslim’, according to Özgentürk. ‘Even when she models naked, the woman remains Muslim and returns home to her mosque and her prayers. The most progressive looking Turkish woman is a Muslim fanatic. For those who declare their “freedom”, this freedom equates with sexual freedom. These are the double standards of our schizophrenic society, which is experiencing a trauma. Relationships have become something like a detective story. Characters try to erase the secrets of their bodies. I started Nude from this premise. Very few social films examine such issues’.

With each new film, Özgentürk tries a different mode of expression and a different language. His most recent film, Kalbin Zamanı/The Time of the Heart, a nostalgic story of the love of a woman for three men, spans over three time periods. The film is book-ended with a parallel love story in animation, a first in Turkish cinema, designed by Özgentürk.

Our informal discussions with Ali Özgentürk have a history of 25 years. The first interview below took place in April 1996 and the second in April 2005, both of them in Istanbul.

**FILM-MAKER IN TIMES OF STRIFE: A JOURNEY INTO SELF**

**It has been almost seventeen years since you made your first feature film, Hazal. How did one become a film-maker in those days? What, if anything, has changed today?**

Conditions of becoming a film-maker have not changed that much. Anyone, who wants to express him/herself through this medium, can do so. However, just like everywhere else in the world, to make films in Turkey has become rather difficult. I also feel that the number of people interested in becoming a film-maker has also diminished. New generations are choosing other mediums. The graduates of film schools go into television or advertising. They do not want to become feature film-makers. The young seem to shy away from that aspect of cinema, which requires immense patience, a certain perspective and a vision. They prefer faster and easier ways of becoming somebody in society and earning good money. Even the number of cinéphiles has dwindled. Cinemas are full during the Istanbul International Film festival, but this is misleading. People are only interested in culture for fifteen days a year. On the other hand, there are those who make short films and videos and they have their own festivals. It is hard to generalize.

**Is the situation in Turkey different from other countries in terms of the relationship between the spectator and cinema?**

I do not think so and this is what is so amazing. A boy in New York who is eating his hamburger at Macdonald’s likes the same songs and the same movies as the boy at a Macdonald’s in Adana (in south of Turkey) or Istanbul. This standardization is not healthy because it destroys diversity. In a big metropolis, like Paris or New York, where cultural and artistic space is much larger, the way culture, art and cinema are consumed is different. Yet, if you look at the number of viewers for the recent film of Angelopoulos, Ulysses’ Gaze, 30,000 in Paris – which is rather low – and 15,000 in Istanbul. The difference is negligible considering the fact that Istanbul has less number of cinemagoers and cinemas. The spectator for an Angelopoulos film is basically the same in Paris or Istanbul. This is not so bad. You can find equivalents in literature. The masses that love Harold Robbins will always be different from those who love Kafka, or even Paul Auster. Not everyone can read Kafka, Joyce or Seferis. I think this kind of diversity is necessary. Even one or two hundred years ago, there were popular writers and the others.
Would you go into the field of cinema if you were to start all over?

I still would although I hate the part of film-making that involves working with so many people. Sometimes when I arrive at the set, I ask myself why all these people are there – the cameraman, the technicians, the actors. I hate them all. If one could create all alone, it would have been an incredible experience.

And one would watch it all alone!

Why not? I feel cinema has been advancing in that direction. For instance, a wealthy Japanese will arrive one day and say, ‘make a film for me’ – the same way some people buy paintings of Picasso or Rembrandt. Then he will buy this pre-ordered film and put it on his wall to show to his guests. He will be the only one to have it. Why not? Maybe this will happen in the future. Cinema, I am not talking about the Hollywood cinema, which is not possible to call as such, but cinema outside that could disappear one day. Now there is virtual reality. One day they will invent machines with a memory of thousands of actors and attach these to the head of the director who will then feed his subject to the machine. If he wants Rudolph Valentino to play opposite our Türkan Şoray, the machine will do it. Part of this has already happened, for instance, in Forest Grump when Grump shakes the hand of Kennedy. I would like to work that way.

Why?

When you make a film, there is contact with too many people. Such a contraption may reduce the cost factors and may solve financing and distribution problems. Cinema should increasingly go towards becoming an occupation for a poet or a writer. I am not talking about the Hollywood factory, but people who want to make films like a writer, a poet or a dervish, should also have a chance. This is possible. Antonioni is paralysed, but he is making films. Wonderful things can happen in the future. I am not pessimistic because people always long for beautiful things. Poetry, religious rituals and music are not much different. Today, with the new technology you can turn your house into a concert hall although you can never replace a live concert. I am not of the opinion that technological advancements have spoiled everything. Perhaps communication has been reduced contrary to what is commonly said. Nevertheless, we now have the freedom to be alone. We do not feel a need for the others.

Cinema is collective viewing. This would be lost. The same for the concert.

Collective, yes. However, just like religious rituals, concerts or cinema would not be rejected. On the contrary, there could be a return. Take the multiplex system, which has begun, I believe, in Brussels. You enter a building with twenty cinemas inside – just like a ritual. You can be lost in the darkness. The point is cinema is different from literature, which has the richness of writers to offer diversity. Ninety-nine per cent of those twenty halls show stupid films – photocopy films. The big industry destroys diversity. This is genocide. It is not the same with literature. A writer may arrive and take people along. However, viewers everywhere have problems to establish dialogue with cinema that is not American. Il Postino/The Postman is a small budget film that did well everywhere, including the US. This is by chance. Many elements came together. I liked it, too. What I do not understand is should every film be an Il Postino, or an American product? Why are large numbers of people not interested in a Zanussi film? Why is Underground (Emir Kusturica) rejected? Even Kieslowski? We have to accept a certain amount of laziness about the viewer.
What made you enter cinema? Your university education was quite different.

I studied sociology and philosophy, but as a child, in Adana, I was always crazy about cinema. During my high school years, I wrote reviews of Turkish films for a local paper. I was already doing theatre. Afterwards, I formed the Youth Theatre.

You had some difficulties...

Yes. We were touring villages with plays such as those of Samuel Beckett. The police arrested us for doing ‘communist theatre’ and we were sent to the children’s ward. In Su daYanar/Water Also Burns, I talk about these experiences. Between 1963 and 64, Yilmaz Güney used to work for a film company in Adana. For a small city, there were so many summer cinemas, perhaps forty. Every neighbourhood had one. They changed the program everyday, so we wanted to go to the cinema everyday but, of course, we had no money. Yilmaz Güney used to carry the reels from one cinema to the next on his bicycle and he would let us sneak in through the back door. Yilmaz Abi!! (older brother) He was not a film-maker then, but he always had cinema in him. When I arrived in Istanbul, I began to attend the university and make short films all by myself. Ferhat received an award in Krakow in 1974 and Yasak/Forbidden in Moscow in 1977, where Stanley Kubrick was one of the jury members. The transition from amateur to professional happened around 1974-75. I began to work with Yilmaz Güney and Atif Yilmaz as a scriptwriter. I also worked as an assistant – camera assistant, directing assistant, etc. In Sürü/The Herd (1979), of Zeki Ökten, I was the second director.

Tell me more about this experience.

Yilmaz (Güney) was in jail and needed money. He said, ‘Let’s sell some scripts to other film-makers’. I said, ‘You used to have a story called Sürü’. I had read it in the little notebook he used to keep, but he had forgotten about it. Fatoş (his wife) brought it to the İzmit prison. We wrote the script and sold it to Tunc Okan (director of Bus, 1976). But Yilmaz became rather possessive about his story and did not want to give it to Tunc. He asked me to shoot it. I said I did not have enough experience for such a weighty subject. Finally, we decided on Zeki Ökten. With Tuncel Kurtiz and Melike Demirağ (actor and actress), we got on the Kurtalan Express as Yilmaz instructed and went to Siirt (in the South East) to wait in a terrible hotel for the money and the crew to arrive. After twenty days, it all was there, the crew, the money, the negative and the camera. The shooting took about two and a half months under difficult conditions – warring Kurdish tribes, not a decent place to live, not enough money, not enough food. Nevertheless, the film was completed.

Some distributors of the French film industry spread an idea in the West that Yilmaz directed these films from prison. Anyone who knows something about cinema should know that this is not possible. In these films, Sürü/The Herd (1979), Düşman/The Enemy (1980) and Yol/The Way (1982), Yilmaz was the scriptwriter, just like Ingmar Bergman writing a script for Billie August. The European film industry liked the idea very much to sell Yilmaz to Europe and to make money. People around Yilmaz and Yilmaz himself also liked this idea and the lie continued and still does today. The director of Yol is Şerif Gören, the director of Düşman is Zeki Ökten, and Sürü is evident. I would like to stress this point: There is no reality to directing films from prison.

Your first film, Hazal, foregrounds feudal practices in South East Anatolia and your second, At/The Horse, focuses on the plight of migrants to the big cities. Bekçi/The Guard is about fascistic authority, among other things. Each one is quite different although some themes are recurring. Recently, I watched Water Also Burns and found you in every frame.
Yes, I began that film from an autobiographical point of view.

I do not exactly mean autobiographical.

You mean too jagged?

Just the opposite! Perhaps people who do not know you may not sense this but in finer points, it is full of you. I was deeply touched by this sensitive film. It was as if you were there, in front of me, telling me your pain.

A pathetic film…

No, not pathetic but as if you bare your chest and say, ‘shoot if you want’. We often try to hide our vulnerable side for fear of being hurt, but in that film, all is out in the open, which makes it so poignant.

Your remark is very interesting. I do not say this because you are my friend, but yours is the most accurate diagnosis about Water Also Burns that has ever been said. I was not even aware of it. The way I began that film, the adventures, everything is so naked. For instance, with The Horse, I received $250,000 from the Tokyo International Film Festival to make another film. At that period, I was very interested in Nazım’s (Hikmet) last years in Moscow. I wanted to make a film about that subject but they said, no, ‘he is a communist’. Although I was only planning to make a film about a poet, I was faced with Japanese censorship. I tried to tell my entire grievance in ‘naked’ form and ended up with a depressive film that was banned. The Japanese who had the world rights refused to send it to festivals. In Turkey, the police confiscated all copies; then they ‘lost’ the negative.

I remember you had to bribe a policeman to get one copy.

That copy was shown at the George Pompideau Centre in Paris during the six months retrospective of Turkish cinema. Water Also Burns was like a confession for me. For thirty years, I do not wish to live in this country anymore. I tried to live in Paris for a while, but I am a person with very close ties to literature. Therefore, to live ‘in my own language’ is very important for me. In that sense, the film could be autobiographical. There is a man whose feet are always slipping.

I have been thinking for the past week about an item I read in the newspaper. A government employee in Izmir is sentenced to three months in jail for keeping a translation of the lyrics of John Lennon’s Imagine in his drawer. Can you imagine? Think of this man, like a hero from Gogol, who arrives at his desk everyday to win a few liras. He keeps a little poem that perhaps takes him to other worlds and he is punished for this wonderful feeling. How can one bear this? What kind of a message does this give to youth? Sometimes you get a horrible feeling wondering why you bother to make films in this country, in a society that does not deserve anything. Now I only want to make films to suit my own tastes.

I remember our first meeting in Montreal where you presented Hazal, your first film. The following year when we visited Istanbul, you were shooting The Horse on the shores of Bosphorus and you asked us to play in it. As it was a small budget film and bribing the street mafia was already a heavy burden, all your friends gave a helping hand. We did not hear from you for a while. Then, the news arrived that you were arrested before finishing the film.
Yes, I shot *The Horse* and completed the editing; then two policemen arrived at the editing room and took me away. This was during the military junta in Turkey. They did not tell me why I was arrested. I stayed in prison for one year without trial.

Moreover, you were tortured, mostly to elicit information about the escape of Yılmaz Güney although you were not involved.

Yes, I was tortured, but in comparison to what they did to young political prisoners, mine was nothing. After one year, they let me go. It is an absurd story.

Those were the Years of Lead. During one of my visits to Turkey – I think it was not long after your release – we took the Yalova ferry boat one early morning to visit a writer/teacher in a medium security prison, someone you had been corresponding with. He was serving for a story he had published. We stopped at the local market, and bought onions, potatoes, oranges and you carried them in a fishnet bag. He shared his cell with a European heroin addict. He looked so happy to see us; he kept smiling with his eyes, so to speak. He made us tea and we drank it with the guard who even unlocked the iron bars for a second. This guard was a semi-literate Anatolian boy, but he knew what a writer was. He kept reproaching your friend for not writing the story of the wolf in his mountains in Eastern Anatolia.

That writer was Osman Șahin, who is a well-known scriptwriter today.

I could very well understand how you identified with him and did your best to give support to someone you hardly knew. It showed how much you appreciated the support of your friends when you were imprisoned.

My friends, Zeki Ökten and several others, finished the postproduction of *The Horse* while I was in prison. The solidarity was incredible. I had many problems with *The Horse*, but even today, many people I meet at festivals talk to me about this film. I think this film will stay. With my first film, *Hazal*, I won several awards and made money. The film was distributed in Europe and in Canada. I used to be full of self-confidence in those days. I thought I would be making films for the whole world to admire. I am still self-confident but I am not interested in pleasing the world because, today, there is no criterion. A film may be loved by some and condemned by others. *The Horse* had an average number of viewers. *The Guard* and *Water Also Burns* did very well. Those days, we used to have many more cinema halls, majority of which showed national films. Several social upheavals and sociological changes took place throughout the world since then. Television has arrived. Audio-visual world has changed and the American cinema, to defend itself, put a monopoly to all world cinemas. Out of the 320 cinemas in Turkey, 315 are under the American majors. There is no justice in there.

I would certainly like my films to attract crowds but, after seventeen years, I do not see in myself the energy for such perseverance. The only thing I see is my perseverance to be me. I say ‘this is what pleases me’ and I do it, which makes me feel better. For instance, many people hated *Naked*, but someone called it a masterpiece, although, this is not a measure either. What I am trying to say is that if we can draw a rough line, there is commercial cinema and what I call ‘the cinema of sincerity and intelligence’. I think we can apply this criterion to all art forms. We do not need too many art theories either. Sincerity and intelligence. I am on this side – on the side of humanity.
Which one of your films is your favourite?

I never make such discrimination. You have to look from several angles. For instance, from the point of view of feelings, it could be *The Horse*; the father-son energy affects me immensely. My father was also a poor peasant who had a passion about educating his nine children; just like the father in the film, in a very sentimental and naive way, he always thought that education was the saviour. As a film-maker, and from the point of view of cinematography, I differ from many others and favour *Naked*. In this film, I passed myself through a test. What kind of a film-maker am I? I wanted to make an entirely ‘free’ film, to use the camera like a pen to build a free structure and images. I like *Water Also Burns* for different reasons. I see many faults in this film. Now I see it as a film made in a hurry, but from another perspective, certain things in it were said for the first time in Turkish cinema — and I do not mean the angst of the film-maker that has always existed. *The Guard* was an experiment; I tried to make a tragi-comedy. Each one has different characteristics.

What about *Sır*?

*Sır* is a medium-length film based on two stories by Onat Kutlar. Onat was a friend of mine, a writer, a film and culture personality that I admired. He was a person Turkey needed very much. As we all know, a bomb, planted in the December of 1994 by unknown dark forces inside a café frequented by artists and intellectuals, killed him. Before this incident, we had begun working on the script of *The Letter* but promised each other never to talk about it until the day Onat finished it. In fact, we had an appointment to meet in that café that day — roughly half an hour after the bomb went off. This event affected me deeply. I threw myself to his stories; stories which were very difficult to film — Kafkaesque stories of the unconscious, etc. Despite all, I decided to go into this voyage when the Filmworkers’ Fund project came up. I found a simple key for myself. Onat wrote these stories when he was nineteen. If he were a film-maker, instead of a writer, how would he have shot his first film? Then the task became easier. Without changing anything, I joined two stories, which was rather difficult to do and difficult to apprehend by the viewer; but it was important for me to keep the stories intact. I am satisfied that people have been able to establish a dialogue with the film.

Do you have a new project?

My new project that has the working title *The Letter* is an adaptation from a story of mine. Like naming an unborn baby, you give a title before the work actually materializes! It has been two years since we got the Turkish sponsors and the aid of the Ministry of Culture and Eurimage, but I still have not managed to begin shooting. I do not know what it is about — perhaps about the spirit of being lost in an overcrowded world.

*Istanbul, April 1996*
I liked your new film, *The Time of the Heart*, a nostalgia film that is decorated with tongue-in-cheek humour saluting several genres – thriller, romance, family drama and comedy – in a period film atmosphere. It has Eastern sensibilities. All performances are remarkable, but Hülya Avşar (the female protagonist) and Halil Ergün, who plays her husband, excel. As a director, you have gone further than your other films and sought a new film language and mode of expression, which is characteristic of your work; each one of your films is a new adventure.

The idea for the film is original. About three or four years ago, I was invited to a family living in the old quarter of Istanbul, and I met an old woman there. The way she was dressed and the way she viewed the world, reminded me of Istanbul. I thought of this woman living alone with her memories. There must have been a man in her life, but now she was alone. One day, the doorbell rings and an old man comes and says, ‘Fifty years ago, one of your lovers was killed but they never found the murderer. I was the detective on the case and was fired because I did not solve the crime. I am very curious’. She smiles and does not answer as if she knows but will not divulge. This is how the first seed of the film was planted in my mind. Some months later, at the Pera Palace Hotel, which is like a symbol of Istanbul, just like the Topkapı Palace, with a mysterious history, I met a man who worked there for many years. He was like a professional storyteller with all the anecdotes about the last hundred years of the Pera Palace. The hotel was built in 1892 to host the passengers of the famous Orient Express in Istanbul. In the 1920s, before she became famous, Greta Garbo used to stay there with her lover and gamble. Once, she lost and slept with a rich Turk to pay her bills. Alfred Hitchcock worked on a script. Agatha Christie disappeared for twelve days and, according to rumours, stayed with a rich Turkish lover. For the western bourgeoisie, Pera Palace was the Eastern border. The man told me tens of stories, and I started from the old woman and wrote the story, which could only take place in Istanbul because every city has its own spirit and sense of time. The idea of somehow divulging the secret spirit of the city attracted me. Originally, the title was *Zaman/Time*, but distributors changed it to *Kalbin Zamanı/The Time of the Heart*. The sense of time is significant. Before, people lived in ages when you could see time. Now there is no time and you do not see it. Time and the spirit are missing today. The film depicts a Muslim society in the middle of Istanbul, affected by time and westernisation. I placed the story inside the Pera Palace and thought of it as a microcosm for Istanbul. Films that take place in one single space should be avoided, but I was not worried because the city was directing me.

*A woman who loves three men is rather rare for serious Turkish cinema, which in essence is an Islamic cinema as you told me once.*

Perhaps, for the first time in the history of Turkish cinema, a woman is in love with three men. Islam religion and culture dictates that a woman can only be with one man. For a woman, the most important thing is to form a family, and films should defend the sanctity of marriage. The place of women in cinema has been the same as their place in society. But our woman is pragmatic and can live with passion that she finds in different men. The story is told by a retired police detective, who could not solve the crime. It is a character-driven narrative film. Bunuel says, ‘to make the characters move, this is cinema’.

During the shooting of your previous film, *Balalaika*, a tragedy happened; the principal actor, Kemal Sunar, died of a heart attack on the airplane on his way to the shooting. *The Time of the Heart* also began with a tragedy.
During the first days of The Time of the Heart, Arda Kanpolat, one of the leading players, committed suicide at the Pera Palace. I was traumatized and stayed in the hospital for one week. A corpse fell on the belly of the film; a young talented actor, an actor of the film died. I decided not to see this unfortunate event as material for the film; I exteriorized it and shot the film against death. Instead of changing the story, I changed the style. The moments of life that pass quickly, a hand movement, a slice of life – this is film. I did not want to have a sophisticated approach against death. I wanted a cinema that would engulf different emotions just as a photograph can be a film, not a cinema of vomit to serve as therapy. The suicide occupied the newspapers for days. I could have placed this in the film and come up with something that would froth emotions. I had respect for the actor and also to exploit the unfortunate event would be prostitution.

**Turkish cinema is in a constant search, perhaps a search for identity. There are individual film-makers, but an ecole was never formed.**

I agree with the search but I am not sure if it is a search for identity. Turkey is a country under the influence of the West. After the end of the Yeşilçam years when 300 films were made annually, our cinema is indecisive and confused. Yeşilçam popular cinema had character, knew what it was supposed to do and was open to public. After the 1980s, several trends emerged.

A cinema that was influenced by Yılmaz Güney’s realistic and socially engaged films, neo-realist attempts, magical realism…

Political cinema of Yavuz Özkan; a personal cinema like Ömer Kavur’s, which creates an individual world… I do not think that Turkish cinema had really gone through a neo-realist period, magical realism, perhaps yes… Individual film-makers do not have distinct characteristics either. For instance, Gece Yolculuğu/Night Journey of Kavur is different than his Anayurt Oteli/Motherland Hotel. After At/The Horse, which was interpreted as magical realism by several critics, my Bekçi/The Guard is a search for a new film language. Erden Kıral moved to more sophisticated stories after rural films. Yavuz Özkan began making films around family dramas after a very political film, Maden/The Mine.

**Film production is very low in Turkey. In neighbouring Iran, around 200 films were made last year.**

National cinemas have gained importance for cultures to manifest themselves. However, Turkey is one of the countries where film production is very low – 70 million population and only fifteen films a year. Our cinema has no ties with reality, but is hooked on the inner world. The international quality is not evident. The film-makers are confused – to obtain finances, to please the audience… For years, the audience has been captured by the American cinema. Our cinema does not try to reach the audience and form a dialogue with the audience of Yeşilçam, but instead tries to form a dialogue with the film festivals. Thirty/forty years ago, there was anger against the monopoly of Hollywood. But in 1996, the only Turkish film shown was my film, The Letter. The audience has been reshaped. Even if told in a way to be understood by all, human issues, honesty, fidelity, all the old values do not interest the viewer. Turkish cinemagoers have reached a point that if a film does not make them laugh, it is intellectual. They go to the cinema for catharsis.

The intellectual has been shunned. Iranian director Dariush Mehrjui, our Erden Kıral and several others have spoken about similar concerns.

Intellectuals are made fun of saying ‘intel-dantel’! In Turkey, the unemployed and the poor are slaves to television. They can watch four sitcom serials free everyday. Cinema is an expensive entertainment. The price of two persons going to the cinema is one-sixth of the minimum monthly
wage. The worker cannot go. Only the middle and upper middle class can afford that kind of money. A 25-year-old, without any life experience, takes his girlfriend to cinema to laugh with the money of his parents. They like the American films that meet this demand. *The Time of the Heart* was distributed in 120 theatres, from Edirne to Hakkari across the country, but had only 100,000 viewers; Fatih Akın’s *Gegen die Wand/Against the Wall* had 350,000; a cabaret style Turkish film, *Nerdesin Furuze?/Where are you, Furuze?* two million; *Gora*, about a Turk going to space, four million. I am not saying we should not have *Gora*, but the viewers should be interested in other films as well. The audience stays away from topics related to the realities of Turkey.

**During a recent interview, Abbas Kiarostami said he is very concerned when viewers walk out of his films and even one person walking out is too much.**

For a long time, film-makers of the world did not pay attention to the audience. Large number of viewers is the psychological guaranty of the director. I tasted the audience with my first films. I do not want to insist on making films for an audience of 5,000, like Zeki Demirkubuz. I do not want to make films for film festivals. Recently, festival organizers moved to the forefront and the criterion has become more important than the artist. They hold the power, money and the awards. Cinema has lost its independence; young directors make films for the festivals instead of films that exist with the spectators. They receive money from certain sponsors but do not have spectators – an artificial arena of art with buyers and producers.

**With the advancements in digital technology, film-making has gained a new definition.**

It is good that everyone makes a film – I say film, not cinema – that way it can be understood who makes cinema. More films are made each day and the organizations to make films make more money than films. Foundations, etc. that give money have become an industry. More than the film industry, we have film-making industry. Sponsors, festival directors are fighting for power. It is good that many films are made but when it becomes a power issue, the freedom of making films is taken away.

Culture has become like the washing detergent; a collective rite, and you are one of the crowd if you have watched *Lord of the Rings*. The counterculture – no matter what they do – are part of a
smaller circle. Still cinema stands on its feet with its own values. *The Seventh Seal* of Ingmar Bergman is a milestone. Our job is to make good films, but we exist with the audience. I had this in mind in my last film.

**You have told me once that cinema is still far behind in comparison to literature.**

I do cinema professionally for over 25 years; cinema has not reached the power of literature despite the fact that it is widespread. It has not penetrated the depth of a human being. It has become evident that cinema is not an art that stays. What makes a film exist are the actors, the script, the financing, the distribution, the advertising and the audience. The film reaches the theatres and becomes a film. After some years, you watch it at home on DVD. An old film of Tarkovsky does not give the same feeling today as a novel of Dostoyevsky does, same for Fellini. *Amarcord* does not give me the same pleasure that I experienced when I watched it the first time. It is a matter of contemporaneity. On the other hand, Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) gives you history; you watch it like a documentary. Renoir or Eisenstein has documentary qualities. Film exists in cinema; in the cinemateque, it is like an antique vase.

*Istanbul, April 2005 (translated from Turkish by the author)*

**Notes:**

**Bio/Filmography**

Ali Özgentürk was born in 1945 in Adana in the south of Turkey to a religious Muslim family, with Arabic origins from the Özgen tribe in Algeria over hundred years ago. During his early years, he earned his living working in the cotton fields and the factories. In high school, he had his first experiences in acting and directing when he worked for a student theatre company. He studied philosophy and sociology at the University of Istanbul where he founded Turkey’s first ‘Street Theatre’ and worked as its director for three years. He entered the film world by working as assistant director and screenwriter and shot his first short film, *Ferhat*, in 1974. He was the co-screenwriter of *Endişe/Anxiety* by Yılmaz Güney and the assistant director in *Sürü/The Heard* by Zeki Ökten.

**Feature films**

1979  *Hazal*
1981  *At/The Horse*
1985  *Bekçi/The Guard*
1987  *Su daYanar/Water Also Burns*
1993  *Çaplak/Nude*
1996  *Mektup/The Letter*
2000  *Balalayka*
2004  *Kalbin Zamanı/The Time of the Heart*

**TAYFUN PİRSELİMOĞLU**

Painter, novelist and screenwriter Tayfun Pirselimoğlu’s first feature film, *Hiçbiryerde/Innowhereland* (2002), is inspired by his second novel, *Kayıp Şahslar Albümü/The Album of Missing Persons*. Around 3000 people have been missing in Turkey in the last two decades. Some are ‘disappeared’ while in
police custody; other just vanish without a trace. Some are found dead in the morgue, others return one day. In the genre of a road movie, the film narrates the story of a woman whose son has disappeared. Her search takes her from Istanbul to Mardin in the southeast of Anatolia, where women are neither seen nor heard. Through several experiences involving characters she would never have met in her ordinary life as a teller at the railway ticket counter, she returns home to face the reality. Although the film does not openly make any political statements, information inserted here and there, such as the fact that the protagonist’s dead husband was a Kurdish activist leave question marks in the mind of the viewer. Pirselimoğlu claims to have left open by choice the reasons behind the disappearance of the son, however auto-censorship could be another explanation.

Despite its avoidance of overt political innuendoes, the film was refused a screening permit and could only be released after the deliberation of the Higher Court.

Pirselimoğlu answered my questions in Mannheim in November 2002, where the film was in competition.

NEW VOICES RAISING OLD CONCERN

You have taken a subject that has great potential for a Hollywood film. A love story could easily have developed between the woman who is searching for her missing son and the foreign journalist who wants to help her. You could have filled the narrative with dramatic flashbacks such as the police knocking on the door one night and taking away the woman’s activist husband. Instead of resorting to such sensationalism, you have made a film that one can almost describe as anti-Hollywood? Let us start with the story. What is your affinity to the subject?

I wanted to do something for my mother. I lost her three years ago. I also believe that the mother-son relationship is a very special one, more special than mother-daughter or father-son relationships. Last, but not the least, is the issue of missing persons. Until three years ago, this was an important issue in Turkey but now it is consciously forgotten. The Saturday Mothers is abandoned, not legally abolished, but permission is no longer given for demonstrations and no news about this issue is reported in the newspapers.

Was it the government of Bülent Ecevit?

Yes. The circumstances are now very different than before and the number of political missing persons has reduced but reliable numbers do not exist. Some say less than 500; others say more than 3000. A situation of closing the eyes has been created. I was deeply affected by this. Furthermore, in a strange way, the number of non-political missing is very high.

You mean the young running away from their oppressive homes? This is a very big issue in Iran these days.

Fifteen hundred disappeared only in Istanbul and only half were found. Ministry of Interior published a book five or six years ago: The Album of Missing Persons. On the cover of the book, as if it
were a joke, they placed a cartoon design of a policeman with a magnifier standing on the map of Turkey. Serious efforts are not made to try to find the missing. I am drawn to this subject. Another reason is the theme of chasing someone. The theme of a voyage to the unknown also interests me. When all of these came together, the story was formed. I have heard of real stories that are very similar. I spoke to many people, both political and non-political. Two associations deal with these issues. Human Rights looks after the political missing and The Association of Families of the Missing, the non-political. These are voluntary organizations and they do not meet the needs.

**The character of Şükran, the mother, is it inspired by a certain person or a composite picture of several characters?**

I met someone like her but there is not only one mother. She is a mother we know and at the same time, do not know. She is not a mother we would meet on the street because her attitude is very different.

**In what sense?**

I met mothers who knew their sons were dead but always hoped that one day the doorbell would ring and he would be there Şükran is in total denial; she tries to retain a doubt that the information may not be true.

**She sees three bodies in the morgue and faints in front of one, but she insists that none of them is her son, Veysel. She keeps his bicycle in the stairway, his jean jacket and shoes stay near the door. She thinks she has seen him in the crowd in front of her office.**

This is a form of denial. Şükran is a mother created for this story but there is an element of other mothers in her.

**On the poster of the film, she is shown as covering her face with her hands except two fingers that are slightly separated but she is a passive woman.** While the men – her husband, her son – are involved in action, she closes her eyes as if her duty is to wait.

She has chosen a path for herself. Her husband had a very political past. He participated in strikes, etc. and she suffered. This is the behaviour of a typical Anatolian woman. Because of all these troubles, she brought up her son very protected and isolated, making herself believe that he cannot be involved in any subversion. She thinks that she brought him up in a glass cage, but the truth is very different. It is natural for a mother to make such a mistake. The boy’s girlfriend tells her she does not know her son – only loves him.

Şule blames Şükran for trying to prove to the world how she brought up a good son all by herself and that instead of putting her head inside the sand, she should have learned a lesson from her husband, who must have been taken away several times.

Şükran follows an illusion and this makes her look like a passive woman. On the other hand, she takes action to search for her son, although, her action is commensurate with her character. She chooses the legal ways. In Turkey, police is the last place to go to find the truth. You must go to places outside the police before you approach the police, but she knows that if she follows that path, she will be faced with a very bitter truth. She is a mother who chooses passive ways because she does not want to know the truth.
For the mother of Hüseyin, who is an old woman, perhaps this is possible but for the age of Şükran and her position as a working woman, is it realistic to show her so naive?

The old woman is the mother of a missing person in real life. She is very different. She goes to Ankara, takes part in demonstrations, although she knows for twelve years that her son is dead. Her struggle is admirable. This would have made another story. Şükran is very apprehensive about meeting her. Her son’s girlfriend takes her there to tell her, ‘Look, there is a mother like this; she has accepted her loss and lives with it’. But she prefers not to face reality. In that sense, she is in a dilemma. She feels she has to do something but what she does is to follow the legal channels by going to the gendarme or the police, or the association for non-political missing, as if she wants to fool herself.

She has the image of a suppressed woman. When she enters the office of her boss, the camera shows her as a diminutive figure in front of the heavy-built man.

A small woman in a very large room.

Her behaviour is timid, submissive and modest; her head is always bent to the side; most of the time, she looks down like a school kid reprimanded at the office of the principal. She gives the impression that she accepts her insignificance in front of male authority.

This is the typical behaviour of a woman, but it may not be true for all women. There are other women also, but she is this type of a character, who prefers to step to the side. She is afraid to face reality.

What about the patronizing behaviour of the men towards her? Her boss acts as if he is protecting a lost kitten and this is only for the sake of her dead husband, who was enough of a troublemaker, according to him.

Because it is a political story, he does not want to be involved. Everyone around her keep a certain distance. They want to give signs, but they are not able to show the truth clearly, except for the girlfriend of her son.

I find the attitude of the men totally patronizing. For instance, the boss does not accept her as a grown-up person; he treats her like a kid. The police, the prefecture, everywhere she goes, they tell her, ‘Go Home, Lady’! This is not the way one treats someone with personality! Certainly the image she projects – submissive and subdued – supports their attitude. How realistic is this?

She is one type among the ones I spoke to; there are others who behave differently. But I wanted to tell her story. Perhaps it is not very interesting at first sight. There is action in the others; here no action is taken. But I found the story of a passive woman who looks from the distance, goes wherever she is pulled and lives with her sadness, more appealing.

What about the attitude of the men?

In general, it is like that, protective but on the other hand not willing to get involved, a kind of hypocrisy.

Even the father of Halil, the projectionist at the porno movie house and the boss of Veyssel who operates the sweatshop think she is a nuisance.
These men are worried to cause trouble for themselves. Her son is a political figure; he was involved in some action. There is a poor woman in trouble; they pity her but do not want to get involved. This is a typical attitude for Turkish men.

**When she visits the father of Halil at his work, posters of porno films catch the eye and the men staring at them. They look behind her wondering where she is going.**

This cinema exists. Dilbazlar Cinema is a cinema for sex films. Normally a woman cannot enter there. She enters with fear and exits with fear.

**This kind of cinema, which is forbidden to women, is chosen in the film.**

This is not the story of a woman of action.

**When she arrives in Mardin, we do not see any women on the streets. The hotel clerk eyes her with curiosity bordering on suspicion and offers to take her meal to her room as if she is an eyesore.**

Mardin is that kind of a place – a city dominated by men, not much different than the rest of the East. In the bazaar or the marketplace, you see only men. A very important aspect of the city is that inside is Assyrian and outside Kurd. At the centre of the town, there is an amalgam. The atmosphere is very mystical. The old woman you see is 100 years old. She speaks Syriac and she is part of the mystic atmosphere. I actually met someone called Derviş Ağa there. The men are all protective towards a woman who comes from outside – the one who steals her bracelet and the one who brings it back.

**What I see in the film reinforces the dominance of men and the notion of their superiority. Men work or are involved in politics; women wait. They wait for destiny, or God, the benevolent to change their fate; or, like Şule, the younger woman, they vent their anger on the more vulnerable, raging like a bull, but only running in circles. Men steal from woman; men return the stolen goods. The man saves the woman. The woman perpetually needs the man to survive.**

I do not know if this can be deduced from the story. There is a woman in a difficult situation, someone who takes advantage of this situation and someone who wants to help. This is the picture.

**Şule represents the young generation. She is angry and rebellious, but we do not know in which way she directs her anger except bullying the weaker woman, Şükran.**

I prefer to keep it that way. I want the viewer to create the stories related to these characters. It is interesting when people tell me the stories they formulate regarding this film – things I had never thought of – it surprises me. For instance, the character of Şule is not very feminine. Evidently, she is an activist like her boyfriend and she is disturbed by the degree of passivity Şükran displays concerning the activities of her son, let alone what goes on in the country. Her resources to induce action in Şükran are limited but she tries the hardest blow and brings Şükran face to face with the mother of a missing person. This is a much powerful action than just screaming and yelling at her. But Şükran hates Şule for it. She has already the feeling of jealousy because of her relationship with her son, but she hates her more for showing her the reality, which disturbs her.
What is there to do after accepting the reality except waiting? The widow of the miner says she waited for her husband for three months, but he did not come back, as if the only solution is waiting. This is a very fatalistic point of view.

She says, ‘I waited. He did not come back and I accepted it. You will have to accept it, too. There is nothing you can do except accept your fate’. That woman never had a child but, as a woman, she knows what the feeling of motherhood is like. She prefers to tell Şükran the death of her son in an atypical way. It is not important what happens afterwards. What is important is to give the signs of accepting the truth. The film is the story of atypical people.

An interesting aspect is how Şükran follows her intuitions, which is a rather feminine attribute. She finds strength in thinking her son will hold her and prevent her from falling. Perhaps this is another motif in the film, just like the statement that the fathers always think the sons look like their fathers, but the mothers are sure that the sons look like their mothers. In the last episode, when she meets the other Veysel, this is repeated and ties the story together.

This is very typical. Whether the son looks like the father or not, for the fathers it is very important that the sons should look like them. In a very modest way, Şükran tries to explain that her son looks like her. I often come across this notion and like it.

Zühal Olcay who plays Şükran was the lead in Ömer Kavur’s Gizli Yüz/The Secret Face. One cannot help connecting the two films in terms of the long voyage to the depth of Anatolia, mystical images of the countryside and the search itself.

I think that the voyage here is more real than interior. One can say that there is movement in terms of facing the reality.

Perhaps from the point of self-confidence as well. In the beginning, Şükran is very timid and insignificant. On the train journey, she takes small action, but perhaps this is also a sign of her naivety, or a female attribute of acting from the heart and not the head. She offers grapes to the two guards and their handcuffed prisoner who is accused of shooting three people on the head. When the guards fall asleep, she pretends not to see the prisoner escape. In her naivety, she gives money to the goons thinking they will find her son and does not suspect anything when they ask for more money. She is suspicious of the German journalist who wants to help her but trusts all Turkish men just like the mother of Hüseyin who fed all policemen and gave them money to have some clues about her son’s disappearance long after he was dead. The first time she actually breaks out of her passive and submissive world is when she yells at Ahmet Bey on the phone, then to Derviş Ağa. ‘Find him!’ she screams. This is against her character.

She reaches that point. She even resorts to illegal means for the first time. Someone who tries all the normal channels finally hits the wall.

The pre-nuptial banquet reflected very well, the male supremacy in the culture. The bride, who is not present, is bought from Syria.

This is a real picture. I went to Mardin several times. The way they behave towards women is very typical of the East. The woman is like a porcelain figure that should stay in the corner and attention
should be paid that it is not broken – a very strange sense of morality. The mother is something very valuable.

What type of reaction you have received from women in Turkey?

Those who are mothers are very much affected. They come out crying. Some say why did you make this film? To torture us? In this sense, I think the film accomplished its aim.

Our culture is a male-dominated culture and this is more evident in Anatolia. Do you have a message for such a society?

More than a message, this is a picture. When you show a picture, the message goes where it should, but I did not underline anything in that respect. I wanted to make a quiet film that flows languidly. I did not want to underline anything and that is evident in the result. The material itself is dangerous. One can place mother and missing son relationship in Turkey easily within the political atmosphere; some people reproached me for not delving into that aspect. To abuse the subject would disturb me. My aim was to focus on the relationship but naturally, if the story takes place in Turkey, it will have connotations.

You have had some problems to have a screening permit. Do you still need the approval of the script?

No, censorship in that sense does not exist anymore, now there is another kind of censorship. You need a permit to screen the film and this film was refused. They sent us to the higher commission, which is composed of seven people: four from the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Culture, etc. and three from the film sector. We managed to get the permit but with difficulty. The fact that the film was part of the Istanbul International Film Festival helped. Something like this had not happened for many years. The film was shown in Istanbul for five weeks and then went to Anatolia to be screened in 60-65 cities.

Innowhereland is a good example of recent European films made possible with funds from Eurimage, which involves the participation of two or three European countries.

And for the first time in the history of Eurimage, funds were given to a film-maker for a first film. In the past, you had to make at least one film before applying. Our major partner is German.

In recent years, there is an upsurge of new talent in Turkish cinema; young film-makers like you have brought new blood. What is it that attracts the young to make films?

Evidently, there is new blood. The previous generation is either not very productive or what they produce is not of quality. This is a sign of change. Why would one make a film? You have to have an issue, a story to tell. I am happy that I have the possibility to tell this in a number of ways, but cinema would allow this story to reach the consumer in a most direct way. The atmosphere also appeals to me.

Can we find certain common elements in the films of the new generation, elements that would set them apart from the generation before?

The cinema of the new generation is more personal. The previous generations did not have a converging point; their approach to life was not so plastic. Also, the manner in which the new generations tell their stories is different. We are more open to the outside world. However, we cannot look at the works under the title of new realism, etc. I do not think this is possible today. It is
like the championship in a football game. The right players come together in the right place, the right time and add the luck factor, they win the game. But this is rather difficult now.

The master-apprentice period has also come to an end. Most of the young filmmakers today are film school graduates.

From the intellectual point of view, there are many talents. The master-apprentice relation is important but that was a generation with intellectual problems.

The era of the ‘comprador’ producer is over.

In the past, it was easier to make a film. The cost was less. If you followed the usual channels, such as working under a master for a while, you could convince a producer. Today you have to convince international bodies such as Eurimage.

However, the film-maker has more freedom in the present situation. Look at the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Zeki Demirkubuz. They do not have much in common. They have found their own way of interpretation.

These are special cases because they are their own producers. They make a very personal cinema and they prefer to do it alone. But cinema as an industry is a collaboration between a professional director and a professional producer. There is a problem in Turkey regarding producers. The comprador producer era came to an end; today we need producers who can form relations outside Turkey. There has to be a change in this aspect for the directors to have a chance to tell their stories in a different way.

A new producer type emerged – young, dynamic and film school graduate – like your co-producer Ms Zeynep Özbatur.

This is also a special case but others will follow.

Your first film was a short, named Dayım/My Uncle (1999), and it was very successful.

That film has a special place in my career. I made it with the help of Kadri Yurdatap, the co-producer of Innowhereland. It was the first Turkish short film to be shown at the Venice Film Festival and received several awards in Italy and Spain. I had the chance to work with a famous actor, Ahmet Uğurlu. Thanks to that film, I was able to make another film in Italy, which is called, Sukut Altındır/Silence is Gold. Due to some post-production problems, I haven’t finished it yet.

I have heard that you have a new project.

It is called Mutlu Yıllar Herkese/Happy New Year to All. The theme of quest is there but it is a different film. Five days before the New Year, the stories of three men converge in Istanbul. One of them comes from Diyarbakır to open a printing shop with his friend Musa Kara. The other sells lottery tickets; he arrives in Istanbul just like 3000 other sellers of lottery tickets from the East, particularly the region of Kars, who come before the New Year. The third one is one of the one million illegal foreigners – Africans, Iranians, Iraqians, Afghans – in Istanbul. He is an Afghani teacher who works as a porter. All three are behind the same person, Musa Kara, who we never see. The roads of the characters intersect but they are not aware of each other. The forth character is Istanbul – Istanbul before the New Year’s Eve. It will be an action film. I intend to shoot it Super 16mm and I have cast Mehmet Kurtuluş, a Turkish actor from Germany who has been very successful with the films of Fatih Akin, a director of Turkish origin who makes films in Germany.
The players are new to me but the crew is the same crew ever since my first short film as if we are making a family film.

*Mannheim, November 2002*

**Bio/Filmography**

Tayfun Pirselimoğlu was born in 1959 in Trabzon, Turkey. He studied painting and sculpture at the Vienna Art Academy. His works were displayed at art exhibitions in Istanbul, Vienna, New York, Tallinn and Budapest. In 1996, he made his debut as a writer with the novel *Çöl Masalları/Desert Tales*. His second novel, *Kayıp Şahıslar Albümü/The Album of Missing Persons*, was published in 2001. Since 1995, he has been active in the film industry, particularly as a screenwriter. In 1999, he directed his first short film, *Dayim/My Uncle*.

**Feature films**

2002 *Hiçbir yerde/Innowhereland*

**YEŞİM USTAOĞLU**

Yeşim Ustaoğlu is one of the most prolific and talented young women film-makers in Turkey. After four successful short films, in 1994 Ustaoğlu made her first feature, *İz/Traces*, a psychological thriller about the inner voyage of a disillusioned police officer who is tormented by feelings of guilt and the loss of his integrity. This was a courageous undertaking considering the fact that to depict a policeman in any role other than the protector of peace has long been a taboo in Turkey.

The second film of Ustaoğlu had a subject not only daring, but systematically curbed in Turkey. *Güneş Yolculuk/Journey to the Sun* (1999) told the story of a very special friendship between two young men, a Kurd and a Turk, both of them Anatolians and misplaced in the big metropolis, Istanbul. The film competed at the 49th International Berlin Film festival and won two prizes: The AGICOA Prize Blue Angel for a film on a burning contemporary issue and Peace Film Prize, 1999.
Ustaoğlu was perhaps the only director in Berlin that year who was offered to wear a bulletproof vest to her press conference (which she declined). As demonstrations continued in Berlin, triggered by the capture of the outlawed Kurdish party PKK’s leader, Abdullah Öcalan, Yeşim tried to extend her message of peace with a beautiful film that did not fail to touch the hearts of many.

In 2003, she received the Sundance/NHK Film-maker Award for the script of Bulutları Beklenen/Waiting for the Clouds and completed the film during the following year. Her third feature, Waiting for the Clouds is placed in the 1970s, a time of social and political upheaval in Turkey when the border with the Soviet Union was a constant source of anxiety and paranoia. Communists and those who did not tow the political line were kept under strict surveillance and the social and intellectual climate was dominated by an atmosphere of intolerance and mistrust. Trebolu, a small fishing village near Trabzon, on the shores of the Black Sea, is the locale of this film, which focuses on an old woman named Ayşe and her long struggle to hide her true identity, that of a Greek woman whose parents were sent to death during WWI.

The first interview with Yeşim took place in 1995, the day after she received the Golden Tulip for Best Turkish Film of the Year during the Istanbul International Film Festival. I found her in the café/restaurant that she opened with Tayfun Pirselimoğlu, screenwriter of Traces, in the Beyoğlu district, the old Pera that has become modern Istanbul’s SoHo. In 1999, during the International Berlin Film Festival, I joined the queue of journalists from around the world (Chile to Senegal, I was told) to have the second interview, and the third interview took place in Ankara in May 2004, during the Uçansüpürge/Flying Broom Women’s Film Festival.

**Taboos Can Also Be Broken**

Last night, you won the prestigious Best Turkish Film of the Year award with your first feature. How does it feel to be a winner? And how will this award shape your future projects?

I have a feeling I am already too late. It is like waking up from a long sleep.

Just like your short film, Otel/Hotel, Traces is also about dark and oppressively confined spaces. What draws you to such an atmosphere?

This is one of the vehicles to nourish the story. Space becomes one of the characters.

The protagonist of Traces, a perfect anti-hero, is a police commissar – a very sensitive issue in Turkey, particularly after several recent confrontations when the citizens have begun to see the police force as the perpetrators of violence rather than the protectors of peace.

With Hotel, I began to reflect on the guilt complex and wanted to investigate this issue through someone who is responsible for preventing it. In the beginning, especially at the script stage, I had
several reactions from people who were not comfortable with the depiction of the police force in such a manner, and they warned me, but it all cooled off now.

Another film festival ended and the Turkish films we have seen left something better to be desired, so much so that the FIPRESCI (Federation of International Film Critics) jury refused to give a National Prize. Why is it that quality films are not made in Turkey?

Film-makers do not take off from their own experiences. They all yearn for big stories. They are not interested in individuals. Stereotype characters and events have invaded Turkish cinema. An individual approach is not possible. I liked the winner of the Golden Tulip, Les Silences du Palais/Silences of the Palace (1994) by Moufida Tlatli, the Tunisian film. It is not a big story, but I had the feeling that she was telling a story which she knew and felt.

Why do you think such films are not made in Turkey? Is it a question of money?

I do not think it is a question of money. There are several problems, problems with the script, with the film-makers…. personal and individual problems.

There are several very good screenwriters.

Yes, but the attitude towards cinema is disparaging due to the present situation. Talented scriptwriters stay away. Another issue is that Turkish cinema has built a tight circle around itself which does not easily allow outsiders to step in. In a way, this is a form of self-defence. They fear that anything new and different could shake their already shaky positions. This is how I see the situation.

Turkish film-makers have never built an école, but several important film-makers have made auteur films.

I agree that there has never been an école. However, today we can no more talk about individuals. The producers and the directors are busy trying to preserve their existence. It is necessary for them to renew themselves, to work on new technical structures, on creativity and narration. When they cannot do that, they assume a conservative attitude against every possible ‘danger’ from outside.

In such a medium, how do you feel as a woman, a young woman at the beginning of her career?

I do not like to make a distinction such as man-woman or young-old. Everyone exists in the same system. The difference is in the feelings, in being you. Several young women film-makers have emerged during the last few years, notably three. However, we cannot make a value judgment based on numbers. The quality behind is what counts.

What I would like to know is whether one can find a distinct woman’s point of view in the films made by women. For instance, in the earlier part of her career, Bilge Olgaç was reproached for making ‘man’s films’. When I look at Traces, I feel that a man or a woman could have made it.

I would like to go back to the Tunisian film. A woman’s point of view was very prominent in that film. Turkish women film-makers do not give the woman’s point of view. Just like men, they are not very interested in making films about what really interests them. I do not mean that every work of art should be autobiographical. You do not always have to tell your own story, but it is important to manifest a personal point of view. A large part of me is in Traces, everything I have felt in the last ten
years, the sense of guilt for living in a society such as ours and for keeping silent. I had to tell this feeling with *Hotel* as well. Although it might be difficult to comprehend, in one sense it is very personal. I found a similar feeling in *Babam Askerde/Dad is in the Army* (1994), a film by a young woman, Handan Ipekçi. Despite all its shortcomings, it is a warm and sincere film. On the other hand, *Ay Vakti/Moon Time* (1994) by Mahinur Ergun, one of our more established woman directors, is a totally fabricated, cold story.

The eye of the architect is always present in your films – the old houses in the back streets of Beyoğlu, the geometric courtyards, the claustrophobic alleys, the terrifying shadows of the tall buildings, the ruler-sharp angles of the rooms....

I think this is inevitable.

**How do your diverse talents affect your career?**

Working in my café is better than working in an office. I have more time to myself. This job helps me concentrate on cinema. The café is in an area where there is density of people, very interesting people. In some ways, it is connected to my next project – again with Tayfun (Pirselimoğlu), who wrote the script for *Traces* and was the artistic director. We are in the process of preparing a non-fiction film of about 90 minutes for the German ZDF television about people of Istanbul, particularly those who live around here, the Beyoğlu district. Not only the artists, the intellectuals, but the Anatolian migrants of the surrounding slums as well. We have chosen people who are completely different from one another. The camera will follow their lives for one year and, through these characters, will try to understand the Turkish people and their lives.

*Istanbul, April 1995*

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During the press conference this morning, you said that the idea for *Journey to the Sun* first came to you after reading two newspaper articles. What I would like to know is the real reason that drew you to this project. Is it because there are hardly any films made in Turkey on this subject? Is it because of a collective guilt complex, or an urge to explain certain things to certain people?

I think all of these played a certain part except perhaps the feeling to do something that was not done before. My reasons were mostly personal. In daily life, certain things affect a person. While we live in comfortable surroundings, every time we go downtown, we are faced with the drama of little children. I am very sensitive on this issue. I know some of those kids. I have known them for years. Even this could be the starting point. Who are these children? What kind of circumstances do they live in? Even to think about it disturbs one, or leads one to action. Ever since my first short film, *Anı Yakalamak/To Catch a Moment*, my scripts are based on personal experiences and contain stories about people I meet.

I understand the story was inspired by newspaper articles on the Kurdish villages that have been marked, burned and evacuated in the south-eastern region of Turkey and this issue is deeply rooted in the political situation of Turkey, although the issues in this film surpass the Kurd issue.

This is the issue of Turkey. The fight at the soccer game is one of the starting points. We are all suffering. It may not be like the suffering of the people I portray in my film, but I feel I share their problems.
We have discussed this subject during our first interview following the screening of your first film, *Traces*.

I suppose I have not changed that much. (*laughs*)

Some Turkish critics found the KKK-style red X marks on the houses a bit far-fetched.

The X mark symbolizes hate and condemns the dark skinned.

**An important element in the film is that the characters are in a constant state of movement or transition.**

People of Turkey have been living this dynamism since the beginning. Despite all its problems, it is a dynamic society. When you look at the film from the point of a documentary, you see this movement.

**Does this also have something to do with the liminality of their situation? They feel they cannot belong anywhere.**

This is evident throughout our history although we finally chose Anatolia.

**A perpetual search for identity.**

Despite the fact that we are part of a very rich culture, we continue to ask ourselves, ‘Who are we’? Including Islamist fundamentalism, all social explosions, the Kurdish identity, the Turkish identity and the problems of the third-generation Turks in Germany are all based on the same question. ‘Who are we’? Everyone is asking this question and finding an open door to say I am this or that and defending it.

**Have you found answers to your questions while making this film?**

I became more acquainted with the Kurdish people. I saw from inside how a Turk and a Kurd could be close friends. I transferred to my film what I learned about the cultural and traditional differences of the Kurdish people. I am not so naive but I tried to look with a naive eye, like Mehmet, and wanted to learn with him to develop his character. This was not the first time I met Kurds. I have always had Kurdish friends. But I learned many things and I think I also gave a lot. I am very happy with the work.

**Is this one of the questions that the film is trying to answer? That people are not enemies and the closer they get, the better they understand each other.**

Main theme. I saw it in my personal life, too. While shooting the film, we became so close that we were like a family. It was not a work relationship. The film is about friendship and love; this friendship overpowers love. A lonely youth assumes responsibility of a friend’s life (and death) and grows from this experience. When Mehmet begins to understand Berzan’s world, death loses its importance. Now he can move towards a positive future and build his life with Arzu. At the end, Berzan has returned to his village even though in a coffin. As the coffin slides on water with the birds above, Mehmet is standing on his two feet. There is hope in sadness. In that sense, the film has a positive ending.
Water is the main trope in the film.

Water is an important part of our culture; water is the symbol of life and it has spiritual connotations. Each character is connected to this trope. Mehmet’s job is to listen to the water pipes to detect leaks; Arzu works in a laundromat. Water links characters. From one perspective, Mehmet sounds naive, but he is also very talented and open-minded. When I decided to conclude the film with the image of the water, I thought it should also start with the water – Mehmet carrying Berzan’s coffin, an image that is reflected in the water. That first shot is taken with a long lens; somebody is carrying something, it is not clear what. Then we go to the beginning of the story; the characters are introduced and the links are established. At the end of the film, we go back to the opening sequence.

Is it a deliberate choice that you never mention the name Kurdistan?

I told what I saw and what I felt. I do not feel the necessity to underline certain things. I am aware of the Kurdish reality, but Kurdistan is something else. I do not think it is my subject, I look more with an artistic eye. That is a matter for politicians.

I thought perhaps this was the way to give the story a universal dimension. The issue of ethnic minorities is a universal issue just like the issue of migration to the big cities, be it the result of political or economic crises.

There is that dimension also. It is a universal theme. Racism and police brutality are not only our problems. These are the problems of the blacks, the people who are different or one reason or another, no matter where they live. Only recently, some girls were expelled from a school in France for wearing a headscarf. In cinema, I believe in expression and speculation. The characters must be in a position to interact with their environment – the society and nature. I have developed this style over the years. It is evident in Traces, but in an abstract manner. Here it is more concrete, which gives it a documentary feeling. It is simpler but at the same time more developed. The place and the people are part of my style. The script is inspired by real events. I tried to give a global dimension and human characteristics to local events.

A journalist commented that there were actually two films in Journey to the Sun: Istanbul and the voyage.

I do not think the two are disconnected. If I finished the film where Berzan died, everything would be left in the air. We had to untie the knot that formed in the character of Mehmet. We did this with the journey. The fact that the village, Zorduc is underwater explains the disappearance of a whole culture and history. In the finale, the coffin goes to the water and this is important. Life begins with water. There is also an optimistic dimension. Mehmet assumes Berzan’s identity. This does not mean that Mehmet becomes Berzan. Mehmet is not so naive; he has the courage to look at life in a different way. He is at the point of defending himself. This is why the journey must go on. It must not end when Mehmet is helpless, when Berzan dies. I see the film as a whole.

During the voyage, Mehmet takes a policeman to his car. Despite his initial fears, it turns out that this is not a bad policeman. Why did you feel the necessity for this episode?

The sequence begins with Mehmet’s fear of the uniform. But there is humanism everywhere; we must not lose hope. For instance, the man in the morgue was also very human. Hülya, the boss of the young girl, Arzu, at the laundromat, is another one. In her relationship with Arzu, she is a despot, but also motherly – warm and protective. Her character complements the character at the morgue.
I think this is the most professional film that has come out of Turkey for a long time. The editing is very good; the music is very suitable to the subject and carries all the characteristics of the culture despite the fact that the composer was not Turkish and the cinematography gives the impression that it was done by someone who knew the city very well although he was a foreigner.

The editor, Nicolas Gester lives in England. His most well-known work is Before the Rain. Originally, I did some rough editing. When he arrived, we sat at the table. The composer is from Macedonia, not far from us. I had the music in my head and used some local cassettes. I heard a CD that Vlatko Stefanovski did for another film and I found him. The film is full of exiting meetings like this. Before I began shooting, I did my research both indoors and outdoors. I needed someone who would understand me. I saw the work of Jacek Petrycki in the Kieslowski documentaries and found it very interesting. He came to Turkey. Right from the start, we agreed on one thing: The film had to be shot towards the sun. I must say that everyone who participated in this film did so after familiarizing with the project and liking it.

**How long did it take from the moment the film appeared as a project to the completion?**

When I won the script fund in Montpellier in 1995, it was only a treatment, which means I started more or less after Traces. Actual shooting was about nine weeks.

**Was it a chronological shoot?**

Yes. First, we did the Istanbul scenes. Then we went to Anatolia with a small team. Except for the two leads, we did not take any actors with us. We used the people I chose during my search for the locale. All players are non-professionals. Even the two leads had no film experience. They are part of an amateur theatre group.

**Did you encounter any difficulties?**

In the south-east, we were stopped once. It seems that we were inside a military zone.

**What about difficulties of being a woman director?**

The fact that I am a woman has been surprising many people. But I never had difficulties from that point of view. Everyone was very helpful and supportive.

Women directors in Turkey generally deal with issues that directly concern women, maybe that is why they were surprised. Your protagonists are male but, in your film, we can find many elements that display women’s point of view. For instance, the boss at the laundromat is a despot, as you said, but there is also solidarity between her and the employees. The worries of Arzu about Mehmet, her visit to the police station, the silent sharing of grief and anxiety with other women who came to inquire about their missing men are other examples.

In her conservative world, Arzu manages to find little outlets. She is courageous. She is not afraid of life. She has little female tricks like hiding from her father the fact that she had a beer or drawing lines on her legs to give the impression of a seamed stocking to look more attractive to her boyfriend. I like the Arzu character very much.

The subject of the film is not only daring, but systematically curbed in Turkey. Also, I believe for the first time in Turkish cinema, Kurdish is spoken in a film. Yol was banned mostly for its Kurdish songs. You show the police as a force that tortures citizens. Do you envisage problems about screening this film in Turkey?
I do not think there will be problems. Newspapers write about police brutality every day and the police know what they are doing. It would be funny to say there is no torture in Turkey. This is on the agenda and it is a shame. I did not create a scene on something that does not exist.

**But they do not seem to make many films about these issues.**

_ Ağır Roman_/ _Cholera Street_ even shows how they do the torturing and yet it was very popular. We are closer to democracy if we think about these problems. I believe the humanist aspect of _Journey_ is in the foreground and what is discussed in the background is the realities of Turkey.

How did you attract three countries, Turkey, Holland and Germany to your project?

My producer, Berhooz Hashemian, liked the project and could see that it would draw interest. He promised to find the money and he did. Even at the script level, the television and Eurimage were already interested. But Berhooz did everything. I was home writing. From the moment, I began this project I met many people. Everyone was very helpful. It all happened with warm feelings. For me the most appealing part of the film is the fact that it carries this sincerity.

_Berlin, February 1999_

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The first time I saw _Bulutları Beklerken_/ _Waiting for the Clouds_, I was impressed by the visual beauty of the film but, the second time, I noticed how measured and unobtrusive the directing and the acting were and how effective the ellipses in the narrative. The film has a peculiar dynamism; there is motion and there is ‘un-motion’. Life looks as if it goes nowhere but it does.

This is rather characteristic of the Black Sea where I spent my childhood. Nature dictates lives. Several aspects have changed considerably over the years, but in the mountains, time does not exist. Their isolation preserves the culture of the inhabitants. The main character, Ayşe, can only exist in an environment where there is no time.

Still moments are followed by movement just like in your previous film, _Journey to the Sun_, where there was Istanbul and then the voyage.

As I develop my characters, I want change. I want to liberate them to acquire the strength to solve their problems. In _Waiting for the Clouds_, Ayşe wants to be cleansed of her guilt feeling and prepares the journey to find her brother no matter what may happen. In _Journey_, when Mehmet begins to understand Berzan, he decides to take his body back to his hometown.

The knot that was formed in the character of Mehmet had to be untied to understand his voyage.

If I left Mehmet at his lowest point, he would have been a pathetic character. He finds the strength to carry Berzan (even if it is his coffin) and Ayşe decides to make the journey to face her brother.

The historical perspective is very important in _Waiting for the Clouds_ and has gained a new meaning particularly in a period when borders are torn and new borders are erected. Perhaps you have seen the film _Khamosh Pani_/ _Silent Waters_ (2003) by Sabiha Sumar, which won the Golden Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival. It is a coincidence, but conceivably an indication that film-makers of the same generation have similar concerns. That film is on ethnic violence during the Partition of India.
when both sides commit atrocities, raping women, etc. Women who are violated are pushed into wells by their families to cleanse the family honour, or they marry the perpetrators to survive. The protagonist is an Indian woman married to a Muslim Pakistani. Even her son does not know her real identity. She gives Koran lessons. Everyone knows her as Aisha. In the 1970s, the son becomes a fundamentalist. When relations between two countries are better, the Sikhs are allowed to come for pilgrimage to their shrine and her brother arrives. It is very difficult for her but also for her son to learn that the mother is Hindu.

I have not seen this film. Waiting For The Clouds is based in part on the novella Tamama by Yorgios Andreadis and my extensive research, both in Turkey and in Greece. I read many books and articles of interviews written by Pontus and Turkish historians living outside of Turkey. I also found deported people who are still alive and recorded their stories. To authenticate the narrative, I returned to the area where I had spent my childhood and stayed several months. This part of the research took two and a half years. Trebolu, a fishing village to the west of Trabzon, formerly populated by Pontus Greeks, is the setting for Waiting For The Clouds. In antiquity, north-eastern Turkey was at the crossroads of several cultures that co-existed peacefully, which continued until the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Through one of Trebolu’s elderly inhabitants, a woman named Ayşe, the narrative unveils a horrific episode of the war, which is not to be found in the official history books. In the winter of 1916, the Ottoman army evacuated villages west of the Russian-occupied Trabzon and deported the Greek residents. Many died of starvation or harsh weather conditions. Ayşe was born in Tirebolu as Eleni. During the deportation, when she was only ten, she and her brother Niko witnessed the death of their parents. Eleni’s will power kept them alive until a Turkish family adopted her, but Niko chose to live in the barracks of an orphanage and was later sent to Greece. For 50 years, Ayşe felt the agonizing guilt of abandoning her brother. In 1975, when she loses her Turkish sister, the last member of her adoptive family, she is forced to confront her past. As she breaks down, the memory of her own language returns. The only one in the village who can connect with her is eight-year-old Mehmet, who is a precocious child. When a stranger arrives, he discovers, through the language he speaks, that he must somehow be connected to Ayşe and brings them together.

Mehmet’s role is pivotal.

Mehmet introduces Thanasis to Ayşe and for the first time in 50 years, Ayşe discusses her past. After he was sent to Greece with the other orphans, Thanasis joined the partisans during the war and was forced into exile. He lived in Russia for several years and now has returned to Greece, settling in Thessaloniki. Thanasis is a catharsis for Ayşe/Eleni to confront her past. He even locates the long-lost Niko, her brother. What is homeland? Who is a foreigner? The film tries to find answers to the thorny questions of identity and nationalism.

During our previous interviews, we have discussed space as another character, such as the hotel in your short film Hotel and, Traces, your first feature. In both films, space is confined, dark and foreboding. Here the space is open, the mountains and the plateau, but also closed. Landscape under the incessant downpour and the ubiquitous heavy fog give a claustrophobic atmosphere.

With Journey and Sırtlarındaki Hayat/Life on Their Shoulders, the documentary I made while shooting the Clouds, I moved away from abstract characters of Hotel or Traces, to more concrete ones. I have entered their lives and freed them from the abstract space. I have breathed life into them.
language is different but I feel I have returned to my original premise, which is evident in the short stories I wrote before becoming a film-maker. Perhaps the pressure that had existed on me, when I made *Hotel, Traces* and *Journey*, pushed me to an abstract mode of expression and I am coming out of it and experiencing the intensity of time and space.

This is also the first time that you have written the script alone. The others were collaborations with your ex-husband, Tayfun Pırselimoğlu.

Petros Markaris was my consultant. I tried to create a similar story as *Journey* but, at the same time, delve into the interior worlds of the characters.

When we spoke after *Traces*, you mentioned the feeling of guilt for being silent. The sense of ‘collective guilt’ is also integral to the main theme of *Waiting For the Clouds*. Yaşar Kemal, our finest writer, has demonstrated in his recent trilogy, *Euphrates Flows Blood*, the atrocities done to ethnic minorities in Anatolia and was reprimanded for it, so was Orhan Pamuk, another fine writer with international fame.

There is history other than the official history taught to us, but we do not want to face it. When we do, we have to live in a dilemma. The film is the story of those who suffered on the other side. I heard their stories. Ayşe carries the burden of silence.

**In one scene, she physically carries her Turkish sister on her shoulders.**

She also keeps the word she gave to her dead father. She can never live her own life. She never marries or forms a family.

**The issue of identity is central to this film as well as your previous one. In *Journey*, Mehmet tries to hide his identity or tries to assume another identity. To the soldier on the train, he says he is from Zorguç, the village of Kurd Berzan. In this film, to survive among Turks, Ayşe hides her Greek identity. One denies his identity and the other is not allowed to declare it. The Greek and Turkish identities of one woman have torn her apart all her life, whereas the young Turk, can only find his equilibrium by acknowledging the Kurdish identity and becoming one – a strong message to the Turkish government.**

Mehmet is a young man from Tire, who is treated like a Kurd for his dark skin and for a long while fights against it. Spraying paint on his hair is the ultimate manifestation of his anguish. As he understands, he wants to get away from his Turkish identity. The theme of sense of belonging is the same in both films. Here, Ayşe lives in the land where she was born but cannot express her identity.

**Religion is an important aspect of identity, but also, the language.**

The language is more important; Ayşe lives unable to express herself in her language. The official language is imposed upon us.

**The old woman Ayşe meets in Greece, who invites her to have coffee, is also someone without a country, someone displaced. She lives in the country of her language but away from where she was born.**

She is the other side of Ayşe. Those who are from the Black Sea speak Greek with a special accent and are nostalgic about their homeland. As soon as she sees Ayşe, she understands from her accent her background and switches languages. The old woman wants to die under her favourite tree.
Turkey in the 1970s is the background. Why did you choose this period?

The film takes place around 1975 when Ayşe is 65 years old. The political climate of today is different but, during that period, the atmosphere was suppressive and fascistic. In the 1970s, the Turkish Republic was a country in a social and political upheaval, and the Soviet Union was a constant source of fear and paranoia. Turkish communists and anyone else deemed as the ‘other’ were watched closely by the government. Intolerance and suspicion reigned. This atmosphere was particularly intense around the north-eastern border, the city of Trabzon on the Black Sea, which is not more than a few hundred kilometres away from the border with Georgia (and the ex-USSR). The period aids us to understand better Ayşe and the people around her. For instance, Cengiz is a child, but his life is not much different. His father was labelled as a communist and killed.

Where did you find the opening documentary passages of the deportation?

From the Greek achieves.

How did you explain the role to Mehmet?

I tried to create an atmosphere for him and Ayşe to understand each other. He could grasp that Ayşe had a mysterious past and felt sad. He was very intelligent. In some scenes, he believed what was happening and actually cried in the separation scene. I wanted to tell the story from the point of view of a child. Mehmet carries my point of view. His emotions reflect my childhood that was spent in the area in the 1970s.

Rüçhan Çalışkı̈r, who won the Special Jury Award for Best Actress at the Istanbul International Film Festival 2004, comes from the theatre and Ayşe/Eleni was her first cinema role. Except for the leading players, the rest are non-professionals. How did you work with the mother of Mehmet, for instance?

Similar to the way I worked with Mehmet. She is from the area and played her role with passion. I took several characters from the area. They gave suggestions and helped. They were very perceptive and understood immediately.

What about the characters from Greece?

Thanasis is from Pontus. The language of Thanasis and Niko is more modernized, but Ayşe speaks the language of the mountains. Mehmet knows that Ayşe speaks a different language when she is alone. That is why when he hears Thanasis sing, he says that the stranger speaks like Ayşe and feels he can solve the riddle.

I was rather taken back when Ayşe came down from the mountain and easily found an address in Greece.

Many Pontus Greeks live in Thessaloniki. She starts from the square. When she is looking for the address, she hears the Pontus music coming from a café and enters there. If I explain too much, it becomes didactic. I used fine details such as the music, which is also used simply and sparingly.

The cinematographer is Jacek Petrycki?

Same man, same style as Journey – although the atmosphere is different. His camera is able to reflect the inner conflict and stillness but also the interior rhythm.
The film was shot on location under harsh conditions.

The most difficult part was the shooting. The highland scenes took place in an encampment 3500 meters high with no electricity. Cast and crew carried the equipment on their shoulders along a narrow path and lived in the same conditions as the characters they portrayed. The floods damaged some of our equipment. Then we heard story of a woman who was actually lost in the heavy fog, which was demoralizing for the crew. My documentary, Life on their Shoulders, reflects the living conditions in the area. The people are called Laz, with Georgian roots from the Caucasus. They have kept their language and culture, but to live in such a harsh climate means daily struggle, especially for women, who carry the burden. Once I asked a young man to help us carry the heavy equipment, he said, 'wait a minute' and went to call his mother!

Many years ago, when we spoke about Traces, you said, 'personal stories need not be autobiographical'. We can repeat it for this film. It stems from your personal feelings.

And observations. This is my childhood.

Ankara, May 2004 (translated from Turkish by the author)

Bio/Filmography

Yeşim Ustaoğlu was born in 1960 in Sarıkamış in eastern Turkey. After studying architecture at the Karadeniz (Black Sea) Technical University, she received her master’s degree from the Yıldız University of Istanbul specializing in restoration. She wrote articles for film and art magazines. In 1984, she directed her first short film, Bir Anı Yakalamak / To Catch a Moment, which was followed by three more shorts, Magnafantagna (1987), Duet/Duet (1990) and Otel/Hotel (1992). The last won the Grand Prix at the 14th Montpellier Festival of Mediterranean Films in France. In 1994, her first feature, İz / Traces, won the Best Turkish Film Prize at the Cologne Film Festival and Best Film at the Istanbul International Film Festival. Journey to the Sun won numerous prizes in its travel around the film festivals of the world in addition to several prizes in Turkey. It has also been commercially released in many cities in Europe. In 2004, while doing research for her third feature, Bulutları Beklerken / Waiting for the Clouds, she made a documentary about the women of the region of the Black Sea, Sırtlarındaki Hayat/Life on their Shoulders.

Feature films

1994 İz/Traces
1999 Güneş Yolculuk / Journey to the Sun
2004 Bulutları Beklerken / Waiting for the Clouds

Atif Yılmaz

Atif Yılmaz, alias ‘the director of women’s films’, has a long professional career that stretches over half a century. In his middle-school years in the provincial town Mersin, he was called ‘rejisör’ due to his interest in cinema. In high school, his sole entertainment was the movies, especially musicals. Some of his classmates later became actors, directors or film critics. He arrived in Istanbul to sell his first script and to enter the architecture department of the Fine Arts Academy. He could not sell his script and he could not pass the examinations to enter the Academy, so he settled for the Law School but regularly visited the Academy where all his friends were until he was discovered and thrown out. By chance, he was chosen as assistant director for two films, which led to two offers: a script, Mezarımı Taştan Oyun/Carve My Grave from Stone and a director’s job, Kanlı Feryat/The Bloody Cry, his first film.
He has made over one hundred films since then, most of which carry traditional, folkloric and local elements of Turkish society. However, his best films are those that foreground the evolution of Turkish society and the place of women in this forward motion. In fact, a close examination of his films would map this evolution. In the 1960s and 1970s, the general contention was that solutions to social or economical problems would automatically solve problems of women. *Aah, Guzel Istanbul/Oh, Lovely Istanbul* (1966) and *Selvi Boylum Al Yazmalım/The Girl with the Red Scarf* (1977) are based on such a premise, but later films of Atıf Yılmaz, such as *Dul Bir Kadın/A Widow* (1985) and *Adı Vasfiye/Her Name is Vasfiye*, contend that issues of women possess an intrinsic importance independent of other elements.

*Çemo* (1971) and *Kuma/The Second Wife* (1974) examine the family structure within feudal relations, the continuation of the lineage and the male child fanaticism. With the second film, Yılmaz takes a stronger stand against customs and brings them to trial in the story of a woman who is forced to share her man.

*Mine* (1982) is considered an important ‘woman’s film’ heralding women’s search for freedom in Turkish cinema. More than the loneliness of a woman trapped in undesirable circumstances, the film foregrounds her hidden or submerged qualities. *Dul Bir Kadın/A Widow* (1985), *Kadının Adı Yok/The Woman Has No Name* (1988) and *Berdel/Bride Barter* (1990) are some of his films with strong female characters.

In the 1980s, the entry of women into the work market offered them the possibility to experience the world outside the family circle. For some, economic independence meant freedom to escape familial oppression. With Ömer Kavur’s *Ah, Guzel Istanbul/Oh, Lovely Istanbul* and Atıf Yılmaz’s *Delikan/Hot Blooded Young* (1982), women and their issues came to the forefront and the ‘independent woman’ motif became an important subject.

Several characters of Atıf Yılmaz are independent working women. The protagonist of *Aaahh Belinda/Oh, Belinda* (1986), Serap, is a spoiled career woman who works for a shampoo commercial on television but suddenly finds herself as a bank employee who must run to her kitchen after work. Characters from different worlds, both women are in a constant struggle to assert themselves in a male-dominated society. *Hayallerim, Aşkım ve Sen/My Dreams, My Love and You* (1987) chronicles three stages in the life of a Yeşilçam star; as a character in melodramas, as a sex object and as a re-born hero. While criticizing the studio system of Yeşilçam, the film also sends a message to the stars who
are caught in its web. Türkan Şoray, the sultana of Turkish cinema, plays the lead in a story that resembles her life.

Atıf Yılmaz constantly renews himself along with the evolution of Turkish society. He is always the pioneer in attacking important issues of women – feminism, birth control, widowhood and even lesbianism. When lesbian relations surfaced in Turkish cinema in the 1960s, Yılmaz Atıf showed two women kissing each other on the lips in Iki Gemi Yanyana/Two Ships Side by Side as if testing the grounds in the cinema of a closed Muslim society that has not attained sexual freedom. Düş Gezginleri/Walking After Midnight (1992), a bolder approach to lesbian relations, was criticized for its heterosexual approach, although Yılmaz claimed that the issue in that film was the question of power and whether one could build a world without power in a woman-to-woman relationship. ‘The film shows that this is not possible because whoever is stronger, economically or culturally, has the power. They misunderstood and dismissed it a lesbian film’.

In the 1990s, Yılmaz explored other marginal issues such as transvestites and down-and-out denizens of the night in his usual style of commercial bordering on art. Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar/The Night, Angel and Our Children (1993) is one such example.

Almost every film of Yılmaz is decorated with erotic images, ‘It is the same question asked us over and over again’ he explained once, ‘how many minutes of sex do you have’?

In the spring of 2005, at the age of 80, Atıf Yılmaz presented his most recent film, Eğreti Gelin/The Borrowed Bride, to a very appreciative audience of foreign critics and festival representatives during the Istanbul International Film Festival. Beaming with energy, he hugged me and said, ‘I am ready to shoot another film. I want to be the oldest film director of the world!’

The following interview took place in April 2003, in his office in the Beyoğlu district, although, we have been meeting regularly over continents, the first meeting going back to January 1989, New Delhi.

**WHOSE IS THE GAZE?**

**Yılmaz Bey, your career as a film-maker spans over half a century.**

I have lost count of the number of films I have made.

**Many of your most distinguished works foreground women characters. What is your motivation apart from your fascination with the opposite sex?**

Everyone seems to know that I am fascinated by the opposite sex! (A hearty laugh). In Turkey, men have certain advantages guaranteed by customs and traditions. Women are born without any of these advantages. In their society, they ask the question of ‘who am I?’ or ‘where am I going?’ more than men do. In the rural milieu or in the city, they are in a constant search for identity and they continuously evolve in this search. The peasant becomes a factory worker and gains political consciousness, or works as a maid in a bourgeois household, yearns for a lifestyle like theirs and begins to search for a place in the metropolis. From this point of view, women are characters that are more dramatic. Visual arts such as cinema are concerned with human drama. Therefore, to reflect individual evolutions and transformations, women are material more suitable for cinema. The common theme of all of my films is women’s search for identity. *Mine* takes place in a small town; *Bir Yudum Sevgi/A Taste of Love* in the city slums; *Dul Bir Kadın/A Widow* (1985) focuses on an upper class woman, the widow of a diplomat who tries to find a place for herself in society when
she is left alone; Berdel’s heroine is a peasant woman, but all of these films foreground the search for identity.

With *A Widow* (1985), you gave lesbian relationships a *clin d’œil*. It was the most talked about film of 1985. The erotic fantasies of two women finding comfort in each other aroused an awkward curiosity in the audience but, at the same time, the film was accused of smearing the image of men, particularly due to one sentence, ‘the men take their egoism all the way to bed’. When we look back to the most productive years of Turkish cinema, however, the industry that is called Yeşilçam systematically typecast women.

Those heroines lacked a psyche and they could never become characters. They represented certain masks similar to the masks worn in many traditions of Eastern art, such as the Kabuki theatre of Japan. The same can also be said for the heroes of that period. What is played with masks in the Eastern cultures was done live. For instance, if you look at the women characters of the period, Fatma Girik plays the ‘manly’ woman; Filiz Akin is the educated bourgeois girl; Hülya Koçyiğit represents the oppressed woman of our society; Türkan Şoray is the woman with sexuality who is also oppressed. Each of these types is as if created from a mask. But when communications have advanced with television, Internet, etc., and the borders with the rest of the world have disappeared, they began to turn into characters whether they liked it or not, characters with a psyche, who could face themselves and ask the questions, ‘who am I?’ and ‘am I a member of a collective society?’

In many films of that period, women suffer for simply being a woman. Most of the time, they are used and abused. For those who rebel, the end is death or prostitution. The women who love are never united with the loved one. Do you think that the film-makers were aiming at giving a lesson to the woman such as ‘if you do not obey men you end up in bars and become a “fallen woman”’. Your film, *Asiye Nasıl Kurtulur/How Can Asiye Be Saved?*, shows another reality.

This is how those films were made: Certain viewers from a certain section of society requested for certain issues of Eastern cultures to be explored and cinema answered this request. For instance, we had a maid who would beg me ‘Atıf Bey, make a film for us to cry our hearts out’. This way they could be relieved. Yeşilçam was a cinema that answered the demands of society. Naturally, this has changed over the years. For example, the films of what we call the young generation are entirely personal works that reflect their perception of the world. None of them is alike. This enriches our cinema and from another angle shows that our cinema is in a search. In the past, our target audience was evident: middle class, family, women. They constituted the majority of the audience. Today everyone is locked at home watching television. They cannot go to the cinema. That is why we can say that our cinema is in a search.

Why has the middle class abandoned the cinema halls? Once it was because of all those porno films, then the night curfew of the military regime, then the video…

There is no video now. The most important factor is the economical crisis. Today, for a family to go to the cinema means spending 40-50 million Turkish Liras. The minimum wage only recently went up to 200 million. Can you imagine taking your wife and kids? Today it is not possible to go to the cinema. Furthermore, the television shows 15-20 films each day, which are according to their taste. Our viewers are the young, between the ages of 15-25, and most of them are, naturally, under the influence of American cinema. Turkish cinema does not have an audience. It is not evident who its
audience is. Only the films with popular stories starring media personalities make money; what we call ‘art films’ do not.

**One of the popular subjects of Yeşilçam was the rural stories.**

We used to have 3000 cinemas, most of which were in Anatolia. Every town had at least one cinema. The issues of rural life interested the Anatolian people. Migration was one of the major concerns. The demands of society have changed. For instance, the recent film of Yusuf Kurşenli, Göndertilmemiş Mektuplar/Letters Unsent, is found old-fashioned and stale by everyone. If it were made twenty years ago, people would fill the cinema halls and cry from beginning to end.

**We can still watch old films with pleasure.**

Yes, they appeal to the sensibilities of our society but when the audience is between the ages of 15 and 25, Türkan Şoray and Kadir İnanır look like fossils of dinosaurs. The young make fun of these films. Zeki Ökten’s latest film, Gülüm/My Rose, is the same; it is old.

**But you have overcome such obstacles.**

My films, in general, have found audience.

**You are able to capture contemporary issues.**

Cinema is an art for the masses; therefore, it is influenced by the demands of the viewers and made accordingly. It is merchandise. When I make a film, I am thinking who I am going to show it to.

**One of your earlier films, Kuma/The Second Wife (1974), is a beautiful rural film on infertility and a strong indictment of feudal structures that destroy lives but, at the same time, an acute study of the psychology of two women who must share their men.**

*Kuma* is based on a play and it is one of my best films.

**Berdel/Bride Barter (1991) also explores a similar issue.**

The focus is male child fanaticism, but the issue is explored in more depth here.

**Several scenes are carved in my memory, such as the scene when the husbands try to prevent their wives (unsuccessfully) from attending family planning classes. Inside the classroom, you did not forget a good dose of humour, especially when displaying the helplessness of the city experts in trying to explain in simple terms and plain language contraceptive devices such as the spiral. You captured the audience of Berlin with this film.**

It was also shown at the London Film Festival.

**In 1987, you made a film based on a best-selling novel, Kadının Adı Yok/The Woman Has No Name by Duygu Asena, but changed the story significantly.**

Unfortunately, I was not very successful. The film was made on the success of the novel and it was a commercial success but was not a film of quality. It was not able to explain properly what it explained. The novel that it was based on was not a good novel either.

**Perhaps it is not a good novel, but I read it in one sitting and when I went out, I began to look at all men with hate. It is able to have this effect. One finds oneself in it. The sexual harassment on the buses, for instance, growing up in Istanbul, we all endured these unfortunate events. The message was very strong. I remember few**
lines from your film, a conversation between a mother and daughter: ‘Why do women have breasts?’ ‘To give milk.’ ‘Why don’t men give milk?’ ‘They make money.’ Or the following: ‘You are grown up, now you will bleed from your bottom.’ ‘Like boys who have circumcision. Shall I have gifts too?’ ‘No, it will be a secret.’ ‘But they have parties and presents.’ ‘That is enough who cares about your lower parts?’

The film also defends a different concept of morality but we could not do it well, I must say. It was not a good film.

But it seems that the public appreciated it. The men or women?

Mostly women!

In the old days, there used to be women’s matinees. I remember, in 1980, a sex film, L’anti-vierge by Francis Giacobetti, the second of the Emmanuelle series, played downtown Beyoğlu for fourteen weeks in a woman’s matinee. One single screening was attended by more than 200 women. Unusual for a conservative Islamic society! The women seemed to be starved to see a part of their lives on screen. In the following years, films focusing on the fantasies of women who have repressed their desires in the past due to the extreme conservatism of the Muslim society gained importance, but eroticism reached maturity in the hands of experienced and insightful directors such as yourself, Şerif Gören and Zeki Ökten, and sexual relations began to be transferred to the screen in a more human and realistic way.

When Mine (1983) was shown in the city of Samsun, a cinema had a 200-seat capacity and 190 women arrived. They did not let the men in! Mine coincided with the arrival of the feminist movement in Turkey and it is more or less the beginning of the theme of women’s search for identity.

In Bir Yudum Sevgi/A Taste of Love (1984), you show a working woman.

Who migrates from the rural area to the slums of the city.

Asiye Nasil Kurtulur? / How Can Asiye be Saved? is considered a political film.

Naturally. It is adapted from a theatre play by Vasif Öngören and is the best example of epic cinema. It shows how man-woman relations and the place of woman in society to a certain extent depend on who has the power. The writer’s angle is also political. I returned to the subject of power in human relations with Düş Gezginleri/Walking After Midnight (1992), but the film was misunderstood and dismissed as a ‘lesbian film’.

Adı Vasfiye / Her Name is Vasfiye?

Her Name is Vasfiye is about the identity search of a woman from a small town. Aytaç Arman plays the role of a man who assumes different personalities, but constantly appears as a handicap for the woman. Each time she wants to put one foot forward, a man comes along and prevents her.

Türkan Şoray, the sultan of Turkish cinema, evolved with the times. Then, there was the Müjde Ar happening. You have worked extensively with these two actors.

Türkan, until a certain period, particularly until Mine, played the role of a woman who never kissed and never went to bed with a man even if she lived with him – I don’t know how this is possible – and preserved her honour. She started to make love for the first time with Mine. Müjde entered our
cinema as a younger, braver and temperamental actor with a different view on life. This is in her character.

Perhaps, these different approaches are linked to the changes in our society regarding the way sex is perceived.

Undoubtedly, during that epoch, women’s movement gained ground. Organizations were formed; magazines began to be published. And my wife, Deniz Türkali, was involved in the feminist movements. Our fields of interest change with time and the changes in our city, whether we like it or not.

Müjde Ar is referred to as the ‘intellectual sexual woman’.

A woman with sexuality who tries to be an individual, who rebels.

Contrary to the rural woman of tears who is oppressed…

That was Hülya Koçyiğit. She represented those women.

Müjde Ar is memorable with many roles but especially as Vasfiye, a young woman with sexuality. She calls the doctor who is already infatuated by her pretending she is sick. When he says ‘Will you undress please?’ She asks with an innocent expression, ‘Completely?’ Müjde Ar character is very different than all the weeping willows, the prostitutes, the vamps, the masks… She is real although she does not have much chance either to change her destiny. I suppose it took longer for Turkish cinema to liberate women totally.

Turkish cinema outside the films we have mentioned is man’s cinema, a cinema constructed on male heroes, a cinema that answers the demands of a somewhat macho society. For instance, Yılmaz Güney made films degrading women.

The films he played in or the films he made?

Both, the ones he played in and the ones he made. All his films! And part of the reason is this: Yılmaz made his name with the support of the lumpen viewer. He was their hero. Afterwards, he made what he wanted, but the woman is always secondary and she is degraded. Naturally, majority of heroes in Turkish cinema are male.

Is this much different than Hollywood cinema? In Hollywood, famous and talented women complain about not receiving good offers and not being able to play heroes.

Of course. Majority of the stars are male and, from what I know, they are paid better.

What are the major differences in women’s issues when we compare our cinema to that of the West?

Western society has gone beyond the issue of the search for identity of the woman. The woman has now found her place in their society. Turkish society is still going through the process of change. I do not follow very closely but Iranian cinema also seems to be concerned with the identity of woman. I just watched a film called Ten, which was on the issues of women – a very simple film with a small budget.

Abbas Kiarostami’s first film on women. The young woman is inside her car, strapped with her seat belt. Her son is the amalgamation of all men that represent a patriarchal society.
There is also the Arab cinema. They make many commercial films but the place of woman and her difficulties in finding her identity are similar issues.

**As far as women film-makers in Turkey, there are some individual attempts, but...**

Previously, women such as Bilge Olgaç made films more like a man than the rest of us because they were trained and moulded under male ideology. There is Handan Ipekçi and Yesim Ustaoglu now; is there anyone else?

**I do not think that Handan and Yesim make women's films. What about the return of Bilge to cinema, didn't she change her point of view? I recently watched Kaşk Düşmanı/Spoon Enemy (1984) and enjoyed her subtle satire on men.**

Her point of view was always man's point of view and she made films that a male director would make.

**Tell me about your new projects.**

My last film, Eylül Fırtınası/The Storm of September (1999), was a political film on the wounds of the military coup of 12 September 1980 and it was produced by my own company. The darkness that pervaded the story created a pessimistic atmosphere during the shooting. I decided then that my next film would tell a romantic love story. The film will be called Eğreti Gelin/The Borrowed Bride, the story of women in the 1930s who used to prepare young boys for marriage according to custom. A room was reserved for them in the house and the meals were taken together with the family while these women prepared the boys for marriage.

**What kind of women? Prostitutes?**

No, women who are respected for what they do. They give education on how to treat a woman according to Hadiths and Koranic verses of the Holy Book, such as ‘take good care of your wife’, etc. The script is based on a book by Sükrün Koza called Müziksiz Kadınlar/Women Without Music. I had never heard of borrowed brides until I read her book. When she was a young girl, with her mother, they went to visit the grave of her maternal uncle and found a woman in her seventies watering the flowers. Her mother said, ‘we’ll wait for the whore to leave’. She was the borrowed bride of her uncle who fell in love with her and died of tuberculosis. Love is forbidden in this kind of relationship. There are rules.

**But they are involved in sexual activities, like temporary marriage in Iran.**

Many sources suggest that the instructions were not purely theoretical. What is interesting is that sex education, an issue that has not been fully resolved even in western societies today, was exercised freely in a strict Islamic society over a hundred years ago and continued after the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 until it was abolished in the mid-1930s. I got the idea for the film from this novel but I will not be faithful to it. That period was a period of transition for Turkey from oriental to western. The alphabet was changed from Arabic to Latin in 1928; national schools were opened for people to learn to read and write. It was that kind of atmosphere. The idea of a forbidden love that transcends cultural limitations also interests me and the screenplay is favourable to constructing a poetic and fantastic world with local colour.

*Istanbul, April 2003 (translated from Turkish by the author)*
Bio/Filmography
Atıf Yılmaz (Batıbeki) was born in Mersin in 1926 to a middle-class bureaucrat family. He studied law and fine arts, reviewed films, participated in exhibitions as a painter (Attic Painters) and poster designer, wrote scripts and worked as assistant director in two films before making his first feature, Kanlı Feryat/The Bloody Cry (1951). However, Gelinin Muradı/The Dream of the Bride is considered as his first non-commercial feature. His films participated in many festivals and won awards. He has made over one hundred films and has collected some of his memoirs and thoughts on cinema in a book called Söylemek Güzeldir/It is Good To Tell.

A selection of feature films
1957 Gelinin Muradı/The Dream of the Bride
1958 Bir Şiföri'nin Gizli Defteri/The Secret Diary of a Driver
1959 Alageyik/The Hind
1960 Suçlu/The Guilty
1964 Erkek Ali/Ali, the Man
    Keşanlı Ali Destanı/The Legend of Ali from Keşan
1966 Ah, Güzel İstanbul/Oh, Lovely Istanbul
1971 Yedi Kocalı Hürmüz/Hürmüz with Seven Husbands
1974 Kuma/The Second Wife
1977 Selvi Boylum, Al Yazarım/The Girl with the Red Scarf
1982 Mine
1984 Bir Yudum Sevgi/A Taste of Love
1985 Dağın Yatağı/Untidy Bed
1986 Ada Vasfiye/Her Name is Vasfiye
    Aaahh Belinda/Oh, Belinda
1987 Asiye Nasıl Kurtulur?/How Can Asiye Be Saved?
    Hayallerim, Aşkım ve Sen/My Dreams, My Love and You
    Kadının Adı Yok/The Woman Has No Name
1988 Dul Bir Kadin/A Widow
1990 Berdel/Bride Barter
1991 Bekle Dedim Gölgeye/Distant Shadows
1992 Düş Gezginleri/Walking After Midnight
1994 Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar/The Night, Angel and Our Gang
1997 Nihavent Mucize/Miracle Ma Non Troppo
1999 Eylül Fırtınası/The Storm of September
2004 Eğreti Gelin/The Borrowed Bride
Ardak Amirkulov and Ermek Shinarbaev are renowned film-makers of the Kazakh new wave that gained prominence by the end of 1980s. Amirkulov was part of a workshop organised by the Russian film-maker Sergei Soloviev at the VGIK (all-Union State Institute of Cinematography) in Moscow in 1984, which is generally credited for the birth of a new movement that chose a new film language that favoured natural décor — night shots in public places, alleys or deserted roads — and non-professional actors. Abandoning the Soviet tradition for a more western outlook, the new wave tried a sociological and psychological approach in the treatment of characters and in reflecting destabilized cultural roots.

Amirkulov and Shinarbaev have established their careers separately by remarkable films that are distinct in genre, narrative style and subject matter. Amirkulov’s first film, Ghibel Otrara/Otrar’s Death (1991), which took four years to make, is a historical epic about the ancient town of Otrar, the centre of nomadic civilization in Asia, which was destroyed under Chingiz Khan’s orders. The fate of Otrar, a town so much divided by hatred and envy that it could not defend itself against the invaders has been the subject of dispute for historians and ethnographers for many years. In this film, the events are seen from the point of view of a witness and participant in the battle, who exposes how the Mongol conquerors execute their military operations meticulously by recruiting local merchants, bribing enemies and torturing captives to obtain information while the Muslims of Samarkand, Bukhara and other ancient towns of Central Asia remain passive to the tragedy. The scriptwriters, Svetlana Karmalita and Alexei German, construct a historical fantasy with spectacular scenes of ancient times of flourishing towns, expanding trade, crafts and increasing military power. At the same time, they create an allegory for Russia and its political climate just before Hitler’s invasion of 1941. The film stresses the importance of interconnecting people of different
backgrounds with a warning that choosing personal ambitions over global concerns may endanger civilizations and humanity causing an entire way of life to disappear. The fact that Alexei German entrusted such a complex script to a student and a first-time film-maker is a confirmation of Amirkulov’s talents.

Ermek Shinarbaev’s first film, Karalisulu/The Mourning Beauty (1982), was a psychological drama about a young nomad woman who lost her husband prematurely. Its allusions to female sexual urges scandalized Alma Ata as well as Moscow. His first feature, Sestra moia Liussia/My Sister Lucy (1985), partly based on the childhood of Anatoly Kim, the Korean novelist responsible for the script, explored similar themes within the story of a friendship between a Kazakh woman and a Russian one, both of them single mothers.

Meist/Revenge/The Reed Flute (1989) was another collaboration with Anatoly Kim. In this multi-layered and the deeply metaphorical film of seven novellas about life and death, the writer and the film-maker have gone beyond the concrete political reality of the tragic history of one million Koreans living in the Soviet Union to reflect on revenge that leads to degeneration and destruction, but the message, delivered by the poet protagonist, was concrete: ‘True verses are not destined to appear in a world where revenge reigns’.

Azghyin Ushtykzyn’ Azaby/The Place on the Tricone (1993), Shinarbaev’s fourth feature film, a collaboration with a young Kazakh scriptwriter, Nikita Jhilkibaev, was on a contemporary subject and in that sense different from the other films written by Anatoly Kim. A psychological rather than sociological portrayal of youth in the former Soviet Union just before its demise, The Place on the Tricone, is realistic in reflecting the loss of morale. The film opens with two twenty-year-old men rolling joints in a small flat in Alma Ata. Later, we see one of them in bed with a girlfriend. The mother wakes them up and lectures her son: ‘You must work to make a living’. He replies, ‘To live, you need courage’ and returns to his room to spend his time listening to an Italian opera sung by Maria Callas that he plays on an old tape recorder. The film follows the lethargic young man through one summer: he meets friends, mainly women, and has important and trivial conversations until his experiments with drugs bring him face to face with death.

In 1997, Ermek and Ardak joined hands on a minimalist film about displaced youth, 1997-Sapis Rastema S Risunkami/1997-Rustem’s Notes with Drawings, Shinarbaev as producer Amirkulov as director. The focus of the film, the story of youth in a vacuum is very different from Amirkulov’s epic Otrar’s Death, but perhaps closer to the heart of Shinarbaev, bringing to mind The Place on the Tricone. Nonetheless, the experimental genre is new to both. Shot with the participation of Ardak’s students at the film school in Almaty, with
neither professional actors nor a coherent narrative, *1997* offers the viewers a glimpse at characters that move in and out of the viewing range in a minimalist fashion. The protagonist, Rustem, is given a diary by his sister to record his thoughts, but he has nothing to write. So he draws. One day he meets a young delicate girl who also wanders around the city aimlessly, but their relationship only goes in circles. The complete inertia that shrouds Almaty is likened to the insomnia suffered by the citizens of Makondo in Gabriel Garcia Marquez' novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, when exhaustion from lack of sleep causes amnesia.

It was an emotional moment to meet Ermek Shinarbaev and Ardak Amirkulov in 1998 in Berlin during the 49th International Berlin Film Festival, where they came to present *1997-Rustem’s Notes with Drawings*. Our last meeting was in 1993 in Montreal when Ardak’s *Otrar’s Death* was shown along with *Revenge* by Ermek. However, my first meeting with Ermek Shinarbaev goes back to Alma Ata (today’s Almaty) during the summer of 1991, 22 July, to be exact, only few months before the official declaration of independence and in the middle of the drastic changes from one system to another. The first interview with Ermek took place in Alma Ata in 1991 in the Kazakhfilm Studio and the second with both film-makers in Berlin in 1998.

**A NEW BEGINNING**

Only some years ago practically no one had heard of Kazakh cinema and suddenly several important film festivals are organizing special programs on the Kazakh new wave. The films that were shown in Nantes in France during the festival of 3 continents last autumn drew large crowds. Amanjol Aituarov’s first feature, *Kauchu Ikial/Light Touch*, a poetic rendition of the past lightly touching the present, as he explained to the enthusiastic audience, won an important award. In fact, most of us saw our first Kazakh films there. What is this new wave and how did it start?

Fifty years of Kazakh cinema never interested others. During the last five years, a new situation arose with the arrival of the new wave. Creators of this new movement were a well-known Russian director, Sergei Soloviev, whose latest film, *Under the Sky Full of Stars*, will be shown at the Montreal World Film Festival next month and Murat Auezov, a Kazakh literary critic and the son of our famous novelist, Muhtar Auezov, the author of *Abai*. In the beginning of the 1980s, Sergei Soloviev organized a workshop for ten Kazakh young men who went to Moscow to study film at the VGIK. Five of them were directors, two were cameramen, two were designers and one was a scriptwriter. These students created the Kazakh new wave. They all participated in Soloviev’s film *Chuzhaya Belaya Iryaboi/The Wild Pigeon*, which received the Special Prize of the Jury at the Venice Film Festival in 1985. Murat became the chief, created a new atmosphere and entered them into the world of culture. Before we existed as no one in nowhere, now we are part of the world culture. Rachid Nugmanov’s diploma film, *Ya-Ha* (1986), produced at the VGIK, became an underground legend and won awards. Serik Aprimov’s short film, *Two Men on a Motorbike*, won the first prize of All Union Film Festival in Baku in 1987. This summer, Moscow Film Festival organized a discussion on Young Kazakh Cinema and showed three feature films and a documentary.

When I asked Soloviev about the Kazakh new wave, he said, ‘There is a novel behind the story of each young man who attended the workshop, a novel that does not fit any formula’. And he added with his characteristic chuckle, ‘1984 was a strange year. The space rocket went up under Khrushchev and when it came down Brezhnev was greeting it. While we were filming (*The Wild Pigeon*), Soviet presidents were dying
one by one. We started with Andropov in 1984, then Brezhnev and we finished with Gorbachev.

*The Wild Pigeon* is based on an autobiographical novel by Boris Riakhovski, who was exiled to Kazakhstan in 1937. Kazakhstan was used as a prison for Soviet people, but many of them stayed after their terms, as their lives were not so bad.

According to Soloviev, Kazakh author Suleimanov was the Minister of Filmmaking in Kazakhstan in 1984 but there were hardly any films made. He encouraged the project to propagate Soviet liberal policies to different nationalities with the condition that the film would be made in the Kazakh language and would show plenty of Kazakh scenery.

The film was shot in the Kazakh language and later dubbed into Russian.

The way Soloviev found his students was also very interesting. He told me that in those days students got into VGIK through connections. *Po blatu*, he called it. It must be a Russian word for ‘uncle’. He decided to find the students himself and after three months of search in the scorching heat of an Alma Ata summer, he did find them: Rachid Nugmanov, Serik Aprimov… Ardak Amirkulov, Amir Karakulov, Talgat Temenov… They went to Moscow to get their IDs and returned to Alma Ata to start work with Soloviev as his assistants.

**Tell me about your training and your work.**

I studied at the VGIK in Moscow twice, first acting under Boris Babochkin and then directing under Sergei Gerassimov. My diploma film, *Karalisu/The Mourning Beauty* (1982), was denounced as a un-Kazakh film by both Moscow and Alma Ata for breaking the taboos and showing that sexual urges existed for women as well. Kazakhs were scandalized because they did not like what they saw, but Moscow was equally scandalized because a Kazakh film was supposed to say nice things about Kazakhstan. *The Mourning Beauty* is based on a short story written in 1925 by Muhtar Auezov. When the film opens, nomads are moving to another village while an old woman tells a little girl a story: A young woman named Karagos meets a young man and they fall in love as they gaze at each other’s eyes. They get married and have a son. Their marital bliss ends when, despite her forewarnings and implorations, he leaves home one night to fight in the war. When he is killed, she goes through an emotional upheaval. The changes in her moods exasperate her relatives. She refuses to marry someone else, runs to the woods, spends nights in the open and flogs herself for punishment for being alive. Natal’ya Arinbasarova, a famous Kazakh actress who also played in Kanchalovsky’s *First Teacher* and won the Best Actress award at the Venice Film Festival, plays the nomad woman.

**When did you start working with Anatoli Kim?**

My collaboration with Anatoli Kim, a writer of Korean origin, began with *Sestra moia Liussia/My Sister Lucy*, my first feature length film, which is partly based on his childhood in the south of Kazakhstan at the end of World War II. In the film, a pilot reminiscences his childhood through an imaginary letter to a girl he used to play with in 1947. There are two widows in the film: a Kazakh and a Russian. The Russian woman has a house where she lives with her daughter Lucy and she invites the Kazakh woman and her son to live with her. This film explores the psychological dimensions of the lives of young women who are forced to live alone, carrying the burden of widowhood and single parenthood while trying to deal with their natural urges.
You have created a remarkable balance with the two women characters. The Russian is an extravert; she hides her sorrow by wearing a mask of joy and indulges in sex even though this upsets her young daughter. The Kazakh is an introvert, tied to her customs and traditions. She internalizes her pain and even contemplates suicide. They both suffer. The agony of the death of a partner is two-fold: the loss of a loved one and the guilt for being alive. The scene that touched me the most in that film was the marketplace where widows go to sell, among other items, their dead husband’s overcoat, to have some money to buy bread or eggs to feed their children. You also use animals as symbols – a wounded bird on the beach, a big fish found in a little pond, a dog given to the boy by a strange woman. (Later on, in Revenge, the turtle is significant.) The tension of the times reaches a climax when a man is lynched by the crowd for stealing a cow.

In 1987, I made another feature film called Go Out of the Forest into the Meadow, which was a failure although I think it is my best film.

What about Revenge?

Revenge was made two years ago. It is a parable, an epic folk drama with philosophical dimensions and a mystical journey to the cultures of the Far East. The motive of water, as manifested by the boundlessness of the ocean, is pivotal to the film. It symbolizes DAO, the way or the flow, which is formlessness, emptiness and nothing-ness, but also very dynamic and restless, its dynamism determining the development of life in the universe. The highest goal for an individual is to merge with DAO. That is why the turtle you see in the first scene crawls toward the sea and the women in the last scene have an unhurried conversation about a trip to the ocean, overcoming the fear of drowning because the vastness of the ocean cannot frighten anymore.

This is another collaboration with Anatoli Kim.

The script is written in Russian by Anatoli Kim based on his recollections of the history of his people. I would have liked to shoot it in Korea but as USSR had no relations with South Korea, this was not possible and I refused to shoot it in the Communist North. The final scene was shot on the Sakhalin Island off the east coast of Siberia, an area from which native Koreans were expelled under Stalin during World War II and forcefully transported to Kazakhstan. The history of one million Koreans living in the Soviet Union has been a tragedy. Filming and photography had been forbidden on the island. Our cameras were the first. Revenge would never have seen the light save for an independently promoted Festival of Unwanted Films, organized in Podolsk, near Moscow by the Union of Soviet Filmmakers in collaboration with several production studios across the Soviet Union. Turned down for foreign export by Moscow film officials the previous year, it won the Grand Prix of this festival. It was also shown at the Cannes Film Festival and it will be participating at several other international film festivals including Montreal, but it has not been released commercially here. All theatres belong to Goskino, whose main interest is money. Hollywood films dominate the market; Soviet films are not shown. Furthermore, Kazakh new wave has refinement, which is difficult for the audiences.

You have mentioned Goskino, the State Committee for Cinematography. From the time cinema was nationalized in 1919 by a Lenin decree, film production and distribution had been regulated by Goskino, which gradually gained control of the film industry of the whole USSR. But in 1986, the Fifth Congress of Soviet Filmmakers Union challenged the authoritarian methods used by Goskino to control the arts and
proposed the principles of free market as an alternative. It also assumed the responsibility of defending non-commercial cinema.

The idea was to shift the power to studios run by film-makers.

A controversial film-maker like Elem Klimov, who had a long history of confrontations with Goskino concerning artistic freedom, was elected the First Secretary replacing Lev Kulidzhanov, who repressed the film-makers for two decades. This was already a revolution. Since then, Goskino lost its monopoly over the international market but, I understand, it still holds on to the domestic distribution. What are the most important changes during the transition period to independence? How do you obtain funds to make films today? Could you also talk about the changes in censorship laws?

Funds are obtained from Goskino and the Kazakh Ministry of Culture. There is no system of distribution. Goskino has to distribute our films for a small percentage, but cannot. We need Goskino for finances but we have to be independent to choose our own topics. We need total freedom. Last summer, censorship was legally abolished except for state and military secrets, pornography and works that may ignite war or ethnic conflict. Films before perestroika were historical pieces stressing the communist aspects of history. You were not supposed to show the bad side of life. Formula films repeated the same love stories about a boy and a girl falling in love, having some conflicts and resolving it. Kazakh cinema today is interested in art films and in perfecting this genre. New wave film-makers do not want to make propaganda films or commercial pieces. When you consider works such as Serik Aprimov’s The Last Stop, to deal with such themes was not possible before. Rachid Nugmanov’s The Needle had problems because it dealt with drug addiction, which was not supposed to exist in our society. We had to send our work print to Moscow and wait for their decision for months. Moscow decided how many copies we could make and which theatres we could show our films. Some films had fifteen to twenty copies and were never shown. Everything depended on their decision.

What role does Goskino play now?

Goskino’s role is now different. The government gives us the money for new productions. We need the equipment that only Goskino can give us. We need government support. For instance, Mosfilm is now independent from Goskino as was declared during the Cannes Film Festival of 1990. The studio participated in the festival market for the first time as a private company. It does not depend on Goskino, but we do.

Kazakhfilm Studio has had a very long history. During World War II, Sergei Eisenstein shot two parts of Ivan Grozyj/Ivan, the Terrible there when some of the studios were relocated to Alma Ata. However, as you have pointed out, over the years, the propaganda films and formula love stories created a cinema that was of no interest to anyone. How does it operate today?

Under the Soviet system, Kazakhfilm Studio used to produce four feature films a year, four for television, five or six animation films and about forty documentaries. Within the main studio, there are several other studios: Alem/Universe, created by Murat Auezov, who was the chief of the studio, is more sophisticated and has a universal approach, aiming at cinema ‘with a new language’. They produced Revenge. Miras/Heritage gives precedence to history, national psychology, culture, etc. They are both state studios. Before perestroika, the head of Miras used to be an important person, but not anymore. There is also a documentary film studio called Parallel. Kedam is an independent
organization for documentaries. You have watched this morning a recently made documentary, Polygon, by Oraz Rymzhanov and Vladimir Rerikh, which explores the nuclear exploitation of Kazakhstan during the Soviet regime. Interestingly, the film includes some military secrets that the government gave permission to be used. Andrei Sakharov actively took part in it, giving his final interview to the Polygon team.

Several independent studios have been formed beginning with the perestroika...

There are fifteen independent studios in Alma Ata; the biggest is Catharsis, which produces shorts, documentaries and features. Most co-operatives are independent studios making short films. Situation of the independent studios is very bad financially. Catharsis has made five or six feature films but, to my knowledge, none were released commercially. Independent studios buy foreign films, usually illegally, and make money releasing them in Kazakhstan. With this money, they make films. Things may change in the future.

What are the people from the Soloviev workshop doing now?

Rachid Nugmanov made money with his first feature film, Igla/The Needle, which was produced in 1988 by the Kazakhfilm Studio. Twenty million tickets were sold. He now formed his own studio called KINO. In 1989, only two Soviet films were on the top-ten list and The Needle was one of them. It helped that he cast a famous rock star, Victor Tsoi, as the lead. He has no problem with money now but material and technical supplies are lacking. His new project has the storyline of Seven Samurai. It is a parody of film legends, Soviet and universal. After The Touch, Amanjol received one million from a bank to make a feature film, Bilgisiz Yol, about a group of hippies who go to Aral Lake, inside the military zone and are shot. Amir Karakulov made Razluchniza/Between the Brothers for Central TV and it will be shown (in Russian) in November. The film is based on a story by Jorge Lois Borges but applied to contemporary Kazakh life. It is about two brothers, and a woman who belongs to the older brother, but the younger brother falls in love with her. She loves them both with the same force but with a different kind of love. There is no way out of this ménage-a-trois. They want her to decide but she cannot. The answer is death. I edited this film and did the soundtrack.

Alma Ata, July 1991

Bio/Filmography
Ernem Shinarbaev was born on 25 January 1953. He studied at the VGIK twice, first acting with Boris Babochkin receiving his diploma in 1974 and then directing with Sergei Gerassimov, graduating in 1982 with a diploma film, the medium-length, Karalisulu/Krassavitsa v traure/The Mourning Beauty. His first long feature, Sestra moia Liussia/My Sister Lucy, about two young single mothers trying to cope with psychological and economical problems following World War II, was shot in the classical trend of Soviet cinema. His second long feature, Go Out of the Forest to the Meadow, was a failure, although Shinarbaev considers it one of his best. He has also produced two films, Abai and 1997, directed by Ardak Amirkulov.

Feature films
1985 Sestra moia Liussia/My Sister Lucy
1987 Go Out of the Forest to the Meadow
1989 Meist/Revenge
1993 Azghyin Ushityzyn’Azaby/The Place on the Tricone
1994 Coeur fragile/Tender Heart
BEING YOUNG IN ALMATY

The first question that comes to mind about 1997-Rustem’s Notes with Drawings is the title. Why 1997? This is not about Hong Kong!

Ardak Amirkulov: 1997 is a very special year for us as well. I had several ideas about the title, but finally decided on 1997. This is my first film dealing with contemporary time; the first two were historical pieces. 1997 is an experimental film made with my students from the Film Workshop at the Almaty Film Institute. I thought it might be good for our memory to transfix a special time in history. Everything around us has been changing so fast that we wanted to make a film to mark this period in time to return one day to revive our memory. 1997 was also the year when it became clear that the political changes were now irreversible, the year when all monuments were replaced in Kazakhstan. While we were shooting, Lenin’s monument was being changed with the monument of two young Kazakh girl soldiers who died during WW II. It is a pity that I did not have the possibility to shoot this event. At the same time, it was the 850th anniversary of Moscow, the return of Hong Kong to China and the death of Princess Diana. We wanted to mark all these events.

Why was the death of Diana so significant that this event is woven into the narrative as well?

A.A.: It is rare for a royal person to die in such a manner. Usually they die of natural causes. Diana’s death was a world event. She was a remarkable woman and an attractive one. We thought that this was really an event for the whole world.

During an episode that takes place inside a theatre, we are told that The Karamazov Brothers is being staged, but suddenly we hear a dialogue about Princess Diana. The significance of this unexpected shift was not clear to me.

A.A.: The conversation was not about Diana but about love. Usually, this sort of conversation takes place in a cinema or theatre.

Was the dialogue actually taken from the text of The Karamazov Brothers with a dialogue about the death of Princess Diana superimposed?

Ermek Shinarbaev: During the editing of the film, I also asked the same question to Ardak wondering why he wanted to put exactly this conversation at this place. He said, ‘I don’t know, but I want it’. When I watched the film on screen in Berlin, I said to myself, maybe he was right. The passage about the death of Diana marks the year and, at the same time, gives a certain intimacy to the conversation.

I found it very ambiguous as it arrived without any preparation for the audience. The only interpretation I could think of was perhaps an absurd play was being staged with dialogue about Diana superimposed on the dialogue from The Karamazov Brothers.

A.A.: Sort of. (laughs)
No one ever smiles in your film, not even once. Is this a reflection of the mood of the young in Kazakhstan today?

E.S.: It is a very good question. We have discussed this issue with Ardak. He remarked that the psychology of this generation was strange for us. One can call them a ‘frozen generation’.

A.A.: I think young generations everywhere like to oppose authority. They are against everything in life. By the time they reach twenty, they begin to be more flexible towards conforming to the rules of society. Then they begin to smile!

The films that came out during the first five years of independence such as Talgat Temenov’s Byegushaya Mishen/The Running Target (1991), Bolat Kalimbetov’s Ainalayin/Darling (1991) and Darejan Omirbayev’s Kairat (1991) are pessimistic portrayals of young people who have no hopes for the future. The generation in your film is equally unhappy. They are completely blasé about everything. There is nothing to do; nothing is interesting. They seem to be suffering from an existential boredom.

A.A.: Under the communist regime, we had faith in something. The new generation lost everything. They have no faith and this could be the reason for their indifference. The Soviet period was a global lie, not only for the youth but for the older generations as well. The lie has been exposed. That is why the young have no faith in the future. Now they have some other scale of values, the main one being money. If you have money, you are somebody.

The scenes you shot in front of the shops displaying fancy fashion clothes express this new value system very well. Such shops did not exist in 1991 when I visited Alma Ata. Also quite impressive was the last scene, when the girl kept turning and turning around the pond, an obvious image of a vicious circle.

A.A.: The vicious circle could represent the inability to express feelings. They are impotent in terms of their feelings.

Earlier, you talked about the teamwork with your students. Are all the actors non-professionals?

A.A.: All of them.

You have divided the film into chapters and marked the episodes by the use of silent-film-style cue cards. Why did you use this technique?

A.A.: The cue cards were necessary for the rhythm because the film does not have a classical dramaturgy. The episodes are like packages. Each new credit appears with the intention of drawing the attention of the spectator to a new chapter. I wanted to revive the interest of the audience and, at the same time, remind them that it was cinema.

This brings to mind another question. At the end of the film, you appear behind the camera, shooting. Is this a kind of a Brechtian distantiation device to remind the audience that it is only film?

A.A.: Yes.
Abbas Kiarostami appears in the last scene of *Taste of Cherry*, playing himself behind the camera. He has his explanation for this intrusion. Why was it necessary for you to have this scene?

*A.A.:* *1997* is a film full of problems, so we wanted to make it more optimistic at the end, just to remind the audience that nobody was dead and no one was killed.

*A German critic told me today your film reminded him of early Jim Jarmusch. What do you think?*

*E.S.:* During the preparation for the film, the crew – Ardak and his students – made a point of watching new films by new generation film-makers, such as *La Haine/Hate* by Mathieu Kassavitz and *Trainspotting* by Danny Boyle. They wanted to be in the stream of such films. That could be the reason.

*A.A.:* We have also seen the *Dead Man* by Jim Jarmusch. As usual, Darejan (Omirbaev) brought the cassette to Almaty.

*Ardak, between this film and Otrar’s Death, which received the award of the Governor of Kazakhstan, brought you to the head of the Kazakhfilm Studio and won you the First Film Award of the City of Montreal in 1993, did you work on another project?*

*A.A.:* After *Otrar*, I made another epic feature film called *Abai* (1995), the biography of an outstanding Kazakh poet. This film was commissioned and completely financed by the Kazakh government for the 150th anniversary of Abai, and I was nominated as the director.

**Ermek, how did you get involved in 1997?**

*E.S.:* We began our collaboration with Ardak on his previous project *Abai*. When I saw the rushes of that film, I said to him, ‘This is a big project, you must have a professional team’. I suggested a co-production with my French friends. We made a short visit to Paris and I presented him to my producers and to the editing team. They agreed to continue the editing, so we brought the whole team from Paris to Almaty. The final mix was made in Paris; we used the lab in Paris and made a copy there. I was somehow the Kazakh co-producer and it was a very fruitful experience. We were content with each other. When Ardak launched this new project, he proposed me to help him and his students. I said, yes. We have now experience in producing and we should be producers ourselves.

**Ermek, the last film I saw from you was The Place on the Tricone, which won the Golden Leopard in Locarno. I thought it was a radical departure from your previous films.**

*E.S.:* For a long time, I wanted to make a film about contemporary life to explore the soul of the new generation, which is so different from mine. The outcome was *The Place on the Tricone*. Afterwards, I made another film with my French co-producers, *Tender Heart*, that I shot in Kazakh and later had it subtitled into
French. I could show it nowhere except in Kazakhstan and France because I had neither the money nor the brains to do the English subtitles. I received many propositions to show it in the US and Europe, but it was blocked for lack of subtitles.

In the beginning of the Kazakh new wave, the tendency was to make films in the native language, not only in Kazakhstan, but in the other Central Asian Republics as well, but now I see that Russian is coming back, at least in your country.

A.A.: The reality is that the young generation speaks Russian. To be open to this generation, the films should be made in Russian.

E.S.: Following our separation from Russia, we were so glad to be independent that we thought we should make our films for ourselves – Kazakh language for our dialogue with the Kazakh population. Soon, we had to realize that our connections with Russia were much deeper than just being a colony; we are related culturally as well. Besides, our population is only sixteen million, which is not enough film audience. Russia is a big country with a big population and they did not lose interest in our cinema. Therefore, it makes sense to make films not only for the Kazakh population but also for our big neighbour. Even in Kazakhstan, only seven million of the population is Kazakh, twenty per cent does not speak Kazakh at all.

Before Independence, Kazakhs used to comprise forty per cent of the population with around thirty per cent Russian and then German, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Tatar and others.

E.S.: Now the percentage is higher for the Kazakh because of the exodus of the Russians, although there are still many Russians left. Our government made special efforts to keep the Russians. Kyrgyzstan has lost many Russians who immigrated to Russia and their industry is in shambles for of lack of Russian engineers and workers. That is why the Kazakh government is trying to keep the population. During his last speech, President Nazarbaev openly said to the Russians, ‘Please stay, it is your country, too’.

The eruption of Kazakh films in the international arena following the demise of the Soviet Union has lost its momentum by the middle of the 1990s, but recently, in addition to successful festival appearances, several Kazakh films have actually been playing in regular cinemas of Europe, which is unprecedented.

E.S.: Darejan Omirbaev’s Killer (1998), as well as his previous films, Kardiogramma/Heartbeats (1995) and Kairat (1992), have been very successful in Europe. Another Kazakh film, Kozymnin Karasy/The Biography of a Young Accordionist (1994) by Satimbaldi Narimbetov, funded by the European Union, will also be released in Paris soon. That will be the fourth Kazakh film released in regular cinemas in France. We have spoken to a French distributor regarding Ardak’s film, 1997, and it is almost certain that it will be released in January 2000 in France in the frame of a program for the Arte television channel, roughly called I am twenty years old. The project is European, however, the distributor believes that it might be interesting to show a Kazakh film within this program.

What does the Kazakh government do for film-makers, if anything? Does it give financial support?

E.S.: Because of the monetary crisis and the anticipation of a big crash like the one that happened in Russia, the government renewed the budget this year to cut all expenses. We are uncertain whether there will be some financing for cinema or not. At the end of the previous year, our government
spent $2 million for the 1st International Film Festival, Eurasia. $2 million! It is incredible. Many film-makers complained. Darejan Omirbaev gave an interview to a French newspaper to say that it was shameful to spend all that money for the festival instead of financing unfinished films. Last year, the government launched twelve projects, but only three were finished. The rest are waiting for money. I believe, for the Kazakh government, it seems to be more important to maintain the image of Kazakhstan than finance films.

From what I understand, that festival was only a one-time affair. The organizer, Gulnara Uzbakanova, told me that there is no money to prepare another festival.

E.S.: Yes and no. Our president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, may keep his promise and turn it into an annual event. The government now has a mega project for a feature film called The Kazakhs and they also launched another project, Ablai-Khan, about one of the main historical heroes, who founded the Kazakh state three centuries ago. Timur Nakmanbietov, a well-known Kazakh who lives in Russia and makes advertising films is already appointed as the director for the second project which has a budget, on the Kazakh side about 30 million US dollars! Nikita Mikhalkov is also involved. Right at the beginning of the presidential campaign, Mikhalkov made a visit to Nazarbaev to give his support. They discussed big cinema projects. That is why I can say that our government does not support cinema but at the same time does support cinema. This is a contradiction. It is very transparent which kind of films they are ready to finance. They do not care about Kazakh film-makers or new projects; they are not interested in supporting young talents. Large amounts of money are invested on prestigious projects collaborating with Mikhalkov. Mikhalkov’s new film, The Barber of Siberia, premiered in Almaty as an act of support for Nazarbaev.¹

For the film-makers who are not interested in glamorous films, is the only choice co-production with European countries?

E.S.: Darejan Omirbaev, Ardak and I have collaborated with France, Serik Aprimov and Amir Karakulov with Japan. This means that we are open to co-productions, but we cannot expect all our films to be supported by foreigners. The problem is there is no money for cinema in Kazakhstan. We are very poor. The average budget of a film is $300,000. It is very cheap, but it is impossible to find this money because it is not an investment, it is a gift. Who will give this gift? For many years, the State subsidised our films; now the State is very poor. In many villages, the population is hungry. It is very difficult for the government to finance cinema in such a situation, yet they are ready to finance prestigious projects. I do not understand why and how!

Berlin, February 1998

Notes
1. During my second visit to Almaty in October 2004, as a jury member for the second edition of Kazakh National Film Festival called Shaken’s Stars, to honour the first film-maker of Kazakh
national cinema (as distinct from Soviet cinema in Kazakhstan), another mega project called Nomad, with a budget of 45 million dollars, was being shot in the outskirts of Almaty, a co-production with the US and directed by Russian film-maker Sergei Bodrov.

Bio/Filmography
Ardak Amirkulov was born on 10 December 1955, in the village of Ak-Kul in Dshambul in Kazakhstan. He studied philology at the University of Almaty and graduated in 1980. In 1984, he attended the workshop of the Russian film-maker Sergei Soloviev along with other young Kazakh talent who later came to be known as important voices of Kazakh new wave. Between 1994 and 1997, he was the President of the Kazakhfilm Studio. After a period of unemployment and sickness, he became a professor at the Almaty Film Institute.

Feature films
1991 Ghibel Otrara/Otrar’s Death
1995 Abai
1998 1997-Sapisi Rustema S Risunkami/1997-Rustem’s Dairy with Drawings

Serik Aprimov
Serik Aprimov is one of the most important names of Kazakh cinema. Konechnaya Ostanovka/The Last Stop (1989), his graduation film, is considered a manifesto of the Kazakh new wave, a movement that started when Soviet society was dismantling.

Aprimov was born in a small Kazakh village called Aksuat, which is the inspiration behind most of his films. After his military service, he began to work at the Kazakhfilm Studio in Alma Ata, first as a driver, then administrator and assistant director before becoming a film-maker. He was one of the students in the workshop Russian film-maker Sergei Soloviev organized, which led to the birth of the Kazakh new wave. Aprimov graduated in 1984 and, in 1986, he made the short film Dvoe Echali Na Motorsikle/Two Were Riding the Motorcycle.

The Last Stop is the story of a young Kazakh man, Erken, who returns home to his demoralized village on the Kazakh plains after his military service. His friends are still where he left them, procrastinating in a state of despair and desolation, drowning the misery of their aimless existence in alcohol and petty crime. His girlfriend has married someone else. The pitiful lives of the people he once loved makes him decide to leave the steppes forever.

The film presents seemingly random episodes in a documentary fashion: Erken meets his childhood friends; watches his girlfriend get reprimanded by her tyrannical supervisor for stopping to talk to him while repairing an adobe; a wedding ceremony turns into a drunken brawl; an intoxicated man fires at the local police from a rooftop. The dismal portrait of the aul (the village), the centre of rural existence for centuries, is a testimony to the demise of the false dreams of socialism. The
‘mythologized Soviet space’ that Kazakh critic Bauyrzhan Nogerbek identifies ‘with its beautiful landscapes, ethnographic costumes, national games, songs, and dances’ is completely absent from this picture. ’Kazakh national space is not just ignored and squeezed out of the screen. It is also created new on the basis of the surrounding reality to which viewers have become accustomed, creating it in the style of “unrehearsed reality,” of Vertov’s “life caught unawares” ... The cinematic aul is demythologized and, at the same time, assembled anew, but now there is no place in it for any moral-ethical norms of human conduct’.1

Aksuat (1999) is a visit to Aprimov’s village ten years later. The older brother, who cut his ties with his roots, returns for a while to hide from his creditors. The one who stayed falls in love with his brother’s pregnant city wife but he is unable to protect the family against the local mafia. Changes have taken place although the future is still uncertain.

Tri Brata/Three Brothers mixes realism with poetry in a story of the clash between the old and modern times. Three young brothers, living in a small village, hear a story from an old railway maintenance man about a wonderful lake where life is beautiful and women are available if you have the money. Their dreams turn to tragedy as they find out too late that the old trains are there for target practice for the rockets.

One may consider the three films a trilogy. At the centre of the three is the aul, which has lost its meaning both on a national and personal level and even social and historical. According to Aprimov, the word Kazakh means ‘the people who have wandered away from the centre’. Metaphorically speaking!

In 2004, Serik was in Locarno presenting his most recent film, Anshi/The Hunter. Now a man in his forties but still very much outside any film trend, local or global, he talks in riddles and proverbs. Over the years, he has polished this art along his cinematographic talents. He is like an ak sakal (white-bearded wise old man) from an Aitmatov story. In fact, The Hunter reminds one of early Aitmatov depicting the lives of the simple people of the steppes. It also follows the centuries-old Kazakh tradition of using stories as an indirect way to give advice, leaving the final decision up to the listener (viewer).

The Hunter is the most complete work of Aprimov to date. The rough, unfinished edge of his earlier films that had drawn the attention of the film elite of the West has rounded up into a more approachable film. The story is very straightforward. Brought up by a young, free-spirited and sexually liberal woman, the protagonist suffers from peer incrimination, which augments his adolescence pains in an environment that is cold, cruel and indifferent. He has a certain aversion toward a mysterious hunter, the lover of his surrogate mother. One night, while the couple are taking care of sexual matters, he vents his anger by stealing the hunter’s gun for a target practice on the local bar. The hunter saves him from jail on the condition that he accompany him on his journey. Hence begins the initiation of Erken into the world of adults, which brings with it certain emotions such as warmth for the opposite sex or for one’s mother.
The Hunter is about the dying out traditions of the Central Asian steppes, but the film is not a call to return to the old ways as this is no longer possible as Aprimov explains, but rather to incorporate the old ways into our modern life.

Certain loose ends in the script render the narrative somewhat confusing at times and the plastic qualities of the film (pressures from the producers perhaps) may not appeal to those who once fell in love with the rugged style of Two on a Motorcycle or The Last Stop. However, with The Hunter, Aprimov has created an epic film, which is at the same time very intimate and very personal.

The first interview took place during the Rotterdam Film Festival, February 2000. The second began during the Locarno Film Festival in August, 2004 and completed in Almaty in October, 2004.

THE LAST STOP IS AKSUAT

Some essential themes or motives are found in all of your films. One of them is the country versus the city. In The Last Stop, the hero leaves his village, but when he comes back, he cannot cope, so he leaves again. In Aksuat, he decides to stay.

The village is not a real village but a place in my head. Sometimes people ask, ‘Aren’t you afraid that some body else is going to make a film about Aksuat?’ I say ‘no’ because that is the key, the Aksuat that I have.

The image of Aksuat in The Last Stop was so real that the villagers were offended. Western media reported that the people of Aksuat were unhappy to see the naked truth about their lives exposed.

Not the people of Aksuat, those were the government officials. The film was produced by Kazakhfilm as one of the five features Goskino would annually finance. The situation in the Soviet Union was already very chaotic. Therefore, it was impossible for Moscow to control what was going on. The head of the Kazakhfilm told me that if the film caused a scandal, he would not stand behind me. If I agreed to that, I could go ahead and do what I wanted to do. I had no problems during the production, problems only started after. We wanted to have an avant-premire in the village where the film was shot, but the authorities would not permit it. As the villagers insisted to see the film, a screening was organized at 3 a.m. When the film was released, the general prosecutor issued orders for the cinemas to be closed. The film was shelved for five years. However, it was distributed on video, mostly pirated. After a while, many people knew it by heart. People were not upset, and now eight years later they tell me life is much worse than what I showed in my film.

In what sense?

Nobody has work and because of that crime is very high. Some years ago, crime was not an issue. When I was shooting The Last Stop, it was not so obvious to the people how desperate their situation was, but I felt it. Now, they also can see it. For the Kazakhs, aul, the village, is a holy place, the centre of one’s life. When I returned to my native village after my military service, I realized that something had gone wrong. Among the three kids I used to play with when I was ten, one committed suicide, one was in jail and the other became an alcoholic. I realized the problem was the village itself. The Communist system destroyed the aul. The title of the film refers to the fact that there was no future. I did not want to use allegory. I wanted to hit directly with the truth. Something was bound to happen and it did three years later with the fall of the Soviet Union. In a way, that film heralded the demise of the communist ideology.
Finding a new identity is another important issue in your films. Old times are lost and new times bring multiple problems of new identity.

Kazakh mentality is actually quite simple. We do not live in the past or the future. The future is the shadow of the past. We live in the present and take it as it comes.

Would you say that Aksuat was a commentary on the socio-economic situation of the country after seventy years of the Soviet domination?

Not a commentary. I tried to avoid any kind of social commentary, but perhaps it is in the texture of the film.

It has been said that there is no political message in your work. I find all your films political.

I do not have such an aim but one way or other I seem to touch certain spheres.

Illusion and reality, as perceived by the old man and the boys, is the central theme in Three Brothers. Can one draw a parallel to the country?

There is an obvious parallel. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, the society has been divided into two major groups: the ones who still live with the memories of the communist time – there was nothing good about it, but they keep their memories – and the others, the young and aggressive, who want to make as much money as soon as possible. Neither of these groups can survive. The old cannot go on living dreaming about the past and the young want to achieve too fast. Only someone who lives day by day can survive.

‘Miracles don’t exist’ seems to be the message.

If you want to survive, you have to take reality as it is. If you start dreaming, you begin to torture yourself. The old man was living with the dreams of the past and he died; the youngsters were living with the dreams of the future and they did not survive either. The little boy did not know anything about the past and did not know what the future would look like. He was just living from day to day and he was the one to survive.

Which means it is a matter of illusions and reality and dreams and tragedy. There seem to be no choice in your films. Dreams lead to tragedy; and there is no place for illusions.

Yes, it is all in one and so close to one another where I live.

In Sergenden, dreams create a monster character.

Dreams force you into a cocoon and you cannot get out of it. Since I am against illusions and dreams myself, I do not want to cheat the audience by giving them illusions. Encouraging someone to have illusions is like giving someone drugs. For a certain time, he will be excited and feel great but after a while, he will realize that it is temporary. (He takes three matches and makes a triangle.) If you ask what this is, most people will say a triangle. Actually, it is three matches; the triangle is a ready-made illusion. Illusion is a virus, which infects like a fatal disease. The old man in Three Brothers could be my own father who lived all his life with the illusion of communism. When the three children begin to believe the old man, they are eventually killed.

‘The brothers’ trope recurs in your films.
I have three brothers and they are completely different than me. They always say, ‘Why don’t you live like the rest of us?’ They have their separate lives, so this is part of my experiences.

Actually, in *The Last Stop*, they were not brothers, but three friends.

At the time of *The Last Stop*, I was not in a conflict with my brothers.

**Does the conflict now arise from ideology?**

We have different values of life. They see their way and I see my way. The ideas of each one are representations of society.

**How did the story of *Three Brothers* come about in the first place? How did you work with the children?**

I had many ideas. I knew I wanted to make a film about children. Once I was chatting with an old drunk who was talking about locomotives. The old man and locomotives was enough to give me an idea what the film would be about. I added the military planes. The script had to be ready in four-five days. I got the money and started shooting. Usually, my script is not more than eight to twelve pages. First, I observed the way these children played. Then I explained to them what I wanted them to do, tried it three-four times and got the final shot. I do not give the script to the children or to any of the other players. Sometimes I even tell them to play something completely different because my aim is to find the right expression. When I get that, the dialogue is secondary. The most important thing is to find the right movement and expression of the face. *Aksuat* was shot in about eighteen days and it took me a month to shoot *Three Brothers*.

**Can you comment about the structure of *Three Brothers*, which is in three parts, and why did you use divisions with pictures?**

I told my wife, who is the executive producer, that I was not happy with it. She reminded me that I felt the same with *Aksuat* but it was OK after editing. *Three Brothers* was edited eight times. Once I was visiting the artist working on the film and, accidentally, I saw some paintings in the house. He said he was doing sketches while working on the film. I thought I could use these in the film to divide it into episodes and, at the same time, they could represent the memories of the old man. There are two different periods while you are working on a film: in the beginning, when you are processing different ideas, and after it is shot when you have to look at it in a completely different way.

**How do you procure the finances?**

Kazakh film-makers cannot shoot a film unless there is a $400,000 budget. I have chosen another direction to make films that cost between $50,000 and $100,000. First, I figure out how much money I can get and find it and based on the amount available, I formulate the idea about the film. Here is how we made *Aksuat*: After I made *The Last Stop* in 1991, I left film-making for a while and started to do all kinds of things. I wasn’t even thinking of making another film. One day, a Japanese producer called me while I was lying at home and said, ‘Here is the money, make a film’. My first question was, ‘How much money have you got?’ ‘$50,000.’ My wife said it is too little. But I thought that I was sitting around and doing nothing. I asked the Japanese what kind of film he wanted. He said, ‘the style of *The Last Stop* and I will be happy’. By the time I made *Aksuat*, everyone knew that I could make films with a very small budget, so they told me to make another one. That is how I made *Three Brothers*. Everything is open, it is up to you to decide, like fishing, you wait and see if you catch something or not.
What would you do if they actually gave you $400,000 that you say other Kazakh filmmakers expect?

I would make three films instead of one.

*Aksuat* and *Three Brothers* were made the same year, but there was an eight-year lapse between *The Last Stop* and *Aksuat* as you mentioned. What did you do during those eight years?

Everything except film-making. I was giving advice. And for two years, I worked at the press office of the president. There is almost no work there except chatting around. I used to sleep on the sofa but the guards of the president told me I was not allowed to sleep there. I found an old sofa that I took to the attic where I could stretch myself quietly and read books. They got me there, too, and told me I had to sit in the room and not sleep during the day.

Why do you appear in your films? I am sure Fellini was asked such a question innumerable times.

My reasons are purely practical. In *Three Brothers*, I needed the pilots but they were not allowed to act in the film. Within their work environment, it was not a problem, but not outside. My driver and I replaced them.

You also appear in *Sergenden*.

For a small role, I would not look for an actor, so it became a habit. Whenever there was a small role, people suggested me.

No one had heard of *Sergenden* before the screening here in Rotterdam. Why was it hidden for such a long time?

No one was hiding it except that after *The Last Stop*, people said *Sergenden* was not my style. It was not accepted the way the previous film was, so it was forgotten.

What is your opinion about the film?

All my other films were born of my experiences and feelings. *Sergenden* is purely the result of my imagination.

In 1991, when I visited the Kazakhfilm Studio, there seemed to be solidarity among the film-makers, particularly those from the Soloviev workshop that initiated the Kazakh new wave. Does this solidarity continue or is each one following his individual path?

We see each other once a year and say ‘hello’, that is all.

Ermen Shinarbaev produced two films of Ardak Amirkulov. They seem to enjoy working together. What about Talgat Temenov? Does he make films today?


I have heard that in Kazakhstan people do not go to the cinema anymore. How much does the situation of cinema reflect the political situation of the country? What is the connection between Kazakh politics and Kazakh cinema today?
Now the government is fighting for oil and energy and too busy to pay attention to cinema. For the moment, Kazakhstan is an industrial empty space, but this may change in the next five years. For instance, in Russia, big cinemas are opening now.

**It seems that the government has money for cinema but wants to invest it on films about national awareness.**

There was a try. Two films were made in such a mood, *Ablai Khan* by Timur Nakmanbietov and *The Kazakhs*, but they were both failures. The situation now is that each director tries to find an intermediate person to reach the government,

**After Independence, what are the most important changes for Kazakh cinema, losses and gains?**

During the time of the Soviet Union, every year we would produce six or seven films. But at that time, there was censorship. Now the government does not care at all but I cannot make the films that I want to make. When there was money, there was censorship. Now there is no censorship and no money.

**I believe the audience has also changed.**

Cinemas in Almaty are closed one after the other. Not even the American films are shown. In Kazakhstan, you don’t see any films, not even the *Titanic*. The main problem is the TV stations that buy old American movies for about $1,000 and keep showing them year after year. I offered to show *Aksuat* free but they said, ‘No. Life is hard enough without your films’.

**During the Soviet period, your films were distributed by Goskino in Moscow. What is the situation now? Is the only way to see films like yours, the film festivals?**

Distribution does not exist in Kazakhstan. I had an idea to invite my friends to see my film free, but someone said unless you send us an invitation to say that it is completely free, we won’t come, which reminds me of a joke: Kazakh people have an ironic attitude toward religion. After the Soviet Union, there was a *mescit* (a small mosque) no one wanted to visit. The *mulla* kept saying you should come but everyone said, ‘It is too much trouble. We have to take our shoes off, pray…’ The *Mulla* said you don’t have to do anything, just come. So they came and the *mulla* was promoted. When the new *mulla* arrived and saw all the chaos in the *mescit*, he asked for explanations. The first *mulla* said, ‘My job was to bring them here, your job is to make order’. The same should apply to the Kazakh audience. First, you have to bring them to the cinema. I don’t worry about distribution. What happens after I make my film is not my business. I don’t consider film as a business. I am not trying to make a big fortune from my films. As a film director, what other choice do I have? There will always be some kind of money to make films, even less expensive films.

**What about the language? After Independence, the tendency among film-makers from the former republics was to use the native language as opposed to Russian, which was used during the Soviet period.**

*Aksuat* was about seventy per cent in Kazakh, but *Three Brothers* is in Russian. I wanted to make the film in Russian because all children in Almaty speak Russian. I did not want to change the situation. It would not be true. I always work with the material that I have. Many Kazakhs do not know their language. When I grew up, my sister told me to speak Russian. Without speaking Russian, you could not get higher education. Now that everyone speaks Russian, there is another problem; we need to speak English.
You said *Three Brothers* came out of an idea about the trains, but it is also about the planes and it ends with the planes.

I felt that if there were an old negative force, there should be a new positive force. Locomotives are very old; there should be something modern. I like to work with binary opposites just like the good brother versus the bad brother. I think that when two opposites come together, something new can be born. Without that effect, nothing new can be born.

But planes can also be considered as a destructive force. Does that say something about progress?

My personal point of view is that progress leads to self-destruction.

Rotterdam, February 2000

THE NEED FOR HUNTERS

For me, *The Hunter* is a film about closed spaces, the home and the aul (the village), and open spaces, namely, Nature. The former is locked in a present that has severed its ties with its heritage, an orphaned world like the protagonist who was found in the forest by the ‘bad woman’ of the village. The latter, Nature is where past merges into the future, where babies are born to families living in yurts and are blessed by hunters as tradition demands, by spitting water on their faces. In Nature, man is free to run with the wolves, to make love without inhibitions, to live his life as it flows and to ‘disappear’ when the time comes. Do you feel nostalgic for the old Kazakh traditions?

I do not think we should (and can) go back to the old times. I come from the countryside but now live in the city. We have lost contact with nature. When I was a little boy and my uncle died, I saw my aunt crying and asked her why. Was it for him? She said, no, he would not come back. Was it for her difficult life? She said her life was not difficult. Why was she crying then? She said it was for the little red ball under the water. We lived as a community and we did not ask why. I would like to go back to that. We have a saying in Kazakhstan, *asphalt young men*, the young who have lost connection with nature. They only know computer games and the cities. Computer games do not teach you how to deal with what you meet in nature.

Do we need more hunters?

The film-maker is like a hunter watching the world unknown to him and trying to understand. When I was young, we were living on the steppes and following the rules of our fathers, which were not to be broken. They were simple but they worked over the centuries. For instance, I was supposed to be respectful to older men, to get up even when someone one year older than me entered the room. Nowadays civilization proceeds so fast that the *asphalt young men* forget their traditional values. Our prisons are full of young men like the protagonist of the film.

Erken is an orphan, a common trope of the Stalinist tradition where biological parents were assumed to bear political, social and/or religious values of the past. Naturally, you reverse the tradition. But absence of the father and the search for a substitute (the hunter) is also a conventional trope of Soviet films, defining a condition of not belonging to a society that is different. What is the inspiration behind the script?
The script is original. The main reason why I made the film is that in our traditions, mothers are not supposed to touch their boys or show any affection thinking that way they will become men. The first time my mother touched me on the forehead was when I was six years old and had a fever of 42 degrees. We had to vomit our medicine to continue to be sick to be caressed by our mothers. When you are not caressed by your mother, you have problems later on.

**The hunter takes onto himself the responsibility of initiating Erken into adulthood.** A tacit understanding gradually develops between them although neither one is a man of much words, let alone emotions. Only after the death of the hunter, Erken discovers that the hunter kept the drawings he used to make as a child.

In our culture, men do not show their feelings. The hunter was a stern man, but he kept the drawings.

After the death of the hunter Erken realizes that the book he was reading was blank – although the audience is privy to this fact long before.

Knowledge is passed from father to son, etc. and not acquired from books.

Erken and the hunter meet a family living in a **yurt** on the steppes and the hunter blesses the newborn baby by spitting water on his face. The second time, when Erken as the mature hunter visits them, he only kisses the boy.

I used the old Kazakh tradition of spitting to emphasize the changes in modern times that have their repercussions in every aspect of life even in remote corners of the world.

**Why did Erken have to pay the debts of the hunter after his death?**

According to our tradition, a man cannot be buried before his debts are paid. Paying his debts, Erken fulfils his obligations toward the man who played an important part in his passage to adulthood.

**Let us talk about women.** The woman who mothers Erken is a young provocative village girl whose motivation for adopting the boy is a puzzle. She is presented right at the start of the film as a sexual being, like a playmate, whose maturity in the later episodes arrives as unexpected and even lacks credence. The woman the hunter indulges in sex on his horse is an unknown stranger who lets her hair down when she spots the hunter – a subtle sign that she is ready and willing. The third woman is married to an old man who allows her to have satisfaction riding a camel since he cannot make her ‘happy’. While the men are busy doing whatever men must do, hunting or trading, women occupy themselves with sexual acts and/or thoughts. The only woman who is not presented as a sex playmate is the one who lives in a **yurt** with her husband and produces babies: she is like a shadow behind her husband. Furthermore, none of these women have any names.

I was reminded by a Dutch critic as well that none of my women characters have names. It might be because I was not caressed by my mother as a kid as is the custom in Kazakhstan. Once you are brought up that way, it is hard to change into a nice man.

**There is a good dose of exoticism in your film, not to mention eroticism,** but it is still Aprimov to the core with your tongue-in-cheek sense of humour; the same Aprimov who showed love-making in a truck in *The Last Stop* while the woman had to keep her foot on the break pedal, follows the hunter practicing every position of Kama Sutra and more on top of his horse with an unknown woman while the animal is galloping at full speed over the Kazakh steppes. Is sex on the back of the horse part
of the Kazakh traditions? What about the young woman with an old husband, who is allowed to satisfy herself on the camel? Some people may accuse you of using cheap tricks or resorting to sensationalism for commercial gains.

The tradition in history was that we were free sexually. Communists came and said sex was bad, so we stopped being so free. When the woman put her hair down, that was a signal. The hunter was not talking to her. He was letting the boy to go between. Then the boy said that she was putting down her hair. This was a signal. He rode the horse well; he could also make love on the horse. We have a saying that if a man cannot make love on top of a horse, he is not sitting properly. Actually, the expression in Kazakh is ‘to play on the ears of the horse’.

The cinematography is very sumptuous. The camera lingers on birds (especially the eagle, which appears twice), the wolf (an important character) and the endless steppes with almost an aura of sensuality. Tell me why the hunter says, ‘I am the eagle, you are the wolf’?

I tried to stay away from symbols. We have a childhood habit of naming each other with animal names, the good ones as well as the bad ones. It is also believed that if a child is given the name of a good animal, his life will go in the good direction.

Can you explain the breathing ritual?

In the Altai region in the East, where I come from, this is very traditional. We recognize two groups of animals: cold breathing such as the cow and the horse and warm breathing such as the dog and the sheep. When the hunter spends time with the cold animals, he goes to a shaman to have hot breathing. The one with cold breathing can never have any close contact with people.

The relationship between the hunter and the wolf continues until the wolf kills him.

We say the hunter does not die; the wolf comes and takes him away. When we are born, each one of us has his own wolf, and when we die we go with the wolf. The hunter is a mysterious person. He just goes away. I left it at that. Nomadic life still exists. Soviets made us settle down and organize kolkhoz (agricultural farms). After they left, Kazakhs have gone back to live in the mountains and the steppes. A new generation of hunters appeared to kill the wolves that endanger lives. In Soviet time, there was a law to kill 50,000 wolves each year. Now we don’t do it, so there is a need to kill them. A new kind of wolf, the Red Wolf, appeared, which is very dangerous. Normally, they show themselves during the day and attack at night. Now they even attack during the day. Regarding this last episode, I had two versions: the first version had definite steps in the way western audiences would understand. The hunter runs, falls off the horse, is dragged and the wolf jumps on him. Then I tried to make it simple because for us, a person does not die; he just goes away. I had two options: either explain to the audience or show it the way it is in our culture. Nature does not explain a thunderstorm.

The fatal encounter between the hunter and the wolf is breathtakingly amazing considering the fact that you shot it live without resorting to some digital tricks. How did you manage this incredible scene with such a ferocious animal?

There is a certain manner to catch wolves. We give the wolf big pieces of meat and when its stomach is full, the hunter goes on the horse to catch him. It takes two hours. The wolf gets weaker and weaker because of vomiting. You have to be on one side all the time. It kicks its head because it watches the hunter. At the end, the hunter comes from the other side. The wolf runs in circles and
is caught. Eight wolves were caught this way for our film. The wolf never looks at man in the eye, the same with the camera. I would never like to repeat the scene of the wolf attacking the hunter.

**The music in the film had a tone of nostalgia for the old ways. Is it an original composition or adapted from the traditional songs of the region?**

I do not like the music to be composed by a composer. It gives a sentimental feeling and changes the way people accept the reality of the film. The music is in the picture. Nowadays, not only that you choose to make films in colour, but add music, too. That is my compromise.

**How did you recruit your actors?**

The hunter is a colleague from the VGIK. He is the third hunter in his family and he spends most of his time in the mountains. I found Erken near Almaty. I try to find children outside the city. They are more natural and close to nature.

**No Kazakh film is made without foreign aid. In fact, the film industry has come to a halt in Kazakhstan. Does the government have any plans to ameliorate the situation?**

The president and the government want to make commercial films comparable to Hollywood. I cannot make commercial movies, I do not know how. I said to the government, ‘Why do you want to make Hollywood films? We do not make Boeing jets. You have to start making them first’. Once the government showed some commercial films to a German producer who said, ‘When I want to drink Pepsi Cola, I don’t drink Kazakh Pepsi Cola’. I am part of a small group of film-makers who make their own films. When we succeed obtaining money from abroad, we bring the project to the Kazakhfilm Studio and ask them to add something.

**One last question: why do children or adolescents play an important role in most of your films?**

My strongest memories are from living in the aul. I want to preserve this memory. My father used to say that when he painted autumn, he did not paint the autumn but how he felt it. Now that I have spent 30 years in the city, the only emotions evoked in me are still from those first twelve years in the village.

*Locarno, August 2004 and Almaty October 2004*

**Notes**


**Bio/Filmography**

Serik Aprimov was born in 1960 in Aksuat in the Semipalatinsk region of Kazakhstan. In 1979, he completed a business course in Alma Ata. Between 1983 and 1988, he studied at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow. He began working for Kazakhfilm Studios in 1988. After the short films, Dvoe Echali Na Motosikle/Two Were Riding a Motorcycle (1986), I Ljubov mui Sochranim (1987) (co-director) and Gipnotozer (1988), he made his first feature, the graduation film, Konechnaya Ostanova/The Last Stop, which is considered a manifesto of the Kazakh new wave.

**Feature films**

1989 Konechnaya Ostanova/The Last Stop
1993 Sergelden/Dream in a Dream
Rachid Nugmanov is one of the pioneers of Kazakh new wave, which brought a new vitality to the Kazakh cinema. His diploma film, the 36-minute Ya-Ha (1986), an experimental documentary shot in the manner of an improvised diary, won the Tarkovsky prize at the Moscow International Film Festival. The underground rock scene in Leningrad just before perestroika when rock music officially did not exist was brought to screen perhaps for the first time. Many stars of the music scene appeared in the film, which features several of their hit songs. Although Ya-Ha was never distributed in the USSR, it became an underground cult classic.

Nugmanov’s first feature, Igla/The Needle (1988), which exposed taboo subjects such as drug addiction, was seen by more than nine million people during the first three months of its release in the Soviet Union. In this burlesque thriller, the protagonist, Moro, played by Viktor Tsoi (the leader of the popular rock band Kino, whose immature death created a James Dean-like cult), returns to Alma Ata to collect debts and discovers that his former girlfriend Dina has become a morphine addict. He decides to help her overcome the habit and to fight the local drug mafia responsible for her condition, but is confronted by the mafia head, ‘the doctor’ (played by the rock icon Pyotr Mamonov), who is exploiting Dina. The film does not delve into the background of Moro. We can only judge him by his actions. According to Anne Lawton there is no doubt that Moro is ‘a positive hero, not in the socialist sense, but in the romantic sense of the word – free from all ties, material and psychological, a lone wanderer possessing innate dignity, honesty, an unerring sense of justice, and a mix of knightly might and kindness’. ¹

Several critics pointed out that perhaps a new romanticism was created by the new wave, a romanticism that renders the pathos of the hero as insignificant.

Following the success of The Needle, Nugmanov became the aesthetic voice of an emerging counterculture and a new generation in a dying empire and was elected as the president of the Filmmaker’s Union.

Diki Vostok/The Wild East (1993), a political allegory, was in production when the Soviet Empire collapsed. Hence, Nugmanov calls it The Last Soviet Movie. During the civil war in the ex-Soviet Empire, a troupe of midgets, called The Children of the Sun, escapes to the faraway Tian Shan Mountains in the east, where they have to deal with numerous gangs of racketing deserters. Since the government does not control the situation, The Children of the Sun ask help from the vagabonds. Nugmanov parodies The Seven Samurai of Akira Kurosawa as well as the John Ford westerns in this offbeat story of bikers, rockers and midgets brought together in a landscape of burnt-out Red Army tanks and even the
coffin of an Egyptian mummy. The film is shot in Kyrgyzstan by Nugmanov’s brother Murat, who is responsible for the beautiful camerawork in several Kazakh films.

Nugmanov eventually settled in Tours, France, and has become a prominent voice of the Kazakh opposition government in exile.

The following interview took place in the Belgian city of Gand (Ghent) during the Flanders International Film Festival, 1994, but finalised through numerous correspondences with Nugmanov over the years.

THE WILD EAST, ROCKERS, BIKERS AND A NEW LIFE

I met you for the first time in the summer of 1991 at the Kazakhfilm Studio in Alma Ata when you told me that the new wave of Kazakh cinema was ‘post-perestroika’. It was about young generations everywhere, be they Kazakh or Russian, or anyone else. It was about new relationships and a new mentality. No ideology, no politics. No restrictions. How did your career develop since The Needle (1988), which sold twenty million tickets at the box office and travelled to many prestigious festivals including Berlin?

Starting with the end of 1986, life was changing constantly in the Soviet Union. In 1989, everyone was enthusiastic about the future thinking we would build the best country in the world in less than two years. In this fervour, I was elected the president of the Filmmakers Union when I was still a student. It seems like so long ago. I agreed because I also was not very serious. I thought, ‘Good, I’ll break the Guinness World of Records’. Since then, and especially after 1989, each year has been worse than the one before and all the enthusiasm has faded away. By 1990, everyone was concerned about the future. When I met you in Alma Ata, there was already a bad feeling about everything.

That was the year when many good films were made and Variety trade magazine called Alma Ata the ‘Hollywood of Central Asia’. Alma Ata was the fourth largest film centre after Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev.

Those films probably were finished at that time but the concept was born in the 1980s. I was preparing The Wild East with Victor (Tsoi). When he died, I stopped the film. I did not know how to go on without him because it was written for him. I came back to the Filmmakers Union and for one year tried to think about the future of the Kazakh cinema. I was always for privatization. I understood even then that the government would not give us enough money. Perhaps it could give this year, but next year would be less and one day it would stop. Most people thought that we could not do anything without the government money. If one day the government betrays you, what do you do?

Are you talking about the Soviet government?

Soviet period was over at the end of 1991. It was clear then that if you could not become the owner of your own studio, eventually you would lose everything. Look at Mosfilm, which used to produce fifty or sixty films a year, what are they doing now? Six or seven films! In Kazakhstan, almost all financing has been cut. I do not know if you have heard this but all film production, except one, was stopped in the Kazakhfilm Studio this summer. The situation is very dangerous.

Right after Independence, under the liberal policies of President Nursultan Nazarbaev, Kazakhstan moved to free market economy faster than Russia and the
banks and cooperatives did not miss the opportunity to publicize themselves through high-profile investments such as cinema.

They do it less and less because they lose money.

We hear about mafia money being washed. A certain company has been under fire.

I do not know who is mafia and who is not. They are responsible for themselves. I do not know where all the money they spend comes from and why they invest it in cinema. Some people want to wash dirty money and perhaps the company in question is involved in such an operation. At least they do something alternative. I, personally, believe we cannot survive alone. We may make some videos or half-amateurish stuff but not films like those that we used to make unless we go into international co-productions. New wave was born at the end of the 1980s. It is still a child, but this child can die before it starts to walk.

The Kazakh films of the past few years are so pessimistic. Youth with no hope for the future, loss of morale and lament for dying traditions are some of the prominent themes.

This is a reflection of life. How can we make films that are not connected with life?

At the time that your first feature, The Needle, came out, the urban youth immersed in the culture of rock music, drugs, violence and shady deals was certainly an eye-opener, not only for us, westerners, but also for Soviet audiences from what I have read. And yet, you are quoted as saying that the film is not about drugs at all but about making a film with friends.

I agree that the film had a very strong feeling of realism and that is what I wanted to give to the audience. Scenes like Dina shooting up were real, but the film was not real. It is something like the silent film era and Dziga Vertov’s kino pravda (film truth), real in a playful sense.

All your films focus on sub-cultures, starting with Ya-Ha, your diploma film, but very few people outside the Soviet Union knew that subcultures existed.

Subcultures have always existed. Under the Soviet system, they took the form of an opposition to the communist ideology; now an independent movement of people who do not want to take part in commercial forms of art that are about selling yourself, your soul. What people call subculture is culture that does not have a big release and is not shown to the public because no one wants to invest in it. Nevertheless, these artists do not give up and they support each other. Subculture is all about being yourself. Sometimes being yourself can also lead to commercial success but this is very rare. Some become famous afterwards. Ninety-nine per cent of the time, they remain independent artists. They work for themselves to express their feelings. It is not a matter of being different as some people think. It is just being yourself, which is not easy in this world.

How much of your latest film, The Wild East, is related to that?

All of it. All actors are my friends from sub-culture. Most of them are from St Petersburg – musicians, artists, painters and the guys from the street, even the junkies. These people live together in their own cultural space. They understand each other very well. This is a very special world with its own values and prejudices, which was common in all republics even during the Soviet Period. Stalin’s definition of Social Realism dictated that art had to be national by form and socialist by content, which meant that a film from Kazakhstan was Kazakh only on the surface, in an
ethnographic fashion, but Soviet by nature. The subculture, on the other hand, had no national form. It was international if anything, being influenced by trends such as rock ‘n’ roll and pop art. The content was anti-communist.

You have subtitled The Wild East as The Last Soviet Film. Apart from the fact that it was shot while the Soviet Union was disappearing, you seem to be anxious to close one chapter and open a new one. Your style is rather playful with nods to popular Soviet classics such as Chapayev (1934) and a tongue-in-cheek finale reminiscent of countless Social Realist films when the Solar Children pass the new grain from hand to hand. At times, The Seven Samurai of Akira Kurosawa takes over, but perhaps John Ford westerns are even closer to what you had in mind. The Lone Cowboy looks as if he was modelled after Clint Eastwood. Is the Wild East an answer to the Wild West of Hollywood?

Those times the Soviet Union was just like the Wild West of the last century: No laws, no rules; the wild capitalism has arrived. ‘East’ does not refer to Asia but to ‘communism’ since ‘West’ is usually connected with ‘capitalism.’

What is the significance of the dwarfs?

Quite easy to explain. In the original script, I had a tribe of nomads who were trying to escape from the civil war, not to take part in that bloodshed which you can now see everywhere in the former Soviet Union. They just wanted to live peacefully somewhere in the mountains. I decided to make them Gypsies, what we call ciganye in Russian. When I looked up in the encyclopaedia, I found out that this word meant ‘Children of the Sun.’ Gypsies are generally quite strong and very courageous. I felt there was something wrong if they could not defend themselves, especially against the rock ‘n’ roll bikers, who are, basically, cowards. If one gypsy shouted at them, they would all run away. I thought that perhaps they were very small, so I invited the midgets from the Moscow circus.

A British critic interpreted the midgets as representing ‘restricted growth’.

I do not put symbols into my work. Later, when people discover many things, it is interesting. Initially, I try to stay away from symbols. I was in Kyoto once in the famous Stone Garden. There are no symbols there. It is so perfectly devoid of meaning that you can put so many meanings to it. I also was trying to be perfectly meaningless – without meaning, without philosophy, without symbols – an empty shell. After, you can put as many symbols as you want. I do not know if I succeeded but that was my method of work. Every time I see the film (and I have seen it many times), I discover new things. Just like other people who have seen it several times, who tell me that each time it changes. One time, it may look like a stupid parody, another time a very complicated philosophical tale, then a good action movie or even a tasteless comedy.

What is your connection to rock music?

All main characters in this film are rock musicians.

Is ‘rock’ just a love for you or have you ever played in a band?

I always loved rock music. Beginning with the 1980s, many of my friends were rock musicians – Victor Tsoi and others. I was born the same year as rock ‘n’ roll. It has always had a great influence on me. I also worked with a rock band for two years in the mid-1970s. We wrote about fifty songs and made a record. Nothing was released, but the songs were passed around among friends.
Was there a rock culture in the Soviet Union just like in America?

Not like in America. Rock 'n' roll was forbidden in the Soviet Union. It was real underground. Officially, it did not exist. If you were a rock musician, you could not even call yourself as such because all those ideologists would say, 'Rock does not exist, you don’t exist. Maybe you are a criminal. A parasite to society! A Punk!' I was always attracted to the artists. They loved to play; they were poets. They could not do anything else. If you are a poet, you have to take a pen and write verses. They say you are stupid; you cannot eat with that. What can you say? You go mad if you cannot write. Beginning with my first film Ya-Ha (1986), I was always working with these people. Not because they are rock musicians, but because I love them, and they happen to be rock musicians. An old guy in Moscow made a film called Rock and Roll Tragedy or something similar to that. He did not understand rock 'n' roll or the people involved. Why did he make such a film? Just because it was a popular idea! I never did it for that reason. I didn’t even think of it as rock 'n' roll music. It does not matter to me.

Does The Wild East have distribution possibilities in Europe?

Many people liked it at the Festival of Action and Adventure Films in Valenciennes in France where it received the Jury Special Prize. However, I do not know how to sell myself to this kind of people. I talk to people like you at festivals, but I never visit film markets. The Japanese have bought it though. I have discovered that I have many friends in Japan. One letter I received from a woman says she has seen The Needle (also released in Japan) twenty-one times!

How does living outside your country reflect on your work?

Living far from my country, I can look back and evaluate what is going on because when you live there, you are too close to understand. I could have made another film in Kazakhstan without major problems, but I decided to start from ground zero. In the West, who am I? I am a beginner. For the Kazakh new wave, I am at the top; but it is nothing. I need challenge: to become nobody and to start from scratch.

In your future films, do you think that you would be telling your own story, Kazakh or Soviet, or would you shift your focus to different characters and new lifestyles?

This does not concern me. I do not think much about Kazakhstan or the Soviet Union. I am trying to express myself, my understanding of people. From my first film to the last one, I have always worked with my friends in that kind of style. I never used professional actors. Even the cameraman, Murat, is my brother. I have always worked with people I loved and believed in. I knew that we could do beautiful things. Victor, who is now dead, became the most popular actor of the Soviet Union in 1989. Who could have imagined that a year before? All these talented people would never have gone on screen if I wouldn’t take them there. I do not like the system of stars, the show business, the endless exposure, stars running from one film to another. I am bored with all that. We have film, we have camera, we have friends, we have energy; we gonna do it! It does not matter whether they are from Kazakhstan, Moscow, Hong Kong or London. If I know them, if I love them, I will work with them. Even while sitting here, I am preparing projects and, again, with people I know and love.

Gand (Ghent), October 1994

Notes
Bio/Filmography
Rachid Nugmanov was born in 1954 in Alma Ata. In 1977, he graduated from the architecture institute. He entered the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow 1984 and was one of the students in the workshop Sergei Soloviev conducted. He graduated in 1987. His first film, *Igla/The Needle*, received the Grand Prix of the Festival of Nuremberg in 1990. Nugmanov has been living in France since 1993.

Feature films
1988 *Igla/The Needle*
1993 *DikiVostok/The Wild East*
Chingiz Aitmatov is one of the most well-known writers of Central Asia in the western world. His career flourished in the former Soviet Union where he told the tales of his people, the Kyrgyz of the steppes, from the turbulent years following the world wars to the establishment of the Soviet rule and its outcome, often employing the dominant language, Russian. His first novel, *Dzamilja/Cemila* (1958), was called by the French writer Aragon, 'the most beautiful love story of the world'. In 1963, he was awarded the Lenin Prize for literature. His relationship with the Soviet authorities, however, was not always so amiable. *Ak Keme/The White Boat* (1971), which exposed the moral destruction of the Kyrgyz peasants in the world of evil was ostracized for its pessimistic ending – the suicide of the little boy. *The Dream of the Wolf* (1987) created a furore when god was printed with a capital “G” for the first time in a Soviet publication but Aitmatov was already a world celebrity. His books were being translated into many languages; and adaptations to screen, by some of the best film-makers of the Soviet Union, were winning awards at home and abroad.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the national cinema of Kyrgyzstan owes much of its history to its greatest writer. In addition to serving as president of the Cinematographer’s Union for many years, Aitmatov has also given to cinema more than a dozen of his most important works, often scripting or co-scripting. Central Asian cinema has had a long tradition of adaptations from literature. However, the involvement of writers such as Aitmatov has been more direct and this has definitely influenced the themes, points of view and the aesthetic choices of the film-makers.

The works of Aitmatov attracted many film-makers from different parts of the USSR. There have also been collaborations with Turkey. The contributions of the non-Kyrgyz film-makers encouraged Kyrgyz cinema to establish a link between cinema and cultural traditions and brought a universal perspective to a cinema that by tradition is oriented towards national epics. Kyrgyz cinema also benefited vastly from the aesthetic climate created by Aitmatov and the way he pushed the limits and transgressed the national boundaries to present man as a universal being. Transpositions were not always successful, as the rich and complex nature of Aitmatov’s work does not easily lend itself to the language of cinema. It has even been stated that Aitmatov sacrificed his talent for the cinema and the cultural development of his people.
Chingiz Aitmatov was awarded the prestigious Berlinale Camera during the 46th International Berlin Film Festival in 1996 where a Kyrgyz film, Boranly Beket/Snowstormy Station (1995) by Bakyt Karagulov, was shown. Based on a famous Aitmatov novel, The Day That is Longer Than a Century, and the thirteenth Aitmatov work adapted to screen, the film is the story of two former fishermen from the Kazakh region of Aral Lake who had spent World War II at a remote railway station in the Sary Ozek Steppe. When one of them dies, Soviet guards do not allow the other to bury him according to ancient Islamic rites and at a place sacred to Kazakhs, which is now a military rocket-testing zone. Memories of his friend, a teacher and a partisan, persecuted during the Stalin era for the diaries he kept, haunt the hero. Soviet totalitarianism that had threatened cultural and ethnic identity is linked in his mind with the Mankurts who, in ancient times, robbed conquerors of their memory by means of torture. Aitmatov who also wrote the script claims that the story of a writer persecuted by the regime is not based on personal experiences: 'numerous writers were oppressed by the State. It is a mirror of a period of crisis when the interests of the government were in conflict with the interests of the people particularly in regards to preservation of cultural roots'.

Critical of previous adaptations of his work to screen, Aitmatov was very pleased with this film, especially with 'the sensitivity of the filmmaker to the multi-layered symbolism of the original work – the incessant passing of the trains or the wheel that rolls down the dusty plains – that define the emotional ties of the characters to their cultural roots. Such abstract concepts are very difficult to capture on the screen. I had seen other works by Bakyt and I knew that he would understand this book'.

I met Chingiz Aitmatov for the first time in July 1994 in Luxembourg where he was serving as Kyrgyz ambassador. After several letters, faxes and telephone conversations, he invited me to his villa near the mountains where his daughter Shirin translated the interview from Russian to English. In 1996, in Berlin, although he was busy with jury duties, he gave me some time for an update. Our discussions continued informally wherever we had the chance to meet. In 2000, during the 10th anniversary of Cottbus Film Festival in the former East Germany, as the patron of the festival, Aitmatov led the delegation of Kyrgyz film-makers to present a comprehensive retrospective. A year later, again in Cottbus, in November 2001, we had a better chance to sit down to a longer conversation.

**The Equivocal Marriage of Literature and Cinema**

In the face of the present changes, the collapse of totalitarian regimes and the rise of the long oppressed nations with claims to their past and culture, an artist can no longer remain in his/her ivory tower. You were a Soviet citizen once and a Soviet ambassador during the perestroika years. You have even served as a Russian ambassador after the fall of the Soviet Union. Now you are Kyrgyzstan’s ambassador. How do these changes affect you as an artist and as an individual?

I often ask this question myself. The global transformation can be examined from two points of view: personal and social. Naturally, you would see the interrelation when you analyse these two. I cannot separate myself from the mass that used to be called the Soviet citizens. You may see in me a part that is used to the conservatism of the old times because I spent most of my life in that epoch. Living in a totalitarian regime was very difficult for everyone, but it was much worse for a writer. Nevertheless, I am proud that I have chosen a global role in my work and lived with it.
In the new architecture ensuing the fall of the Soviet Union, who are the winners and who are the losers?

I do not think there are any winners except perhaps the future generations. We have stepped from one level to another, which is one step closer to democracy. Our century is experiencing something that was not even possible theoretically. This does not only touch the post-Soviet people, but the world. Perestroika was initially seen as a process of reforms. History developed spontaneously with these reforms. We are now going through the repercussions of this spontaneous development of perestroika. The ‘New East’ is trying to find who he is. We look at Europe as a mirror. Do we copy the political liberalism, the dynamism and the productivity of the western market? We are not ready for these changes. We found a cruel reality in the capitalist world. Totalitarian ideology is now replaced by totalitarian monetarism. How long will this transition period take?

For a writer, film-maker and intellectual of the former USSR, Independence has brought certain gains such as freedom of expression; on the other hand, there are some losses.

Intellectuals form a part of society that takes everything to heart and suffers more than the others do. They see something attractive in a new society and in new constructions and feel it an obligation to fight for society and its liberation. However, the ideas of the intellectuals can also take a wrong turn, or they may not even be wanted. In the years of perestroika, we thought that everything would happen the way we wanted it to happen, but our ideas were exploited by other forces of society. Today intellectuals are not even on the path of history. The intellectual is a catalyst, the catalyst of historical movement and changes although these changes may not work well with his ideas. The important thing is the movement, the fight for the right cause. This is what develops culture.

In one of your plays, Voshozdenie na Fudzijamu/ The Ascent of Mount Fuji Yama (1977), the hero, Sabur, is an intellectual who is alienated by his friends and society because his ideas were ahead of his time. Where would he be today?

I thank you for such a question. I have often thought of him myself. What would happen to Sabur today? Sabur is one of those spiritual relations of the dissidents, the intellectuals who fought against totalitarianism. He is a man with high goals. He would not be satisfied with the changes because if he did, he would not have his development as a person and as an individual. I could also say that I am satisfied with everything. We now have liberty – liberty of press, of expression. I can write what I want. If I decide to be satisfied with what I have, I would have no other goal in life. I must always find new problems and new challenges. The spirit of man is like space. It has no limits. The individual must fight for his own truth. If he has nothing to fight for, he does not exist anymore. A dialogue took place some years ago between the Japanese philosopher Daisaku Ikeda and me, which was later published in German, Russian and Japanese. Our first meeting was just before the Gulf War. We even tried to send a letter to Saddam Hussein to persuade him to leave Kuwait. Of course, it did not happen that way, but we tried. When we met again in Moscow after some years, we discovered that everything we had discussed earlier was still in front of us in a new way. This tells me that we should never stop. Democracy now exists in Russia, but democracy is not the highest possibility.

Now that we are in a completely new era, how should we treat our past? In Fuji Yama, the teacher asks, ‘What for shall we come back to our past?’ Bolat Shamshiev, who directed the film version, once commented that the film was ‘an attempt to answer the question whether it is necessary to stir the past’.
Without a past, a present and some ideas about a future, life does not exist. The past holds us every hour. We have to measure the present with the happenings of the past. We often have a misconception that the future should always be bigger and better than the past. This is not always true. In art and literature, it is not true at all. I do not think modern music is as good as the music of the beginning of the century. We should analyse the past as a tool to know and to build the future.

You have always been very close to cinema, both as a scriptwriter and as the head of the Cinematographer’s Union. Critics have referred to you as ‘the heart and soul’ of the Kyrgyz cinema. You have been on the juries of important festivals. Retrospectives of films based on your works have been held in cinemathèques and specialized festivals.

I could not say that I am very close to cinema for the moment. During the last few years, politics and diplomatic work have completely separated me from cinema. Nevertheless, I have my own principles and I know what I want from cinema. I do not like those fashionable festivals such as Cannes. They have other goals, other aims. They represent well-developed countries. Festivals such as Berlin, Istanbul or the festival des 3 continents in Nantes, France, give a chance to the cinematographies of other countries to have a voice.

What about Kyrgyz cinema after Independence?

Kyrgyz cinema, just like Kyrgyz theatre, is only a dry little branch. After losing government subsidies, it has gone through immense economic difficulties. However, artists still have a perspective. If they find subsidies, they can express themselves. There is no censorship now…

There is another kind of censorship. Economic problems determine the type of films to be made.

That is very true. We still have the illusion of liberty, not the liberty.

It has been said that your work is much richer and more complex than adaptations to cinema. Do you agree that it is very difficult to film your work?

Certainly. Out of the twelve films that were made to date, only two are worth seeing: Ak Keme/The White Boat, (1975) by Bolat Shamshiev and Pegi Pios, Biegouchki Kraiem Moria/A Piebald Dog Running on the Edge of the Sea (1990) by Karen Gevorkian.

The White Boat successfully balances the national legends and myths with the reality of daily life without sacrificing the poetry of the artistic structure and A Piebald Dog Running on the Edge of the Sea brings to screen, with visual poetry, the plight of a small ethnic minority on the Sakhalin Island who are threatened with cultural extinction. Shamshiev is Kyrgyz and Gevorkian is Armenian.

Two very important Russian film-makers have also transposed my stories: Andrei Mikhalkov Konchalovsky with Pervyj Ucitel/The First Teacher (1965) and Larisa Shepit’ko with Znoi/Heat (1963), as well as some very talented Kyrgyz film-makers such as Okeev and Bazarov.

I find it a paradox that Kyrgyz cinema was first heard of in the West thanks to The First Teacher, a film made by a Russian. In fact, Konchalovksy started his career in Kyrgyzstan with this film. Larisa Shepit’ko was Ukrainian. She was supposed to direct Heat, based on your short story The Eye of the Camel with Shamshiev as their diploma film to graduate from VGIK, but finished it alone, although Shamshiev
played the leading role. The film won the Grand prize of the Karlovy Vary Film festival in 1964. *The First Teacher* is often referred to as the beginning of independent cinema although Konchalovsky was very much criticized for infidelity to your novel of the same title and deviation from reality. Do you think that there should be a unity between the film and the book?

That is the idea, but it is not always so in reality.

**In your books, one can easily find a hero, usually a young one, who is fascinated with the magic of cinema – the little boy in *The White Boat* or the dead soldier’s son in *The Soldier's Son*, for instance.**

I have always loved cinema. In my childhood, there was no television. In the mountains, there was no electricity either. Films were shown by turning the handle of the projector manually. Naturally, the strongest boys got to do this job and, naturally, they would speed it up or slow it down as they pleased. There were so many fights!

**What kind of films were those?**

End of the 1930s Russian films. National cinema only started in the fifties.

**In *The Soldier's Son*, the boy watches war films and thinks they are real.**

Cinema is illusion. The little boy does not remember his father; he thinks someone on the screen is his father. For the boy, this is the reality.

**For him, illusion is more real than reality.**

Children are very sensitive and they were more so in the days before the advent of the television. Now they can sit in front of the television for twenty-four hours if they wish. It is a completely different world.

**Could you tell me something about your last novel, *The Stamp of Cassandra*?**

Difficult to explain. It is very different from my traditional stories.

**Is this difference connected with the global changes or internal, personal changes?**

The two are interrelated. On the one hand is the issue of nationalism; on the other, the global view of the planet and the human race – a view, which does not depend on race or religion. The hero reflects about what is happening on earth from an interplanetary station in space. A new Cassandra!

Luxemburg, 1994

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Six years ago, we discussed the new world order after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Today we are in the former East Germany, now unified with the West, but bombs are falling not far from your country. You have told me that we have to change our perspective.

At this moment, it is very important to think about humanitarian values while talking about the world. Through the mass media, which has become more important and powerful, the danger of the absolutization of one or the other religion has entered our lives. Mass media must be aware of this danger. To be more concrete, in the past, when two countries were in conflict with each other, this conflict could not have repercussions on the rest of the world. Through the development of the mass
media, which permits us to witness with our own eyes what happens in faraway places, we see that a conflict between two sides, regardless of which side we are on, can influence the world. This is the point, which has to be taken in account when talking about the war and this point worries me.

The development of the mass media has become dangerous.

Mass media monopoly can be very dangerous. It can influence our minds and further development of the world. The responsibility of mass media has increased enormously because now it deals with global issues.

To turn our attention to cinema, once you told me Kyrgyz cinema was like a baby learning to walk. At what stage is it now? The film industries of all former Soviet Republics have been negatively affected after Independence and the transition to market economy.

Kyrgyz cinema is not a baby anymore, but a youth, a teenager thrown out on the streets to find his way. I am quite sure that talented young directors like Aktan Abdikalikov will go an interesting way. I am not Ak Sakal (the wise old man with a white beard), but I will try to answer your questions. In the past, we used to meet our colleagues in Moscow but now our focus seems to have moved to Cottbus! The world changes and everything becomes history but these changes affect our creative development. National art including cinema was the invention of the Soviet era for us. I count myself among those who discovered national cinema tradition during the Soviet period. We achieved great things within the context of the Soviet cinema and language. We had our own cinema, our own directors and stars. I do not want to comment on national cinema today and I do not want to blame anyone for the present situation either. We are in a free space where we can work. Each country has the opportunity to prove what they can achieve and in the end, life will prove what can be achieved. We have moved from one system with all its limitations that seemed to work for us to a different system of market economy. New tasks await us. The question is are we going to survive. Many factors influence this outcome. The fact that Cottbus Film Festival has focused on Central Asia is very important. In the new social and cultural circumstances, such festivals give us psychological support. Naturally, film-making always offers alternatives. One of these is that we might move towards mass cinema. When I say ‘mass cinema’, I mean Hollywood. We can also try to preserve our identity and show it. This is not a problem for only Central Asia. For international cinema and culture also, it is important to maintain its diversity and originality, which find a voice in national representations. Our task is to keep pace with international filmmaking and show that national spiritual values are important and can contribute to interesting filmmaking. There are many international film festivals – Cannes, Berlin, Venice – and may they prosper in the future. In psychological terms, it is important for us to find our own place.

In the past, we were under the pressure of the totalitarian society, which created difficulties but also some advantages. Now we are swimming in a large ocean, it will be seen if we can keep our head above the water or swim. The potential is there. The subject of culture and art is infinite at this stage of our civilization and very important to talk about.

In the context of the recent events, we are facing a challenge of universal proportions – spiritual values against international terrorism. I am sure that cinema will participate in this struggle. To reflect on what happened in the past and what will happen in the future has become crucial. The current structure calls upon us to change our perspective if the human race is to survive at all.

Cottbus, November 2001
Aktan Abdikalikov (Aktan Arym Kubat in Kyrgyz)

Aktan Abdikalikov’s Selkinchek/The Swing, Beshkempir/The Adopted Son and Maimyl/The Chimp constitute an autobiographical trilogy, a bildungsroman, one might say, which narrates in chronological order the film-maker’s childhood, adolescence and passage to adulthood within the context of historical, social and political changes in Kyrgyzstan. The protagonist is interpreted by Abdikalikov’s son, Mirlan, in all three.

The Swing is almost a wordless film about a young boy, who spends his days with an old retarded man pushing a beautiful girl on a swing. The idyllic picture of childhood is disrupted with the arrival of the stranger. Beshkempir/The Adopted Son (1998) narrates the dramatic effects of the ancient custom of offering babies from large families to childless couples on a young village boy. One spring day, five women sitting on a colourful kilim in the village square, pass a white bundle from hand to hand, pronouncing the words, ‘It is not my son, but the son of the sky’, and the newly weaned Azate acquires new parents. At the age of thirteen, when he finds out that he is adopted, he experiences a deep sense of loss. The death of his grandmother is very crucial as it marks Azate’s passage to manhood. This is perhaps the first time Azate articulates his feelings. He will pay her debts if there are any, as according to custom, a person who owes cannot be buried. Ironically, he has to take care of his family at a moment when he discovers they are not his blood relatives.

Absence of the real father had been a regular trope for Soviet cinema, to emphasize the split, the exteriority between the hero and the laws of his society or social group, where the hero must exist within the socio-cultural models that are already determined, although, Abdikalikov asserts that the character of Azate stems from his personal experiences as he also was adopted.

The emotional journey of the young rural hero moves to an urban environment with Maimyl/The Chimp and the common language is Russian. The protagonist is waiting to be drafted to the army. Once again, he is outside the society, a misfit among his peers, this time because of his protruding ears. Extreme self-consciousness about his appearance augmented by family problems – alcohol dependency of his father and the departure of his mother – exacerbate his alienation. He does not have the confidence to approach the blonde-haired Russian girl with whom he has fallen in love.

Nature is very important in Abdikalikov’s films as a part of daily life. Although Kyrgyzstan is theoretically an Islamic country, animism is practiced widely. Starting with the almost shamanistic ritual of the giving away of a baby boy to a childless couple, The Adopted Son opulently indulges in centuries-old beliefs that connect men to nature. Another example is different birds proclaiming different seasons in nature, which in turn connect with the emotional development of the protagonist.
The film is mostly in black and white with an economical use of colour. Abdikalikov, who was trained as a painter, experiments with tones and nuances in re-creating a village life that undulates between sexual awakenings, fist fights, hopes, uncertainties, but also fear and disappointment. He explains that all significant memories of youth were in colour for him signifying emotional memory and meaning, and the rest in nebulous black and white. Colour, which is an integral part of the trilogy, also defines the interior and exterior landscape in *The Chimp* when the garish decoration of the disco and the dull grey landscape of the urban space are juxtaposed with the vivid hues of nature.

The following interview took place during the Rotterdam Film Festival in January 2002.

**THE MOST SUCCESSFUL KYRGYZ FILM-MAKER**

Many opinions have been expressed about your work: *The Swing*, *The Adopted Son* and *The Chimp*. Critics easily identify a trilogy. Is this what you originally had in mind, or is it a term used by journalists who like to compartmentalize?

Journalists started to speak about a trilogy after I emphasized it. I had the trilogy in mind right from the beginning. I made my first film, *The Swing*, ten years ago. When I finished the second film, *The Adopted Son*, I knew that I needed a third film. It was like the periods of my life: childhood, adolescence and becoming an adult.

You mean the trilogy developed as it went and it was not fixed from the beginning.

That is right. By the second film, I knew I had to do it.

Why did you choose your son to play the lead role?

Because this is an autobiographical trilogy, I thought of someone closest to me to interpret my ideas, feelings and emotions, and I chose my son.

Your alter-ego?

Yes, yes.

Perhaps on your part, there was an innate wish for your son not to have the same kind of experiences that you had – a wish for a better future.

I did not choose this topic to illustrate that the son should not be like his father. I wanted to focus on the father and son experiences and disclose the differences between them. My aim was to mirror the good as well as the bad.

Is the trilogy autobiographical in terms of facts or feelings?

The plot is very autobiographical. The events of *The Swing* were drawn from direct experiences. I was an adopted son and I had the nickname *ape*, the chimp. Furthermore, when I was a young boy, I was in love with my sixteen-year-old neighbour and I followed her everywhere. However, some subplots are not autobiographical, but stem from my co-scriptwriter’s suggestions or stuff I read somewhere. Emotions and feelings are autobiographical to the maximum. I don’t know why I
always feel the need to bare my soul. It must have something to do with the fact that in our daily lives, we repeatedly experience the disintegration of the original principles of ethics. In our chaotic world, to give a definition to truth has become very difficult. The only thing one is capable of is to try to be truthful to oneself. I am not a beautiful person, and this reality formed the foundation of my spiritual development. I know that appearance is not what counts, and it does not bother me anymore, but adolescence is the most vulnerable period of our lives when we long to be loved. Slowly, you begin to understand and try to be beautiful through thoughts and feelings. Another painful memory from my childhood that found its way to the film is growing up with an alcoholic father.

The character of the fat girl in The Chimp reminded me of Fellini's 8½. Does this image come from life or from love of cinema?

I knew that I would repeat the same things that one could find elsewhere, but I had a neighbour exactly like this woman. I just took a real fact. This kind of woman exists in the childhood of all men.

Little bit real, little bit imaginary. Boys usually have big imaginations before actual experiences.

Fantasies.

You use several powerful images, one of which is the mirror. Once you said that the father in The Chimp puts the mirror down when he loses his soul.

I do the ‘cinema of images’, so I use all tools and all material available to achieve that goal. I put meaning to the surroundings, to the atmosphere and to the construction of the film. The mirror is the reflection of all our secrets. As we grow up, we keep gazing at the mirror. I can also recall several metaphors that connect the mirror to cinema or to mythology. For instance, the bad are not to be seen in the mirror. They have no reflection.

Is this from Kyrgyz mythology?

I don’t remember but in Russian mythology, one always finds the image of the mirror that tells the truth. There is even a proverb about telling the truth which is connected to the mirror. This is expressed in Kyrgyzstan with turning down the mirror. In that scene, the father starts to cry and turns down the mirror. To be more precise, I wanted to say he could no longer face himself. He was weak and he was afraid of himself. The reflection that is broken is like his faith that has been corrupted. The woman with a scar on her face looks at the mirror a little differently. Her faith is broken. On the other hand, the little mirror the boys hold to look under the skirts of the girls reflects the devilish nature of adolescent boys.

The last one is universal. Boys used to behave the same way in Turkey, too, when I was a young girl. It is good that in the film, we can recognize these experiences and laugh about them, but they also help us to reflect because the subject is very serious. To see young people with nothing to do, waiting to go to the army is depressing. If they had something good to do, they would not think of going to do army. Is this a true reflection of the Kyrgyz youth today?

Yes, it is true and the period just before the army is a period of decision. You have to decide about your life.
This aspect can be applied to the country as well. For instance, in your short film *Ostanovka/Beket/Bus Station*, which you co-directed with Ernest Abdizhaparov, people are waiting for the bus that never comes.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, there was a vacuum. Before people had faith to construct, to build communism. Now there is no faith, nothing to build. A vacuum has been created. In *Bus Stop*, people are waiting for some kind of a future to come but waiting and waiting.

Traditions were suppressed during the Soviet era. In *The Adopted Son*, they play an important role. The title *Beshkempir* signifies ‘five women’ in Kyrgyz. These women, who look like tribal heads of the village, perform an initiation ritual that declares the boy adopted. When the grandmother dies, the boy performs the ritual of settling her accounts and through this action enters the world of adulthood. How do people feel about traditions in modern Kyrgyzstan? Do the young want to search their roots or do they simply not care? It is rather significant that the protagonist is an adopted boy, a familiar motif of the Stalinist cinema although the purpose is reversed here.

After the break from the Soviet Union, we were eager to find our roots. In my earlier films, I gave prominence to Kyrgyz traditions for the people to remember. Along with cinema, political and cultural life was also actively involved in the revival of roots. Now we try to re-evaluate the role of traditions because the country should not isolate itself; it should integrate to the world. That is why I used people from different cultures in my last film, *The Chimp*. In the Soviet Union, different cultures and nationalities had lived together. In Kyrgyzstan, there are about eighty nationalities. This was a plus, so why ruin it? The nation itself, the people are not guilty. Politicians are. Now these issues are stabilizing. People reject the bad things and take the good ones to make decisions.

**Does the government have control over arts?**

Not at all! Absolutely not! And I am scared about that because control is order. You can avoid control. Things that are forbidden, you have to avoid, which means the artist has to be more concentrated to be more inventive. During the Soviet Union, many films ended up on the shelves, but still films were made and these films were good. Perhaps it is easier to live in an authoritarian regime than in total freedom. Living in a free country, every individual needs to have a bigger chance, and I don’t think our country is ready for that kind of freedom.

**When independence arrived, what were you doing, or thinking, and what was your reaction?**

I was in the mountains trying to write the screenplay for *Gde tvoi dom, ulitka/Where is Your House, Snail*? When I heard what happened, I was surprised. I went to the mountain with one regime and came back with another. But I still think that people did not understand what was happening. It is all the politicians. People could not make a conscious decision.

**The film industry received a big setback. Many film-makers are not shooting at all. One of your eminent film-makers, Gennadi Bazarov, has not made a film since 1989.**

It was as if people had more confidence in film-makers before Independence. I needed a kind of a stepping back period to reflect because what we had was taken away from us and each individual was trying to survive as he could. Now it appears that I am the only one of the Kyrgyz cinema who survived. I know many very talented film-makers, perhaps more talented than I am, who could make good films, but they are sitting idle somewhere. A selection was made and only the best
survived? I do not think so. We were never told how to make different kind of films, how to work for money or how to finance projects. I cannot explain how I get the money. I was not ready for that myself. I was just shooting. I am still shooting.

You receive funds from the West because they have seen your films and liked them and they trust you. What are the dangers of making films with foreign funds? Any ramifications on your thinking or planning?

No. No remarks were made during the screenwriting, editing or shooting. When I say this, everyone is surprised. But this is the truth. I am the sole author of my films.

In the past, you had worked with Bazarov. When I met him in Nantes recently, he spoke highly of your work and told me that even those days one could already sense your curiosity and artistic creativity.

I was his assistant director and set designer.

What about Tolomush Okeev, who passed away recently? Didn’t he produce Where is your House, Snail, a children’s film?

Yes, my first film. Nobody knew about this film. The first screening was in Cottbus last autumn and the next was Nantes. The script of that film was ordered from Moscow. It is like a propaganda film. I was not allowed to change the script but I tried to adapt it to Kyrgyzstan.

Do you think that one can see a marked difference between a Kyrgyz film and a Kazakh film or an Uzbek film?

The Kyrgyz are perhaps closest to the Kazakhs. I think Kyrgyz films have a more melancholic but at the same time more brusque way of looking at life, which could be interpreted as typical of the mountain people. The Kazakhs are more introspective in their films reflecting the steppe mentality. Uzbek films are more extravagant, even kitsch. Cultural differences have become more pronounced within the film industries after the fall of the Soviet Union.

You are a self-made man. You did not go to film school and you were a painter before becoming a film-maker at the age of 33.

I studied painting.

Do you still paint?

No. I tried at the beginning, but the project is different in terms of the form. You have to change your mind. Now I express my thoughts successfully through cinema. If I fail, I will go back to painting.

Most people do not know much about Kyrgyz cinema. The most prevalent name is not a film-maker but a writer, Chingiz Aitmatov, who has been actively involved with the film industry in many ways. Do you feel the influence of his work on your artistic and intellectual development?

He was my favourite writer and he certainly influenced me. But I liked the earlier Aitmatov. I do not like the wise old Aitmatov. I think his thinking has become European and I think he is wrong.

Aitmatov told me he considers you the most important Kyrgyz director!

(laughs) I like more the earlier Aitmatov, such as Dzamilja/Cemila. I think Kyrgyz people need that kind of understanding of Kyrgyz mentality of looking at life. Books like Cassandra’s Stamp, nobody needs such literature. His themes are very global. I think of Aitmatov that way because I want to
remind myself not to step over this barrier: Don’t shoot films about general global issues from somewhere in Paris! Aitmatov would not be mad at me for saying this, he would agree with me.

**What kind of movies do you like to watch?**

I watch very little. I am always thinking of my own way. I don’t know if it is good or bad, but for me, it is more interesting to have some kind of an experience to create a personality. If I will be mistaken, it still would be an interesting road of the lonely stranger.

**Are you starting another trilogy?**

Not now, but everything starts very spontaneously. We don’t know why we fall in love. Only afterwards, we can try to understand. I won’t be surprised if I end up with another trilogy.

*Rotterdam, January 2002*

**Bio/Filmography**

Aktan Abdikalikov was born in 1957 in the village of Kuntuu in Kyrgyzstan. He studied at the Art Institute and started to work as a set designer. He produced numerous short and feature films. In 1993, he entered the international film world with his medium-length film *Selkinchek/The Swing*.

**Feature films**

1992  *Gde tvoi dom, ulitka/Where is Your House, Snail?*
1993  *Selkinchek/The Swing* (mid-length film)
1998  *Beshkempir The Adopted Son*
2001  *Maimyl/The Chimp*

**ERNEST ABDIZHAPAROV**

Ernest Abdizhaporov excelled in short films before directing his feature film *Saratan* in 2004. *Beket/Bus Station*, a 22-minute black-and-white film is a visual poem that serves, in a minimalist manner, as a metaphor for the isolated situation of the country. Co-directed with Aktan Abdikalikov, the film shows people of different ages waiting for the bus. Snow is everywhere. We can almost hear the crisp snow and feel the cold and the feeling of waiting and desperation thinking the bus will never come as vehicles keep going the other direction. The characters are anonymous, like shadows. The camera is closer only once when the middle-aged man pushes the drunk intruder bothering the young woman.

*Menim Pirim Almanbet/I Worship the Spirit of Almanbet* (1993–2000) is about the Kyrgyz national epic, *Manas*, which is almost impossible to reduce to film. The focus here is on one of the storytellers who has had troubles in his life and has made
mistakes. The film narrates his relationship to the epic – the way he looks at his life through Manas and tries to find his place in Manas.

*Saratan/Village Authorities*, his first feature, uses a small Kyrgyz town as a metaphor for the nation ten years after Independence. The film is an episodic comedy set in a contemporary village. Tragicomic tales of politics and religion, tradition and modernity, pride and honour are told using stock characters – a mystical healer, a Jehovah’s Witness, a ‘new Kyrgyz’, an oppositionist-communist, a womanizing militiaman, a mullah who is late to prayers, a drunk father – that represent post-Soviet reality. Just as in *Bus Station*, Abdizhaparov keeps his distance except for the final scene when spring brings hope. The hero of the film, according to Abdizhaparov, is the people of Kyrgyzstan who endure everything but finally find the right way.

Unlike so many Central Asian films that target festival audiences, the film has touched a chord with the local audiences and became a box office success in addition to receiving the Best Screenplay Prize at KinoShock and a special mention of the F.i.p.r.e.s.c.i at the Fribourg International Film Festival, 2005.

The following interview took place during the Cottbus Film Festival in former East Germany in October 2001.

**MINIMALIST WORLD**

**As this is our first meeting, I would like to know about your background.**

My film career began in Germany with the screening of *Beket/Bus Station* in Aixburg. The second screening is here in Cottbus. I am a self-taught man. I did not learn film-making at school. I began making films five years ago in the post-Soviet era. I made five short films to practice my trade, to learn about making films. Now I want to make feature films.

**How did your collaboration with Aktan Abdikalikov in *Bus Station* happen?**

Aktan offered me to write the screenplay, but he could not find the money to shoot the film. I offered him some money and suggested that we ask for equipment from the studio.

**The characters in *Bus Station* are anonymous, almost ‘faceless’. You seem to keep the audience at a distance intentionally.**

I was afraid to show this film. Not everyone reads the film the way you did. Some find it very long. The film is about waiting. People have to experience the real feeling of waiting. Only distance can give this feeling. We wanted to eliminate the subjective character of the film-maker. In the distance, everything is objective.

**The passengers waiting for the bus are from different age groups – old man, young boy, middle-aged people.**

They represent Kyrgyz people after the break-up from the Soviet Union. They are near a big road, waiting, for what? Cars pass by, and they are still waiting.

*I Worship the Spirit of Almanbet* draws from Kyrgyz traditions. When Chinghiz Aitmatov introduced the film at the festival here, he said many storytellers try to connect Manas to some mystic and mysterious circumstances. One of the greatest storytellers once told him that while he was sleeping in the fields, he was awoken by the sound of running horses and an old man appeared and told him, ‘You’ll be the
teller’. ‘How it is possible to know by heart such a large amount of text?’ Aitmatov said he often asks himself. ‘The great storytellers were able to improvise. This short film has a mystic characteristic for me. It has a possibility to improvise.’

In the retelling of the Manas, what is said is less important than how it is said. People are generally familiar with the story, especially through the works of Aitmatov. That is why I did not think it was necessary to subtitle the recitations. To hear the words is more impressive. The poetry of Manas is the inspiration for the Kyrgyz culture. Manas is like an encyclopaedia about Kyrgyz life.

What language is used in Kyrgyz films today?

Kyrgyz language; it used to be Russian during the Soviet Union.

What are the conditions for the film-makers?

The government is not in a position to help the film-makers. We want economic reforms to change our system and we understand it must be a difficult period. That is why we accept the problem as normal. Perhaps, after some years, the attention of the government will turn to us. In the meanwhile, we make videos to survive. In the Soviet era, Kyrgyzstan made three films per year. After perestroika, we made more because directors could find rich sponsors. In 1992, twelve long feature films were produced. But after that, it became gradually more difficult. Between 1995/96, no films were made. Usually, it is one film in two years and this year two films are finished: one by Aktn, produced with French money and one by Marat Sarulu, My Brother, the Silk Road.

Do you find the Kyrgyz tradition slowly eroding?

On the contrary, we are beginning to recover our lost traditions and parallel to that searching for the best tradition to adopt: to incorporate our traditions with the western civilisations. This is the best. In our theatres, American films are shown. Currently, only the young are working. Older generation well-known film-makers are no longer active. We understand that Kyrgyz film industry cannot produce commercial films and cannot compete with Hollywood. First, there is not enough money and, second, it is not our mentality. We can only make our traditional Kyrgyz cinema and develop intellectual films. I think this is our way.

Cottbus, October 2001

Bio/Filmography

Ernest Abdizhaparov was born in Frunze (Bishkek today) in Kyrgyzstan in 1961. He studied Russian literature and worked as a teacher. In 1988, he started working at the Kyrgyzfilm Studio in various capacities. He made his first film, Menim Pirim Almanbet/I Worship the Spirit of Almanbet (a short), in 1993.

Feature films

2004 Sanatan/Village Authorities

Gennadi Bazarov

Gennadi Bazarov is one of the prominent film-makers of the middle generation of Kyrgyz cinema. His first feature Samancynyn jolu/Materinskoe Pole/The Mother’s Field (1968) came at a time when Kyrgyz cinema was experiencing a golden period. Story of a strong woman who refuses to accept the tragedy facing her family and the nation, the film was a reminder of the immense loss caused by
World War II, and touched the hearts of the spectators. Having lost her husband and son to war, Tolgonai, the strong mother, mother of the nation, carries the burden of daily struggle for survival with dignity. The scenes where Tolgonai carries a dialogue with the picture of her dead husband, even asking him for tobacco, were filled with pathos.

Bazarov made nine feature films before Independence, but has not been able to make a film ever since.

The following interview took place in Nantes during Festival des 3 continents, on 17th Nov 2001, which, incidentally, was the 60th birthday of Kyrgyz cinema.

**A CULTURE TO SHARE WITH THE YOUNG**

*We watched your film, The Mother's Field (1968), as part of the Kyrgyz cinema retrospective here in Nantes. Few years ago, Bakty Karakulov also made a film on the same story, which is based on an Aitmatov novel. His film is called Boranly Beket/The Snowstormy Station.*

This is a re-make. I am not at ease to say it, but I do not think that the film was a success.

**Karakulov concentrates on mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations. Your film has a global view of war and how it affects society.**

I did not see Karakulov’s film but, in my film, I wanted to show how the bloody war changed the Kyrgyz society. When Aitmatov wrote his novel, he had a real woman as a model for the character of Tolgonai, a woman who always believed that her husband and her children were not dead and one day they would return. When he met her later in the 1960s, she said, ‘Chingiz, you are a writer, why don’t you write a new novel in which my husband and children come back to me?’ There was a documentary made about the meeting between Aitmatov and this woman. She was saying, ‘please write this novel to bring them to life or do much better, write a novel in which all dead kids come back to life’. She is still hoping that some miracle will happen. There is a Russian expression, which says hope dies last.

**Kydykeeva, who plays Tolgonai, was trained in theatre, I believe.**

Initially, she was a theatre actress and was very well known. After she began to make films, she gave up the theatre. She died ten years ago. I have a story about her that is very important for me. In the late 1950s, she played in a film shot in Moscow, which was shown in Paris. When Gerard Philippe, who loved horses, watched this film and saw her riding the horse, he invited her and the others to his place and promised her that in his next film, they would be riding together. Six months later, he was dead. So, she never played in a French film, but I am very happy to bring her image to France now.

**How about the other actors? Are they all professionals? Now the trend is to use non-professionals. Those days, did you get extras?**

Half professionals and half non-professionals. When I was making the film in 1968, I was 26 years old. Many people among the old had seen the war. When they heard that a film about the war was
to be made, they came themselves. I did not need to invite them. They acted as consultants. We helped each other. They said, ‘you film us as you want, we’ll do it free’ because it was important for them.

**Who wrote the script?**

Three people: Chingiz Aitmatov, a well-known Russian director, Talankine, and screenwriter Boris Dobrodeev.

**The photography is very striking.**

That is Vilenski. We changed nothing, but used only natural lights and natural sets.

**The scene when the trains keep passing and the woman is running after them, crying her son’s name touches the heart.**

When she sees her son?

**When she is looking for him.**

While I was shooting those scenes, the people who came to participate were helping me, telling me where the train was and where they were standing to meet the train. In the Soviet Union, you cannot find one family that did not suffer from the war. In each family, at least one member died – brother, son or husband – everyone experienced the war.

**How many films have you made?**

Nine feature films. *The Mother’s Field* was my first film, made at the end of my studies at the VGIK. Attending film school in Moscow was a wonderful experience. I discovered foreign directors such as Kurosawa and Fellini, as well as important Russians such as Tarkovsky. While a student in Moscow, I made a short film called *Molitva/The Prayer* (1963) based on a story I wrote myself about the *basmati* rebellion. When Aitmatov saw the film, he called me and said, ‘I give you my novel. Make a film with it at the end of your studies’. I was so honoured. Chingiz Aitmatov founded the Kyrgyz cinema, but he was not a dictator. He let the director to do his film the way he wanted.

**What about your co-operation with Larisa Shepit’ko?**

After finishing school, I worked at the Kyrgyz Film Studio doing all sorts of jobs, director’s assistant, photographer, etc. I was Shepit’ko’s assistant director in *Znoi/Heat* (1963).

*Heat* was Larisa Shepit’ko debut film, which was scripted by Iossif Olchanski from a book by Aitmatov. Where was it shot?

On the border between Kyrgyzstan and the Kazakh steppes.

**There was a period when many well-known film-makers from other republics such as Eldar Shengelaya from Georgia came to Kyrgyzstan to make films. Mosfilm studios sent many film-makers to Kyrgyzstan. Vasili Pronin’s *Saltanat* was produced by Mosfilm in 1955. Some others from neighbours with more developed cinema also arrived. In 1957, *Leguenda O Ledianom Serdtze/The Legend on the Heart of Ice*, by A. Sakharov and Shengelaya, was produced by Mosfilm with the collaboration of the studios of Frunze, as the capital Bishkek was called then. In 1958, *Daleko V Gorakh*, by A. Karpov, was produced by Kazakhfilm. In 1961, *Pereval/The Collar*, the first experience of Aitmatov as a scriptwriter, was made by Sakharov after Aitmatov’s novel *My Small Poplar to the Flipping Red*.**
The middle of the 1950s was very active in that respect. Then, in the 1960s, Andrei Mikhalkov-Kontchalovski started his career in Kyrgyzstan with *Pervyi ucitel/The First Teacher* (1965), a black-and-white film made from a script by Aitmatov and Boris Dobrodeev.

**Russian film-makers built a link between cinema and cultural tradition and helped the new wave of Kyrgyz cinema.** They were all friends in the same school (VGIK) and helped each other. Just like Andrei Mikhalkov-Kontchalovski, several important Soviet film-makers made their first works in Central Asia.

When Aitmatov appeared, there was already a cultural and creative atmosphere. People wanted to come to Kyrgyzstan to be part of what was happening there. I remember it very well; I was at school at the time.

**What about your other films?**

After *The Mother’s Field*, I began to search for a theme of my own rather than continue to make films based on others’ scripts and soon started to make films based on my own scripts that focused on people living in the moment and in their own interior world. I always chose protagonists who were in a quest to find the truth for themselves – criminals, prostitutes or artists in a stressful state – not knowing where to go or how to act. One is never born a criminal or a prostitute. The situation makes them this way.

**Or the society?**

The society. When such characters are locked in a vicious circle, they try to find a way out. I try to understand their point of view because each one of them has his/her dignity and each one has something to defend. My films are mostly psychological dramas.

**But in a socialist system, the criminal or the prostitute is not supposed to exist, not officially, that is.**

Officially, they did not exist. It was all hidden. That is why I had to fight a long time before I could make my films because they were not supposed to exist. When I showed my scripts, they said, ‘you want to make a film about the alcoholics or prostitutes?’ ‘No, you can’t’. I had to make films based on scripts written by other people. Things started to change with *perestroika*. The system was more open. I could begin to make my films. But these were the stories I was thinking about for ten years. Sometimes I had to publish a novel first and then adapt it to screen. I published two novels and then made films on them.

**Was that a test to see if they would be accepted?**

It was to make the nomenclature understand that if it was published, then it was not that bad – not that ‘anti-Sovietic’ – and that it could be made into a film.

**Was the censorship worse for literature than for cinema?**

The censorship was very strong in all parts in the Soviet Union. Everything was dictated: how to dress, to think, what to say. Everything was controlled.

**But cinema can find ways to say what it wants to say through other means.**

Of course, we tried to tell what we want through metaphor or allegory to go around the censorship but many things were cut off from the films of many directors, for instance, Tolomush Okeev.
When did you make your last feature film? What is the title?

1989. Anomaly. It is about prostitutes. It was the end of the Soviet Union. Then we became independent and poor without any money to make films. I did not shoot a film for over ten years because there is no money.

Do you work on television?

For five years, I have a contract with the television, my own show where I speak about the problems of art and spirituality. I invite artists to come and discuss issues. I also make short video films and publicity, etc. I continue to write scripts and novels but I cannot publish them because it costs too much money. They stay home and are not read by other people.

Your government has recently decided to allot one per cent of its budget to cinema. But for the moment, the only films that are made in Kyrgyzstan are made with foreign aid. According to the Kyrgyz Studio head, ‘There is a big problem of commercial persuasion to focus on national topics when the money comes from abroad. They want to tell you how your film should end. The relationship between the film and spectator and the one who gives the money and the censorship is difficult’. What do you think about the films made with foreign money? Are they really ‘Kyrgyz films’? Do they represent the national cinema?

Only Aktan has made films with foreign aid and, yes, of course, this is Kyrgyz cinema. It is a new point of view of the same problems tackled by the new generation. Aktan is a very talented filmmaker. He was the set painter in two of my films. One already sensed in his way of work his curiosity and his artistic creativity. Artists must not be ashamed of learning from each other. The younger film-makers say that they learn from the older generation but the older generation learns from the younger one too. We are not trying to be proud in Kyrgyzstan, we are happy to learn from each other and I am happy when I see the others succeed.

I enjoy the films of Aktan Abdikalikov. I have seen all of them. He had already had a name in Kyrgyzstan with his documentary films, but really his medium length film, Swing opened international doors for him. The Adopted Son (1998) is said to have received 28 awards. The industry must have profited from its success. Ernest is also very talented. He admits he owes all he knows to Aktan, and Aktan admits he owes to you and Okeev.

Aktan and Ernest carry our hopes for Kyrgyz cinema.

The film they made together, Bus Station, is very good.

They did not learn cinema at school. They learnt it by doing it. You add to this their talent.

With a simple story, Bus Station conveys the situation of the country after Independence.

They know how to make an image to represent the whole philosophy.

Tajik directors I met in Cottbus last year told me that they have formed schools to teach the young. Do you have such programs?

We have just created the National Cinema Academy and established the Cinema Development Fund. An association of young film-makers, Jebe, has been established under the Union. We can no
longer send the young to VGIK. It costs dollars now. So we thought we have all the people we need in Kyrgyzstan – directors, screenwriters, painters... Even if many of us do not make films anymore, we still know our job. If we can produce one talented director a year, it would be good for us.

During the round-table discussion yesterday, Mr. Okeev claimed that in Kyrgyzstan, there is no interest in cinema, but he does not live there anymore. Aktan Abdikalikov did not think it was so catastrophic. He said that there are seven cinemas working in Bishkek and a number of others in other regions. His film, The Chimp, was shown for fifteen days with two screenings each day and the ticket price was two times higher than before. What do you think is the general attitude towards cinema these days?

Some people want to see Kyrgyz films, but there are many problems. The cinemas are very old. In the cinemas that work, Hollywood films, action and pornography are shown, and the third problem is that people don’t even go to see these Hollywood films because they are so poor that if they have to choose between buying a ticket for the cinema and buying bread, they would buy bread. A new law has just been signed by the president about aiding national cinema, it is small but symbolically significant. I hope that this will grow into a policy of supporting national cinema. I would call it ideological help to make people understand that spiritual issues are important, art is important and that they will go back to art.

In the context of the recent turbulence in the region regarding Afghanistan, what is the opinion or stand of Kyrgyz film-makers/intellectuals?

Afghanistan is always at war, so it is not new for us. There was war with the Soviet Union and before the Soviet Union. I would like the people to stop fighting and ask themselves what they are fighting for. The earth is one for everybody. I ask the Afghan refugees in Kyrgyzstan why they are fighting, they do not know. Of course, there is the important fact that Bin Laden is hiding in Afghanistan. America should look for Bin Laden and not just kill the innocent population by bombs. It does not help. My idea is every conflict in the world can be solved around the table. The influence should be one of argument and not force. I remember a sentence by Timur Lenk, ‘Courage is to be patient when you are in danger’. When you are in danger, it is not very clever to act rush and say I will kill you. It is better to wait and think.

Do you think that religious revivalism in Central Asia can eventually be a threat to stability in your country? According to reports, Hizb ut-Tahrir activists who seek to restore an Islamic caliphate, although by peaceful means, are also active in Kyrgyzstan targeting impoverished citizens with a promise of bringing social and economical justice.

Kyrgyz people have traditionally been very far from religion and religious fanaticism. They have always respected religious traditions, but they are not really believers.

One final question: I am curious why you have a Russian name, Gennadi.

During the war, my father had a very good friend, a Russian, called Gennadi. The day I was born, this man received a letter announcing the death of his son, who was a pilot, so my father called me Gennadi.

Nantes, November 2001
Bio/Filmography
Gennadi Bazarov was born on 14 May 1942 in a village called At-Bachi in the Tian Shan Mountains. Between 1959 and 1961, he worked as an assistant before entering VGIK to study under Seguel. In 1963, he made *Molitva/The Prayer* about a conflict in the 1920s between two *basmati* brothers. His first fiction film *Samancynyn Zolu/Materinskoe Pole/The Mother’s Field* was a big success. *Asylum for those of Age* (1967) was about patients of a drug clinic. In 1969, he made *Zassada/The Ambush*, which combined documentary with fiction. His career as a feature film-maker came to a halt after Independence.

Feature films
1968 *Samancynyn Zolu/Materinskoe Pole/The Mother’s Field*
1969 *Zassada/The Ambush*
1972 *Oulitza/The Road*
1976 *Zenitza Oka/Apple of the Eye*
1978 *Kanybek*
1980 *The Writer*
1984 *The First*
1987 *Refuge for the Miners*
1989 *Anomaly*

**Tolomush Okeev**

Tolomush Okeev, one of the most important filmmakers of contemporary Kyrgyz cinema, started his career with a ten-minute documentary, *Attar/Eto Loshadi/Horses* (1965), made as he was graduating from Mosfilm apprenticeship creating a beautiful visual poem with simply the images and sounds of horses in motion. His first feature, *Bakajdyn Zajyty/Nebo Nachego Detsiva/The Sky of Our Childhood* (1967), was a requiem to the world of ancestors, a world that has been vanishing rapidly with the arrival of modernity. In this spectacular film, when his children begin to move to the city, a horse-groomer tries to keep the last son in the mountains to teach him the old ways, but a new road has already been built and constructions are in progress to connect the railroad to the newly discovered mine. He has no choice but to send his son to the city for his education. *The Sky of Our Childhood* is considered Okeev’s most autobiographical film and a seminal work for Kyrgyz cinema. *Lyuty/The Ferocious One* (1973), which is considered as his masterpiece is an unsentimental and unromantic picture of nature, which can be very cruel to man. Traditional education of the boys to make a man out of them is also questioned. However, Okeev does not create black and white characters. The cruel uncle can be a fascinating character from a different point of view. The world presented in the film is so ‘ferocious’ that, at times, the viewer can easily take his side.
Tolomush Okeev passed away in December 2001, a few days after our last meeting. He was 66. He was one of the greatest outdoor film-makers. He knew well the Kyrgyz steppes and the mountains. Kyrgyz Film Studio is now named in his honour.

The following interview includes our first meeting in Istanbul in 1993 and the last in Nantes, during the festival des 3 continents, 2001.

SEARCHING FOR LOST IDENTITY

You belong to the first generation of Kyrgyz film-makers. There was no one before to influence or lead you.

I grew up during WW II, which was a very difficult period for everyone. Our influences were classical Soviet cinema such as Yurkevich and Reisman. Chingiz Aitmatov’s *The Spirit of Rebellion* influenced my first film although it contains a certain amount of propaganda and certain arriviste elements, of which I am not proud.

I have read that you were born in a tent in Bokanbaevo in the Issik-Koul.

I was born in 1935, the year when Stalin was working hard to bring forced collectivization to the nomadic people of Kyrgyzstan. My father was a herdsman. I recreated this era in *Urkui/The Worship of the Fire* about Urkui Salieva, the first woman communist of the republic and her murder at the hands of the religious fundamentalists.

*The Worship of the Fire* has a common element with all your other work. Your focus is on the environment and the search for a balance between the inescapable modernization and nostalgia for eroding traditions.

One cannot separate the history of Kyrgyz cinema from the history of the country. In a period when our world was rapidly changing, through our films, we tried to understand the present without losing sight of the traditions of the past, which are embedded in the daily lives of the people.

What is noteworthy is that you do not glorify traditional values or misrepresent the outcome of modernization, but rather focus on the effects of change upon individuals. You exercise a non-judgmental objectivism.

The officials at the Goskino were not so happy with my ‘non-judgmental objectivism’. They would rather have didacticism and social rhetoric. *The Sky of Our Childhood* was shelved for many years. The powers were alarmed by the way the film showed the erosion of traditions and rituals in the name of progress.

The shots of the mountain peaks are breathtaking in that film. One can feel them lamenting the disappearance of the national culture. I can imagine that ecological and ethnical issues were not subjects for consideration in that period although you have never given up voicing your concerns.

I developed this theme further in *Potomok Belogo Barssa/The Descent of the Snow Leopard* (1984).
Your messages often come across through metaphors. For instance, in *The Sky of Our Childhood*, when Bakai’s sons want to move to the city, he refuses. He has a tamed golden eagle that he is forced to set free, but the eagle has forgotten how to fly.

In the end, the eagle is stuffed and placed on top of a nomad stone idol by the construction workers!

**Tell me about your relationship with Chingiz Aitmatov.**

We met in 1956 in Leningrad. Aitmatov was studying literature at a higher level. (He used to be a veterinarian before.) I was studying with his sister. One day, he came to visit his sister and we were introduced. When his first novel, *Dzamilja/Cemila*, came out, he was 28 years old and I was 26. He was not famous then. Once he stayed in the room I was sharing with three others and the director of the school was not happy when he found out. We have known each other for several decades.

**When did you start working together?**

In the 1960s, we met again at the Union of Cinema Producers and Actors of Soviet Union. We were the first members from Kyrgyzstan. Aitmatov was the chief of this union. At first, I went to Moscow to study directing and screenwriting and made my first film, a short film called *Horses*. *The Sky of Our Childhood* was my first feature, as you know. What we discovered about each other was that our point of view, our soul was the same. *Cemila* was against the formal rules, the rules of morality. It was a novelty. While the woman’s husband is gone to war, she takes a lover. And there is no communist ideology in the film. I was criticized for my first film, *Horses*, because the horses were killed and sent to the meat factory. The critics said why should the horses be killed. Why is this allegoric? Why is this a tragedy? *The Sky of Our Childhood*, which is about Kyrgyz life, the problems of the old, ecology, culture, language, land, received the same reaction. I made a film about the conquest of our land by the Russians and everyone criticized me. The media was totally against me. If the media is against you, there is no money. With Aitmatov, our ideological fight was the same. To defend is to offend. When the government offends, we must defend.

Aitmatov wrote a story about the relationship of a man to his horse, *Goodbye Gulsari*.

I made *Horses* in 1965. Perhaps he was influenced by my film. Until 1986, we worked together. Then he went to the Union of Writers and I became the chief of the Union of Cinematographers.

**Another collaboration was *Al Alma/Krasnoye Yabloko/The Red Apple*, I believe.**

Aitmatov wrote the script.

Before *The Red Apple*, I made *The Ferocious One* at the Kazakh Film Studio. It was a very difficult shoot. The weather conditions were terrible. *The Red Apple* was finished in 1975. I was 45 and Aitmatov 47. We were getting old. Our youth was passing by. We decided to make a film about love and we discussed about it. At this point, other film-makers – Russian and Kyrgyz – also wanted to make films on Aitmatov’s stories: *Cemila, Goodbye Gulsari, The White Boat*. Aitmatov said to me, ‘other film-makers want to make films about my stories. Let us make a film together’. I said, ‘they make so-and-so films of your classics, which scares me. I want to take one of your works that is not a classic and turn it into a classic film. I do not want to damage our relationship. And I do not want to adapt *The Red Apple* hundred per cent but rather extract the meaning and add my own point of view to it. I will give you credit as a screenwriter but it will be my script’. We made a gentlemen’s agreement.
Aitmatov’s works have been adapted to screen by Russians as well as Kyrgyz. Which one was able to give the spirit? Were the Russians able to understand and project the Kyrgyz essence and the spirit?

I want to tell the truth. On the works of Aitmatov, Russian or Kyrgyz, no one has made a better classic than Aitmatov. Two Kyrgyz film-makers adapted Aitmatov books: Bazarov made *The Mother’s Field* in 1968 and Bolatbek Shamshiev made *Ak Keme/The White Boat* in 1975 and *Voshozdenie na Fudzijamu/The Ascent of Mount Fuji Yama*. *The White Boat* is the best, but even that film has a tendency to recount the story, at least seventy per cent if not one hundred, so it looks like an illustration.

I have read that Shamshiev changed the ending because in the novel, the end is very tragic.

The film ends as a tragedy but it has two meanings: it is not clear if the boy actually dies. There are some very good moments but the parts dealing with the traditions are confused and confusing. In my opinion, the film has its own structure and form and when you adapt from a literary work, you must follow the rules of cinema. When you read *Kafka* and then see the films of Orson Welles, these are two different things. For instance, *Gone With the Wind* is a good piece of work, both as a film and as a novel. Or take Kurosawa, the films he made on literary classics are also classics. This is my understanding of making films. It is not necessary to translate the book one hundred per cent onto the screen.

Some non-Kyrgyz film-makers also adapted Aitmatov’s works to cinema.

There are three: Larisa Shepit’ko, who was Ukrainian, made *Heat*, which is based on the short story *The Eye of the Camel*; Andrei Mikhailov Konchalovksy, who is Russian, made *The First Teacher* and Karen Gevorkian, an Armenian, made *A Piebald Dog Running on the Edge of the Sea* (1990). I worked on the script of the third one. Gevorkian is a friend of mine from Moscow. I was planning to make this film myself, but he said, ‘you are very busy. I have nothing to do. Let me do it’.

What were the Kyrgyz doing in the Sakhalin Island, with the Nivkh, a fishing community of no more than 4000 people?

It is a serious matter. Vladimir Sangi is a Nivk writer, who told this story to Aitmatov, who was very interested as he was looking for material on the philosophy of the continuation of life. When Sangi told him about this subject, Aitmatov decided to work on it because for great film-makers or great writers, it is not satisfying to create works about one nation only. For instance, Bertolucci has made a film about the Chinese Emperor; Podovkin is Russian, but he made a film about Chinghiz Khan; Mikhailov made *Urga* about the Mongolians and I am looking for material in Turkey. The meaning of all this is that, you love your partner but from time to time you go elsewhere!

Andrei Mikhailov Kontchalovski wrote the script of *The Ferocious One* along with others.

Kontchalovski, Shengelaya, Shepit’ko, Sakharov all worked in Kyrgyz Film Studios. Bazarov was Shepit’ko’s assistant director in *Heat* (1963), her first film, which was produced by Kyrgyz Film.

Kontchalovski was engaged to make his film debut at the Kyrgyz Film Studio and he adapted Aitmatov’s *First Teacher* to screen, a film that deals with the establishment of Soviet rule in Kyrgyzstan in 1923. Some historians consider this film as the beginning of independent cinema. However, he was criticized for his infidelity to the novel.
I must say that Kontchalovski’s *First Teacher* showed the point of view of the colonizer. It was made for the colonizer and not for the Kyrgyz people.

**Larisa Shepit’ko’s *The Heat* is also based on an Aitmatov work, *The Eye of the Camel***.

I was the assistant soundman for that film, which was made four years before I made my first feature, *The Sky of Our Childhood*. One of our important film-makers, Bolatbek Shamshiev, acted in the film.

**What were some of the difficulties of working under the Soviet rule?**

Sovexport controlled the export of our films and exercised chauvinism. Soviet films were shown only after the Russian films. It was a case of big brother and little brother. That is why a wonderful film, Bazarov’s *Samancynyn Zolu/Materinskoe Pole/The Mother’s Field*, did not have the publicity it deserved. My career during the Soviet Union was a long struggle with each film I made, except, *The Red Apple*. Moscow manipulated distribution by making very few copies of the films that did not make them happy. *The Sky of Our Childhood* had international fame thanks to a festival in Frankfurt in 1967. Those days, the interest of the West made a big impact. This was also good from the point of view of bringing in money for Sovexport. If a film could make money, they did not care about its ideology. They made a compromise. The advocates of the official ideology were encouraging us to make films that would make money.

**Aitmatov’s books include elements opposing the Soviet ideology and, yet, in 1963, he was awarded the Lenin Prize for literature.**

The first reason is what I just mentioned. Aitmatov was already famous then. Aragon and other western artists supported him. It was difficult to stop someone with international reputation. The second is that for the Soviet system, it was convenient to show to the West that they were not totalitarian but on the contrary, they supported artists like me, or Aitmatov. It was a democratic country! In comparison to Russian writers and artists, our job was somewhat easier because they could ignore certain things saying ‘it is the Kyrgyz who write these things; they don’t really understand our politics’. For us it was better to be in a situation of ignorance under their big brother politics. We had a goal to get out of it. We must not forget that Aitmatov is also a very diplomatic person. He is not only a genius but also very smart.

**Do you think that Kyrgyz cinema, literature and art have a certain peculiarity different than the other Central Asian Republics such as Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan?**

It certainly does, otherwise it would not be very interesting. One characteristic is the epic works. With *Manas* leading the way, there are more than twenty epic works. Most of these epics are written in poetry form. Aitmatov’s works are written in prose but you can hear the rhythm of poetry in the words. This is the most important issue. Kyrgyz and Georgian films occupy a large space in the 1960–70 Soviet cinema. Both became famous with films that tried to reflect real life. Those years, we were the first ones to hear the voice of independence.

**What is the language of Kyrgyz films after Independence?**

Kyrgyz and Russian. The old films, all the adaptations from Aitmatov works, had been in Russian.
Aitmatov told me that except one or two, he is not very happy with the adaptations from his works. Do you think it is because they were not in the Kyrgyz language that they could not give the essence of the story?

You are right. This is the reason why these films could not reflect Kyrgyz character or spirit very well. Right after Independence, we took up the issue of national language in the parliament. For instance, Bolatbek Shamshiev does not speak much Kyrgyz. I made my films in the Kyrgyz language. In *The Sky of Our Childhood*, the grandmother laments the fact that her children speak Russian. I even got into trouble because of that scene. I was accused of being against the Russian language.

Is there any action taken to preserve the national language?

In 1991, Kyrgyz was accepted as the official language. This was not very easy as the Russians wanted Russian to be official as well. After the law was passed, we started to publish books in Kyrgyz and teach Kyrgyz language in the schools. Until WW2, we used the Latin alphabet, so it was important to return to it, as the Cyrillic alphabet does not have some of the Kyrgyz letters. But the nationalists do not understand the main purpose and try to turn it into a revolution. The changes come slowly and money is needed. Extremist nationalists want to change everything overnight. After Independence, we have had two enemies: Russian chauvinism and extreme patriotism.

What are some of the major developments after Independence and what are the ramifications of Independence for Kyrgyz cinema?

Our political situation is stable in comparison to our neighbours but the economic situation is very bad and there is no support from the government. The cinemas do not want to show our films. Uzbeks receive money to make their films, but they have always been in a better situation than us. Cinema is not only art; it has to be financially stable as well. Before Independence, we received everything from Moscow. They also took care of distribution. Kyrgyzstan has four and a half million population. If you make films with only Kyrgyz money and even if they all go to see it, you would not recuperate your money. Marx, Engels, Lenin wrote about how to move from a capitalist system to a socialist system, but no one wrote the opposite. Therefore, it is a very difficult period for us. In times of economic crisis, people do not have the time to think of cinema. Today we can continue to make films thanks to outside funds.

You have served as Kyrgyz ambassador to Turkey and lived in Ankara. Are you still involved with Kyrgyz film-making?

I was Aktan’s teacher and I produced his first film, *Where is Your Home, Snail?* I am involved in a project for a series with participation of all former Soviet Republics.

(translated from Turkish by the author)

*Istanbul, April 1993 and Nantes, November 2001*

**Bio/Filmography**

Tołomuş Ökeev was born in the Issik-Koul region of Kyrgyzstan on 11 September 1935. In 1958, he graduated as a sound technician from the Faculty of Electronics at the Leningrad School of Cinema Engineers (LIKI). He worked at the Kyrgyz Film Studios as a sound engineer, but resumed his studies at the VGIK between 1964 and 1965 and graduated from scriptwriting and directing in 1966. He wrote scripts, acted in films, staged plays and made documentaries before becoming a feature film-maker alongside Bazarov, Ubukeyev and Shamshiev. He also wrote a book called *Art With Wings*. A deputy and an ambassador to Turkey, he was also the founder of Keletçek/The Future, a private company that
produced the multi-national super production *Chingiz Khan*. He died in December 2001 in Ankara where he had been living for several years, shortly after receiving his lifetime achievement award at the festival des 3 continents – Nantes.

**Feature films**

1967 *Bakajdyn Zajty/Nebo Nachego Detsiva/The Sky of Our Childhood*
1970 *Heritage*
1971 *Urkui/The Worship of the Fire (semi-doc)*
1973 *Lyuty/The Ferocious One*
1975 *Al Alma/Krasnoye Yabloko/The Red Apple*
1977 *Ulan (semi-documentary)*
1980 *Altin Guz/Zolotaya Osen/Golden Autumn*
1984 *Potomok Belogo Barsa/The Descend of the Snow Leopard*
1987 *Mirazi Lioubvi/Mirages of Love*
1991 *Chingiz Khan*
Tajikistan

Tachir Mukharovich Sabirov

Tachir Mukharovich Sabirov belongs to a generation of Tajik film-makers who appeared in the scene in the latter part of the 1950s to a climate of moderation following the Twentieth Party Congress’ critique of the cult personality, survived the repression of the Soviet censorship but reached an artistic stalemate with Independence and the economical crisis that followed. He is known for works of epic dimension imbued with the colours of the 1001 Nights, a good example of which is Ashk va Samshed/Tears and Sword (1991), his last film, which was put on a shelf after Independence and never screened until invited to Cottbus Film Festival in the former East Germany. This was the first and only screening of the film. Sabirov set through the film with the audience and watched it with tears in his eyes. He did not make another film until he passed away in 2003.

The following interview took place in Cottbus, October 2001, following this historical screening.

More Than a Generation Gap

I have noticed that this morning you watched your film Tears and Sword with the audience. May I ask how you felt?

I felt like a student having an examination in front of a teacher. I was happy to have this experience in front of the audience and was comparing my film to the film we saw the opening night, Jol/The Road, by the Kazakh director Darejan Omirbaev. I noticed some people in the audience leaving that film, but in my film, some people cried during the touching moments. I am happy about this. I hope that you understand the film in the correct way because you are familiar with Islam. German audiences may have some difficulties. This morning a German woman interviewer asked me if I was endorsing Bin Laden by showing the reading of the Koran. She did not understand the film at all. There is war. People are dying. The country is broken to pieces and the young voice comes to put it all together. This is my way of speaking about it and I hope that you understand it that way.

You made this film ten years ago. If you were to make it today, would you change anything?

Nothing! Imagine this: There is a book, and there are the lines and then there is the subtext. I am working very much with the subtext in this film. When I was visualizing the film, I was reflecting on some concrete problems such as the death of my protagonists. How am I going to kill them? It is not by chance that Gulisor says she is a widow without being married. The problem was to show how they die in concrete terms. Before dying, she closes her eyes and sees her wedding. Greso had to die in a heroic fashion – on his horse.

I liked the balance. A war film or simple melodrama can be tedious. In your film, when the mood is down, you somehow lift it up again.
I wish you had the possibility to see the whole film with its four parts. For instance, there is a story about Mirso and his daughter. He steals his daughter from his first wife to give her to someone to receive something in return. This is in the longer version.

**I did not know that there was a longer version.**

It is a series. There are four parts. I tried to extract some parts to make one film. In the series, I have some interesting scenes about how Mirso kills his two wives and how his hands are smeared in blood.

**How long is the whole film?**

Each part is one hour and ten minutes. Unfortunately, several important issues, such as how a person can do anything to achieve what he wants, are lost. For instance, there is a subplot about a character placed in jail for mistaken identity. The breakdown of the Soviet Union influenced the film and it was not shown anywhere. The screening here in Cottbus is the first time. I am deeply sorry that I lost so many things such as the issues about women – women who are married when they are sixteen years old, women from lowest social strata.

**Who is the screenwriter?**

I wrote the script and then we worked on it with Semen Lungin.

**Did you make another film after this one?**

When I started this film, we planned a series of ten episodes, but we stopped after four for lack of money.

**How many films have you made all together?**

Too many! You can sit in a cinema for two months without a break to watch them.

**When did you start making films? What kind of a background do you have?**

Each man born on this earth has to become something. Sometimes it is wisdom and sometimes it is written up here (pointing to his forehead) – film-maker, thief, communist… It is inside. It moves in yourself and you learn.

**Did you study film-making or did you have an apprenticeship with another director?**

At what age did you make your first film?

I was thirteen years old when I began and I am still learning.

**What type of films did you make when you were thirteen?**

At that age, we were hanging around film sets with friends. I decided to become an actor, so I took acting classes in Tajikistan. I began as an actor for main parts in the period after WWII, which was, basically, a dead period. I played special parts about national feelings, etc. Then I went to Moscow to study film directing under Zavadski. I studied and worked there. In 1958, I was the youngest film-maker who directed his own film and made many films at the Mosfilm Studios.

Historians look at Tajik cinema in terms of three periods: The first period from the post-revolutionary to 1955, the most significant film made in the Republic being *Pochetnoe Pravo/Emigrant* (1934) by Kamil Yarmatov, which he dedicated to the Red Army. Kamil Yarmatov was the first Tajik film-maker who created a new expression for silent cinema with *Emigrant* about the fight for a new life and the difficulties
encountered by serdniak (the middle peasants). He plays the protagonist Kamil from the Kolkhoz in that film.

Yarmatov is the beginning of silent cinema and the first for talkies. Some sources cite Nikolai Dostal’s Syn Dzhigita/The Garden as the first talkie, but this is not correct. Dostal’s film was made in 1939.

You began to work in a period of oppression when many films and projects were shelved and many film-makers were persecuted. One of the founders of Tajik cinema, Gouliamriza was one of the first victims of Stalinism. Kamil Yarmatov had to leave for Uzbekistan. Until 1955, no significant feature film was produced. But even later, a collaboration of Shamsij Kiamov with Nikolai Litus, Moi Drug Navrusov/My Friend Navrusov (1957), was stopped from screening because it told the story of an innovative agronomist who had to suffer the obstacles of conservatism and bureaucracy. The second period is from 1955 to the 1970s with the Twentieth Party Congress’ critique of the cult personality, when Tajik cinema recovered from the harmful effects of negligible production, propagandist documentaries and persecution of directors and artists. This is when you come in along with Boris Kimiagarov and Shamsij Kiamov. The landmark of this period, I believe, was the epic Dohunda (1956) by Boris Kimiagarov about the Revolution.

In the sixties, it was as if a man had been hungry for a long time and finally he could eat. But things did not ease up at all. It was a period of persecution of film-makers. We could make some films, but then we were hit on the head and this went on until perestroika (reconstruction).

What about after the thaw when a new vitality emerged following the examples of Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, marked by a diversity of styles and themes? The pioneer was Dohunda (1956).

I played the part of peasant Edgor in that film opposite Zoukhra Karmova, who played Gulnor.

Shamsi Kiyamov, Abdussalom Rakhimov, Mukaddas Makhmudov moved from documentary to fiction and, in 1966, you made a very important film, Margi Sudhur/Death of an Extortionist (1966), from the novel of A. Aïni. In the beginning of the seventies, young talents, such as Marat Aripov (Nisso), Sukhbat Khamidov (The Legend of the Paviak Prissn), Margarita Kazimova (The Summer of ’43 and Djura Sarkor) and Anvar Turayev (The Third Girl), arrived searching a new form of expression. In 1978, you made The Woman Who Came from Far about the search for spiritual and moral values. Would you consider this period a new wave for Tajik cinema?

In Europe, you are always talking about waves! We do not have any waves in Tajikistan. We have some talented film-makers so we can make films. With two or three directors, there is no wave!

The third period began with a new group of film-makers such as Davlat Khudonazarov, Bako Sadikov and Oleg Tulayev and continued until perestroika and Independence. Davlat Khudonazarov is considered as the ‘shining star’ of the third period.

He was just a cameraman. He worked with Boris Kimiagarov.

Even in his earlier work as a cameraman for Kazimova in Djura Sarkor on the series that Kimiagarov was making about Shahnama, the talent of Khudonazarov and certain lyricism and a poetic language are in evidence. His films are a sharp
departure from the dramatic heroic cinema of Boris Kimiagarov whose *Skazanie o Rustam/Legend of Rustam* (1971), *Rustam va Sukhrab/Rustam and Sukhrab* (1972) and *Shah Nama Firdausi/Firdausi's Shahnama* (1977) are important testimonies to the history of Tajik cinema.

Khudonazarov was in the party, a KGB man. Now he lives in America! No one wants to see the films of Davlat Khudonazarov.

I beg to disagree with you. In my opinion, the features and documentaries of Davlat Khudonazarov, most of which deal with life in the Pamirs, present history and tradition lyrically. For instance, his best known feature, *Vlatom snege zvon ruchya mardi roh/Murmur of a Brook in the Melting Snow* (1982), still in the tradition of realist genre, is a poignant portrayal of an old shepherd, a veteran of the Great War, in search of a comrade who had saved his life. There is the inevitable clash of the old and new, of age and youth and of town and country amid a quest that we know will remain forever unrealized. *Ustad/Master* (1988) on the revolutionary national poet Abulkosim Lakhuty uses archival material not only to present the life of the writer, but also to comment on the events he lived through such as the Civil War. Khudonazarov was the Chairman of the Confederation of the Autonomous Unions of the Cinematographers of the CIS, and one of the leading figures of the democratic opposition to the communists. Don’t you think that his active involvement in the process of democracy in Tajikistan is what forced him to leave his country to live in the U.S?

We have some other directors who touch the heart of people, of women. For instance, Bakhtiyar Khudoynazarov, who is very talented.

Bakhtiyar is definitely a very talented young man. He is not political, but he also cannot survive in his own country. He lives in Europe and makes his films with foreign money. When he tried to shoot *Kosh Ba Kosh/Odds and Events* (1993) in Dushanbe amidst the civil war, his equipment was stolen and he was kidnapped. Are his films shown on Tajik television?

Yes.

What is the situation with the film studios? Does Tajik Kino, which was established in 1930, still exist?

When we talk about Central Asia, our republic is at the margin of this region. We had a very difficult period when we could not make any films. During this period, our film-makers chronicled everything between war and peace. For the present, we exclusively work on video. We have established a film school to pass our experiences to the young generations. Our distinguished film-maker Munavar Mansurchodjaev, who made several films that moved us on the issues of the water, Lake Aral and the return of the migrants from Afghanistan, namely the problems of our daily lives, is one of the teachers. We do not have enough money to make feature films today but we still have important films from the past. For the moment, Festival Kinoshock is the only venue for us to show our films, except for Cottbus Film Festival, which has lifted our veil. The film I brought here, *Tears and Sword* is ten years old but it is still as topical as it was then.

In the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned your dislike of the film *Jol* by Darejan Omirbaev. Could you tell me why?
Who is this guy with long hair?

**One of the young talented film-makers of your country, Jamseed Usmanov.**

He is another one who lives in the US! A hero has to be handsome, someone I would like to talk to. Would you fall in love with a man that looks like that?

**Everyone is not beautiful in real life.**

In a film, you have the possibility to show an actress not too pretty in a very feminine way. For instance, for my film, *Sheherazade*, I took a young girl and made her look beautiful. People were running from one theatre to the next just to see her!

*Cottbus, October 2001*

**Notes**

1. Usmanov lives in Paris, France. His first feature, *Parvaz-e Zanbur/The Flight of the Bee* (1998), which he directed with Byong Hun-min, won international acclaim. His second film, *Farishtaay Kifiti Rost/The Angel on My Right Shoulder* (2002), also won several awards. In 2005, when I met him in Tehran he was working on a new feature, *To Go to Heaven, You Have to Die First*. All three films are shot in his natal village, Asht in Tajikistan. I learned from him that Tacir Saburov passed away in 2003. Speaking of Saburov, he said that he was an eccentric man who liked only his own films.

**Bio/Filmography**

Tachir Mukharovich Sabirov was born in Stalinabad (present Dushanbe) on 21 December 1929 and died in 2003. He completed his studies in acting at the Theatre Academy in Tashkent in 1951 and directing under I. Zavadski at the GITIS State Institute of Theatre Art in Moscow in 1956. He began working in cinema in 1955, first as an actor in *The Road* (1955) by Alexandr Stolper and *Dohunda* by Kimiagarov and, then, some commercial films. His first film, *It is time to Marry the Son* (1959), was a comedy. He often chose commercial genres such as comedy, sentimental adventures and oriental legends. *Margi Sudhur/Death of an Extortionist* is considered a classic comedy of Central Asia. He was also the President of the Association of Tajik Filmmakers.

**A selection of feature films:**

1959 *It is Time to Marry the Son*
1960 *The Possessed*
1963 *Chakhsanem and Garib*
1966 *Margi Sudhur/The Death of an Extortionist*
1967 *Treason*
1968 *The Revelation*
1973 *We are Nothing* (three episodes)
1976 *A Chest for the Betrothed*
1978 *The Woman Who Came from Far*
1984 *And again One Night of Sheherazade*
   *New Tales of Sheherazade*
   *The Last Night of Sheherazade*
1991 *Ashk va Samshed/Tears and Sword*
Turkmenistan

HALMAMMET KAKABAEV

One of the important film-makers of Turkmenistan, Halmammet Kakabaev made *Ogul/Syn/The Son* (1988) during perestroika. In fact, *The Son* is the last Turkmenian feature film of the Soviet period. A poetic film with a fair dose of healthy folk humour, *Ogul* is a parable on the value of creativity and its connection to life. The script, written by well-known Russian film-maker, Sergei Bodrov focuses on a boy whose father, a celebrated local musician, goes to war and does not return. The latest film of Kakabayev, *Toba / Raskayanie / Repentance* (1997) recounts a traumatic mother and son relationship as a metaphor for the loss of human values during the social changes after Independence, particularly, the arrival of the market economy and the western style values of material profits. Jagmur, a successful businessman, who has benefited from the new economy lives in the big town among other successful young men like himself. He is embarrassed of his humble origins and particularly of his ailing old mother. But his greed eventually leads him to a dead end. When his mother dies alone in the village, while he is on holiday abroad, he is burdened by guilt feelings. He gives up his career and becomes a shepherd, however, repentance does not come easily.

Kakabaev insists on the non-political nature of his work, but does not hide his nostalgic sentiments about the previous regime. ‘I don’t believe in blaming the former Soviet period’, he reiterates, ‘seventy years was a huge period of our lives’.

The following interview took place during Cottbus Film Festival 2000, where a retrospective of Turkmenian cinema was held.

**HUMAN VALUES IN A WORLD IN TRANSITION**

*Ogul/Syn/The Son* and *Toba/Raskayanie/ Repentance* are both explorations on a psychological level. *The Son* is a coming of age film, a boy reaching adulthood in a hostile environment. *Repentance* deals with the issue of guilt for not doing the right thing for one’s parents, which I think is more relevant to the East than the West and more so, in countries where the difference between the country and the city is greater.

The guilt feelings for not doing the right thing for one’s parents may be more relative to the East but people like my protagonist who live their lives the wrong way exist everywhere. As I was writing the script, I was thinking it might happen in South America.
When the mother visits her son in his posh city flat and his friends ask who the old peasant in the kitchen is, he says, the neighbour. I do not think he would be ashamed of her in front of his friends, if the mother were a sophisticated lady from the city dressed accordingly.

This is also true but I did not want to base the film on the city and country issue. The same thing could have happened in the village also. The man is not a bad man, he is a scientist but he does a bad thing.

With the market economy, the gap between generations and the alienation of each seem to be increasing. Do you think that the scene when children are left alone to watch television while the parents go to a party would have happened a decade or two ago?

I am trying not to be a politician. I do not believe in blaming the former Soviet period. Seventy years was a huge period of our lives. These things are probably new but there were things happening at that time also.

In both films, you switch from black and white to colour at certain moments. I think, in general, the happier moments are in colour and sad moments are in black and white.

It was a special decision for me. In The Son, after the letter arrives from the front, there is sadness. The world of the young boy could not be in colour. It is the black-and-white side of his world. The second letter is like a new beginning so I chose colour. At the end when the father dies, I wanted to keep the reality of death, but also the strong presence of life. When the boy plays the dutar, it is like a new life. His decision is symbolic. The film is about how life should go on no matter what.

Absence of the father and the search for a substitute (the father’s master in this case) is a recurring trope in Soviet films for not belonging or being different from one’s society, but perhaps, this particular story has autobiographical elements for you.

My father also did not return from the war. In that sense, some autobiographical elements are evident, but I would say that two other films I shot about the post-war generation, The Boy with the Donkey and Papa Comes Back are much more autobiographical. The three make the trilogy about children whose fathers went to war. These children had to grow up fast. I began to work as a mailman when I was only seven. Instead of playing with toys, we had to assume the responsibility for our families.

You have collaborated with Sergei Bodrov on the script of The Son.

The script was written with Bodrov. I have another film called The Bird of Paradise, also written with Bodrov. Out of the ten fiction films that I have made, two were written with him. I cannot work with him anymore because now he lives in the States. I have collaborated with others as well, but written the script myself for the last five films.

Although a Russian, Bodrov was also born in Central Asia. During an interview, he told me that the affinity he feels to Central Asia is in his blood.

He made two films in Kazakhstan.

Son is a very sensitive film that narrates the pains of the loss of a parent with music and poetry. Central Asian legends recount that in the dutar sounds, a keen ear and a
fine soul would hear a peaceful step of time, fast race of a herd of Akhaltekin horses, plaintive song of the winter wind and the mother's tender tune. The lyrics often mix high poetry with down-to-earth spicy folk humour. Do you call the dutar musicians akynd, as do the Kazakhs?

The player is dutarci and the singer is called bahshi. There are so many legends about these wonderful musicians. People could not manage without a dutarci at their feasts. In the past, this folk art was handed down from father to son. That is why in The Son, Nuri, a well-known and accomplished musician is very disappointed when his son, Batyr, is not interested in playing the dutar. When the Great Patriotic War begins, just like the other men of his village, he leaves for the front taking his dutar with him since no one is interested in playing it at home. But all of a sudden, his son feels a strong desire to play the instrument and with perseverance and the help of his father's teacher, he makes the first step towards mastering the art.

Such a twist of fate that when the son earns his first fee – a slice of bread – playing the dutar, his father dies at the front with a stray bullet.

I intended the film as a parable for the value of creativity, which is tightly connected to life.

Do you have an audience for your films in your country?

Our films focus on our culture. Even if we wanted to, we could not surprise someone else. But when we make a film, we do not think of the target audience, and this goes back to the Soviet Union. The film-maker has an artistic idea and he makes his film for himself. My film Repentance is about a guy who forgot his mother. Don’t you have that in your country?

Do you sell your films anywhere else?

We sell our films to the Russian television. I was able to finish Repentance because my previous films were sold to Turkey, Iran and Germany. But the major client is the Russian television.

Do you venture into co-productions? What are some of the problems?

Every artist is responsible for himself. The relationship is between the artist and his work. In the 1970s, when I was a student, Georgi Danelia, my teacher at the Moscow Film School, began a co-production with Italy, but when a proposal was made to change things, he put the script on the table. You are responsible for your own conscience. When I shoot a film in Turkmenistan and show people something they do not understand, this is a crime.

Do young people want to become film-makers?

Our Academy of Fine Arts will have its first graduates in artistic film this year. Cameraman, directors for television production and actors are trained at the Cultural Institute, but after graduation, they follow the same route as in our neighbours, they make video clips.

Turkmenian cinema experienced a golden period in the 1970s. Khodzakuli Narliev’s Nevestka/Daughter-in-law (1972), When a Woman Saddles a Horse (1975), You Must Dare to Say ‘No’ (1977) and Derevo Dzamal/Jamal’s Tree (1981), all of which incidentally have female protagonists, are prominent examples of high achievement. What is the present situation?
The 1970s was the peak of Turkmenian cinema when the graduates of VGIK returned home and started to make films. About twenty feature film-makers are active today, but for the moment, we do not have the possibility to shoot 35mm films.

In 1976, Narliev was unanimously elected the First Secretary of the Board of Filmmakers’ Union of Turkmenistan and, in 1986, he was chosen as the People’s Artist of the Republic. Despite such high visibility as a popular public figure, he seems to have retreated to the shadows. The same for Biul-Biul Mamedov, whose first feature Iashlygymyn Destany/The Legend of My Youth (1992) and Archaly Adam/Man with the Fir Tree (1995) were pioneering works of Turkmenian cinema. Rumours circulate that they are in conflict with the regime of your president for life, Saparmurat Niyazov, who has proclaimed himself turkmenbashi, the father of all Turkmens?

Narliev and Mamedov follow different paths. Mamedov is working in the theatre.

According to Sergei Shugarev, a film-maker from the younger generation, who made Ham Hyyal/Aromat Dzhelany/Fragrance of Wishes (1996), Turkmenistan is a closed system that persecutes people who think differently and dissidence is not allowed.

Shugarev is not a dissident. He was my assistant. He was given the opportunity to practice his trade in Turkmenistan; he chose to go to Moscow. He can come and work in Turkmenistan whenever he wants. He should not be spreading lies.

Why do we not see political films interrogating the recent past or the present changes?

In Turkmenistan, we have had political stability for nine years. We have not had a single political conflict with any party. Why make an artificial situation?

Cottbus, November 2000

Bio/Filmography

Halmammet Kakabaev was born on 1 June 1939 in the Turkmenian village Kochuchut. He studied at the conservatory of the capital Ashkabad and the philological faculty of the Turkmen State University. Between 1958 and 1961, he worked as assistant director at the Theatre Opera and Ballet of Ashkabad and, from 1971 to 1973, he attended the Higher Courses of Film Directing and Scriptwriting in Moscow under Georgi Danelia and became a director for Turkmenfilm Studio in 1973.

Selection of feature films

1980 Vot Vernutsa Papa/Papa Comes Back
1988 Ogul/Syn/The Son
1991 Gennet Gusi/Rajskaia Ptischka/Bird of Paradise
1994 Takdyr/Karma
1998 Toba/Raskajantuje/Repentance
Zulfikar Mussakov

Zulfikar Mussakov is one of the most productive film-makers in Uzbekistan, where unlike neighbouring Central Asian Republics, national cinema is alive and well. Mussakov’s first feature film, Askar Ertagi/Soldatskaja Skazka/A Soldier’s Story (1989), was about life in country barracks, where Uzbek and Russian soldiers, who are divided according to their nationality, help or reject each other and harass the weaker ones. The tragic end does not happen from hate, but rather boredom, ignorance and an inability to communicate in a world full of tension.

Bomba/The Bomb (1995), shot in the Uzbek language, is a slapstick comedy in the style of a television sitcom. A family discovers a bomb in their garden and tries to use the unfortunate situation to benefit. The neighbour, who hears that he can get a flat in Tashkent as a replacement if the bomb explodes on his property, steals the bomb and places it in his garden. Parallel is a love story where the traditional arranged marriage and modern freedom of choice are in a contraposition. Fascinatingly, in all the mayhem at the centre of the film, the only ones who make some sense are the young.

Yaratganga Shukur/Ja Chotschu/I Wish (1997) follows the same genre. An average white-collar worker one day discovers that he has magic powers. Initially, he is happy to impress his privileged friends with his new talent, but his magic powers begin to threaten his peace of mind when he is coerced to choose between good and bad wishes.

A film-maker from a country little known in the West except for its magnificent monuments of Samarkand and Bukhara, Zulfikar Mussakov believes that, one day, Uzbek films may reach beyond their borders. For the moment, he is content making films for his ‘own people’. I met Zulfikar Mussakov during Cottbus Film Festival in November 2000, where his films were shown as part of the Uzbek Panorama.

HUMOUR IN ABSENCE OF HOPE AND LAUGHTER

The Bomb and I Wish are both about society and social issues revealed through the medium of comedy. What drew you to this mode of expression?

This is because of my personal character. I make films that I would like to see.

Could you tell me about your background?

I completed two years of High Courses at the Moscow Film Academy – not the VGIK – to become a director. My first film was made in 1989. I made six fiction feature films in ten years. I also wrote ten screenplays for such films as Yuri Sobitov's Bir Qadam O'ngga, Bir Qadam Chapga/Left March, Right March (1991) and his latest, Price of Happiness, Go Ask a Woman; Bahadir Adilov's
Birinchi Bo’sa/First Kiss (1991) and Dallol Makler/The Broker (1993); Changir Kasimov’s Bechoralar/Poor Guys (1991) and Nazim Tulahoyaev’s Face, an animation film. I have also worked with Shakleva.

How did it feel to become a film-maker during the transition period from the Soviet regime to Independence?

We lost something – contacts with friends and teachers. In return, we gained the freedom to travel to foreign countries without asking permission. I lived a big part of my life in the Soviet Union. No one asked me if I agreed with the changes. This was done by forces outside my control. Therefore, my relationship to the break up is a philosophical question and my reaction is to make comedies with some humour because smile and hope are not present in our lives at this moment.

According to western media, despite economical stability in Uzbekistan, lack of freedom is still an important issue. Amnesty International reports allege that people tried on charges of terrorism or attempting to overthrow the constitutional order are tortured while in detention to force them to confess.

I did not have restrictions to make my films. Perhaps that is why I do not deal with politics. I make movies and people like them. Independent of political changes, the real film will be loved by people. I make films about people I love. I think films should give people the feeling of love. If after the screening, people have a nice feeling about our country, I succeeded.

Uzbek cinema has a long history. The national cinema produced its first films in the 1930s – The Upsurge, Ramazan, Before the Dawn, Klych... The arrival of sound with The Oath in 1937 was an important event. The same year, a documentary, Tashkent Textile Factory, directed by M. Kayumov, received a golden medal at the World Exhibition in New York. During World War II, when some of the film studios of other republics were evacuated to Uzbekistan, the creative collaboration with masters like Romm, Kozintsev, Lukov was very fruitful in producing milestone films such as Takhir and Zukhra (1944) and Adventures of Nasreddin of Ganiev and Alisher Navoi of Yarmatov. Ganiev’s films are very much in the epic form, or dastan (legends) that keep the oral traditions alive. Yarmatov’s Alisher Navoi stresses the natural and historical originality of the Uzbek people. In the 1960s–80s, some of the landmarks of Uzbek cinema were made such as Tashkent, Gorod hlebnyj/Tashkent, the City of Bread (1968) by Shukrat Abbosov in the tradition of Italian neo-realism. What are the prevalent themes and genres of the Uzbek films today?

Different themes. Historical films, documentaries, fiction. My aim is not to make films for festivals but for people. Uzbek film-makers shoot films for the 23 million Uzbek people.

Why do we not see political films that delve into the issue of coming to terms with the Soviet period even a decade after Independence?

We do not only make children’s films or comedies. Naturally, there are political films, but these are essentially historical. Everything that happened in our country until the 1930s has made itself to the celluloid. During the Soviet period, we shot films about the 1930s and 40s. Now we are reconsidering these topics and trying to understand what happened at that time. Presently, Uzbek Film is shooting a film about jadids1 who brought history to our people. They even went to Germany to study. There is another film about the February 16 explosion in Tashkent, the attack on
the President. We got the script and the theme. I do not think there are taboos. This applies to politics. Of course, we have censorship. Violence and sex are not allowed. We do not need them.

Are you referring to Bo-Ba-Bu, Ali Khamraev’s controversial latest work, which is not released in your country? He is one of your best film-makers, although he left Uzbekistan to live in Italy and then Moscow. He is also the name behind the most popular film that has been topping the charts in Uzbekistan for 40 years, the comedy Yer-Yer / Where Are You, My Zulfiya.

About Bo-Ba-Bu, I want to make it clear. In the film history of any country, there must be moments when national feelings of the people were hurt or when people left the theatre because they did not want their sons to see the film. I do not want my children to see this film. Why should we have a film that 23 million Uzbek people do not want to see? Don’t forget where we are! Our national feelings are very strong, so are our traditions. Violence and sex are not allowed because they offend the feelings of mothers and fathers. Every director is a human being with a wife and children. Does he want to see this film?

How does one finance films in Uzbekistan?

The government gives the full budget to six films a year. Private studios exist but lack funds. They cannot make more than one or two films.

Since the government finances your projects, is there a script approval by the government? Are there any restrictions?

I have written many screenplays, if the authorities do not like some, I always have others.

What about co-productions?

The possibility is there, but I am not running after anyone. I wish was fully financed by Japan. I also participated in the Womankind series for America. For my new film, which is called Mother, I won a grant from the Japanese Foundation for Arts. It was a competition open to all film-makers from the former Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. Conditions were to have a common element with Japan. I won for a script that I wrote with Bahadir Adilov and we will direct it together. The grant will be paid after the completion of the production. Japanese actress Akio is coming to Uzbekistan for the shoot. She will play a dual role – a Japanese woman and an Uzbek one. The story is simple and funny. There is a car accident, in which the mother of an Uzbek girl dies. Then the girl meets a Japanese woman in Samarkand and tells her she is her daughter.

Do you feel a commercial pressure to focus on national topics when you receive money from abroad?

As far as such pressure is concerned, the medallion has two sides. It depends on the cultural level of the director and the morals of the people giving the money. The risk of having nationalistic films is there.

Who is in charge of distribution in Uzbekistan?

The government is in charge of distribution. Bomba was sold to Russia and it did very well within the country. As you saw this morning, the copy is completely worn out.
To protect the national film industry, does the government establish a quota as to how many foreign and national films can be screened each year?

I am not familiar.

Uzbekistan’s national film industry had to survive under the Soviet censorship. After Independence, a new menace has arrived, the western films, so much so that advise has been sought from a foreign development agency (Swiss) to help rebuild Uzbek cinema in an effort to create a new sense of national identity. Which are the most popular films today?

Uzbek films are the most popular. Hollywood is second.

I have heard that there is also a tradition of watching Hindi films and that people still remember Raj Kapoor. Unfortunately, video piracy, which is a threat to all film industries as well as the national one, seems to have seduced your audience as well. I have been told that pirated DVDs of films like yours are sold simultaneously as they are screened in the theatres.

At least they are interested in watching them!

Kamara Kamalova, one of your finest film-makers was once asked if she had encountered difficulties in becoming a director because of her gender. She said that being a director was not just creative, but it also involved working with and organizing large numbers of people, most of whom are men and they have an Uzbek mentality, which does not readily accept having a woman in a position of authority. Are there any other women directors beside her?

This is not an occupation for a woman. It is not because of discrimination; you need hard nerves.

Kamara Kamalova is doing fine.

Kamara is an exception. Many women directors lose from being a woman when they become directors.

Do young people want to become film-makers?

We have the Academy of Fine Arts, which will give its first graduates in artistic film this year. Cameramen, directors, film and TV producers and actors are trained at the Cultural Institute. But after graduation, they follow the same route as in Kyrgyzstan or Turkmenistan; they prefer to make video clips. In Europe also only two out of three graduates, become directors. Directors cannot be made artificially. When I come to Europe, some people ask me if we have Mercedes Benz or high buildings in Tashkent. We have a whole department of film school. We also have TV antennas. We see the same films that you see and listen to the same music. May be more! Space is not inaccessible. Of course, we have problems, but you have too. Central Asian cinema does not need alms from anyone. Our cinema has 90 years of history. The first Lumiere film was screened in Tashkent two years after its premiere in France. Of course, our technical equipment is not at par with yours. But from the artistic side, we never ask for mercy. We have the tradition.

Cottbus, November 2000
Notes
1. The short-lived (1913-1916) Jadid or Reformist movement sought closer ties with the rest of the Islamic world. In their schools, they taught classical Arabic to facilitate the reading of Koran. Fearing they were breeding grounds for opposition, the Russians began shutting down the schools and newspapers as early as 1910. Jadid theatre, as an art form previously nonexistent in Central Asia, more effectively thwarted censors to spread the reformist Islamic message. Of the only twenty or so plays remaining from the six-year life of the Jadid theatre, a common theme—the fear of the end of the Muslim community via loss of spirituality—endures. The Patricide, by Mahmud Khoja Behbudig, is one of the most well known. Behbudig is only one of many artists who helped establish an Uzbek identity based on traditional values during the heavily censored era of the early 1900s.
2. A series of explosions hit the capital Tashkent on 16 February 1999 for which President Islam Karimov blamed the 'Islamic extremists' and others who wished to undermine the government.
3. A co-production between Uzbekistan, Italy and France, Bo-Ba-Bu (1999) takes place in an unspecified time somewhere in Central Asia. A young woman played by Arielle Dombasle, (Pauline of Eric Rohmer) loses her memory after a fall and remains mute. Two herdsmen capture and abuse her, forcing her to pray to their god. She becomes their possession but her presence marks a rupture in a delicate equilibrium as the stronger of the two claims her, although the lines of allegiance keep shifting. Shot in the deserts of Afghanistan, Bo-Ba-Bu reflects an imaginary wasteland where the harsh desert dominates life. It is all supposed to be a parable, which, incidentally is undermined by the voyeuristic nude scenes and the graphic cruelty.

Bio/Filmography
Zulfikar Mussakov was born in Akkurgan near Tashkent in 1958. During his secondary school years, he participated in amateur theatre troupes and made 8mm films. After studying theatre in Tashkent, he worked as a director for the experimental theatre Ilkhom. His first short film, shot in 16 mm received a prize in Brno. He worked for television, made videos, wrote and painted. In 1987, he entered the Superior Courses of Directing in Moscow where he made The Sparrow, which is based on a novel by Astafiev. He has been a film director at the Uzbekfilm studio since 1989. His Boys in the Sky (2002) and Boys in the Sky II (2004) have been box office hits. An Uzbek variation on Fellini’s Amarcord (including the boys first encounter with porn), the two films also display national elements and the precarious feelings of youth of Independence who are at odds with their present.

Selected feature films
1989 Askar Ertagi/Soldatskaja Skazka/A Soldier’s Story
1991 Abdullajon/Abduladshan Ili Posvjastschaetsa Stiveny Spilbergy/Abdullazhan, the UFO Kid
1995 Bomba/The Bomb
1997 Yaratganga Shukur/Ja Chotschu/IWish
1998 Kichkina Tabib/Malenkij Lekar/Tabib, the Little Faith-Healer
2002 Boys in the Sky
2004 Boys in the Sky II
Yusuf Razikov

One of the prominent figures of contemporary Uzbek cinema, Yusuf Razikov uses the genre of comedy to reflect on social, moral and psychological issues. *Voiz/Orator* (1999), which he wrote and produced as well as directed, is a gentle satire on the battle of the sexes layered with subtle nuances about totalitarian regimes. In a fairy-tale style, the film narrates the fortunes and misfortunes of a middle-aged cart driver who inherits his brother's two wives, when he already has a wife. Then he draws the attention of the Bolsheviks with his oratory skills and mastery of the Russian language, and a young revolutionary activist falls in love with him. Razikov maintains a humorous tone in projecting the efforts of ordinary citizens caught between the traditional values of the Islamic culture and the new ideology to keep pace with the regime changes, although, the tragic end is ineluctable. *Orator* was the first Uzbek film to be shown in the Panorama section of the Berlinale (2000).

*Ayollar Saltanati/Shenskoje Zarstvo/Women's Paradise* (2000), also written, directed and produced by Razikov, is, again, a comedy about the battle of the sexes, at least on the surface. Olim is a middle-aged artist in an existential crisis. Not only that he is suffering from writer's block, but managing several relationships with several free-spirited women is giving him headaches. The fundamental question that faces him is whether to love one woman who stands for all women, or to love all women. The film uses magic, fantasy and a good dose of humour in searching an answer to this question.

I met Yusuf Razikov for the first time during the Mannheim International Film Festival in October 2000. Our next meeting was in Tehran in 2005 during the Fajr International Film Festival, which was followed by several e-mails.

The Unfair Battle of the Sexes

In *Women's Paradise*, using mythology, magic, humour and fantastical images, you ask a million dollar question: To love one woman who stands for all women, or to love all women instead of a single one? When his terminally ill friend and mentor İsmail entrusts his pretty wife Zebo to him, Olim, the writer, sets on a long journey in search of the young woman, but he is lost in a surreal dream journey that lands him at a market surrounded with all the women of his life. What does this false paradise signify?

That scene is in his imagination, which is a part of his art. The women expect to marry him, but for him there are some borders. He is not free for relationships. He is in a personal and artistic crisis. The women serve as a metaphor for his art and at the same time his inability to be successful in his art. There are two levels: emotional and creative. Neither one is perfect.

I did not quite understand the episode with the girl who killed herself.

This episode is connected to the main theme of the film. Olim, the writer, is not able to love. The girl is able to love, but her love is not needed.

What about the scene when the protagonist extends his hands to be cemented in a wall? Does this show his willingness to escape to another world?

I tried to build the film on externally illogical actions to elaborate on the internal life of the main character. This episode is one of them. When he wakes up, his hands are bandaged, which indicates the sense of transition. The relationship of the protagonist to his doctor is similar to that of the writer to his characters; at the core of it is dependence. He needs his doctor the way a writer needs his characters.
Why does Olim take off his glasses and immerse his head in the water at the end of the film?

He takes off his glasses because he wants to change his view and to look and love like a child.

Both Orator and Women’s Paradise depict women as level-headed and independent. Centuries-old Central Asian legends also portray women as strong characters. And under the Soviet regime, they were supposed to be equal to men, however, self-immolation, particularly in the rural areas, was and perhaps still is, an alarming phenomenon in Uzbekistan. Some sources cite religious pressure of a patriarchal society as a determining factor in addition to the harshness of daily life. I have seen Shuhrat Mahmudor’s 1988 documentary, Hudium/Offensive, referring to the Soviet fight against female oppression in Central Asia in the 1920s. Women throw off their veils and fight for their rights despite assassination of hundreds by their husbands and brothers for disgracing the family. That film focuses on the fact that despite such a movement, the phenomenon of self-immolation among Central Asian women grew in an alarming rate in the ensuing years. Some of the women interviewed reiterate that they do not want equal rights. The narrator’s conclusion is they have accepted their oppression believing in their inferiority. To unveil their minds would need another hudium. Has the status of women changed after Independence? How does the rise of fundamentalism in your country affect the modern Uzbek woman? After all, Uzbekistan is an androcentric society.

Tradition of strong women has cultural roots. According to a popular story, mother and father stand at the end of the courtyard and ask the baby to come forward. He/she makes the first step towards the mother. The community of men adores the face of the mother.

But Islam has always been a strong force in Uzbekistan, even during the Soviet regime. Tashkent was the headquarters of the Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, which supervised 230 mosques, nearly half of the USSR total. Two-thirds of these mosques were in Uzbekistan. In the mid-sixties, the quest of young intellectuals for a national and religious identity led to an ‘unofficial’ or ‘parallel’ Islam. Brezhnev reversed the anti-religious propaganda of Khrushchev and authorized the restoration of religious monuments. During the last few years of the communist regime, Islam was clearly thriving in the cities. From the beginning of glasnost (openness), the official Soviet policy of tolerance had far-reaching effects. In 1990 alone, the number of mosques in Uzbekistan tripled. There must be some changes to the family situation, especially with the recent rise of fundamentalism.

The free women movement started during the Soviet period and it cannot stop now. Of course, there is the danger of Islam.

What about women film-makers in Uzbekistan? The West only knows of Kamara Kamalova.

Beside Kamara Kamalova, we have Rano Kubayarev who made Kenja/Mladschaja/The Youngest in 1994 and Svetlana Murathaciayava.

Another Uzbek director told me that, when women become directors, they lose something from being a woman. What do you think?
This is not my opinion. What I do not like is the subject becoming an emancipation issue. We have presently three female students studying directing. They got prizes in Almaty in the ‘Look in a New Way’ Film Festival. To think that film directing is ugly should be ugly for men.

I understand you make your films with state money. What are some of the ramifications?

In comparison to the other Central Asian States, we are happy to make films. We have state money to find foreign money. Twenty per cent of box office profit is for Uzbek films. The main idea is that cinema is part of culture, which should be supported by the state.

Uzbek cinema’s struggles with censorship go a long way. Nurchon, one of the first Uzbek actresses, was assassinated in 1929, accused of having violated the interdiction for a woman to show herself in public and in 1933, director Soleiman Khodjaev disappeared in a gulag because of his film Before Sunrise, which dealt with the theme of the revolt of Bukhara against the Russian power in 1916. What is the situation with censorship today? Although your president, Islam Karimov, has invited the film-makers to be bold in choosing their subjects, we do not see any burning issues depicted in your films.

I call it ‘inner censorship!’ But there are films. For instance, a film was released recently, which shows violence against women.

Apart from sex and violence, what other ‘inner censorship’ exists? We have read about writers harassed or even exiled.

I have never had any problems. The opinion of censorship is more on the outside. This is part of the culture. State gives money for a film; the least they would expect is a film that the audience would like to see.

Is there a movement of independent cinema?

I Wish by Zulfikar Mussakov was made with private sources. My films are made with state money.

You are also at the head of the Uzbek Film Studio. Is it totally state owned?

Fifty per cent of the action belongs to the state, the rest is private.

The period from 1986 to 1991, perestroika, the transparency policy introduced by Gorbachev was a golden period for Uzbek cinema. Using the government funding, the film-makers tackled previously taboo subjects such as drug abuse and prostitution in several documentaries. But Independence meant freedom to open the door to Hollywood, which is perhaps the biggest menace to your film industry, not to mention video and DVD piracy.

In the beginning, our society became infatuated with all things western, and the video pirating, which is still flourishing, caused loss of jobs in the industry. From another point of view, one may say that the arrival of western values had the positive effect of slowing down Islamization. Now, people are getting tired of the western styles. Novelty has faded. They want to see their own stories on screen.

What is the language of cinema after Independence? And do you use the Latin alphabet?
Uzbek and Russian are both used. During the Soviet period, we used to shoot in Russian and then dub to Uzbek language for national release. We use the Latin alphabet.

What is your next project?

I have several projects. One project is as a director with David Sefarian; another one as a scriptwriter to Rano Kubayarev for a co-production with Russia and possibly Netherlands. As a director, alone, I am working on a video film that will be called Dilxiro/The Man’s Dance, taking its name from the national Uzbek dance, which is only for men. The narrative follows the entry of a young man into the adult world in Islamic Uzbekistan. He endures physical pain as his bride-to-be undergoes her own rite of passage. Such conflicts that abound in our culture will be viewed from the traditional point of view as well as contemporary. The theme is the meeting point of the two.

Mannheim, October 2000

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When we met last night, and I told you about my recently published book, Women, Islam and Cinema, which includes some of your work, you mentioned you were working on a new film, again about women. What is your motivation for choosing stories that foreground women?

I do not think I make films only about women. Actually, Women’s Paradise is not about women but a writer and film; and Orator is not about women. The storyline touches upon the subject of women’s issues. If you consider the numbers of heroines in painting, literature and poetry, you can understand my motivation. Artistically, I think that the character of women is more interesting for dramaturgic development. On a personal level, I grew up in the company of women – grandmother, mother and four younger sisters.

Unlike other Central Asian Republics, in Uzbekistan Uzbek films attract a wide audience, perhaps more than Hollywood films. Can you explain why?

This is a matter of social psychology. Moslems are traditionally more closed and, hence, they try to preserve cultural contents (not as an obligatory result of religion), which are based on respect for elders, traditions and family relations. All these elements are very strong in Uzbekistan.

Are you still at the Head of the Studio?

I was the head of Uzbekfilm studio for five years. Now I am the Art Director.

Besides yourself and Zulfikar Mussakov, who are the other prominent working directors today?

I think soon you will be hearing such names as Yolkin Tuychiyev, Ayup Shakhobiddinov, Khilol Nasimov, Fattykh Djalalov, Sobir Nazarmukhammedov and Turaniyaz Kalimbetov.

What are the most important subjects in Uzbek cinema today – contemporary issues or the revival of culture and tradition?

Uzbek cinema is not obliged to follow a political doctrine. Each film-maker is free to choose a theme. Everything else depends on his taste/mind and talent/abilities. Certainly, all subjects you mention are explored.
What is the main difference of Uzbek cinema from other Central Asian cinemas?

It is financed by the State one hundred per cent.

Are there any women directors beside Kamara Kamalova? What are the issues they deal with?

We have a young film-maker, Saodat Ismailova. She has shot several short films. At present, she is in Berlin as part of the program Artists in Residence working on a big project.

How many films are made in Uzbekistan each year? How many of these are commercial films?

Together with video films (which have a small budget), Uzbekistan produces about 20 films a year – two or three of these are commercial. Commercial films are mainly produced by private studios.

What is the major influence on Uzbek cinema today? Hollywood? Old Russian/Soviet masters? Europe?

I think Asian cinema and partly French.

What is your latest project?

A contemporary rural story with elements of a road movie about a relationship between a 14-year-old boy and the wife of his elder brother, who has left to search for a job.

Tehran, February 2005

Notes


Bio/Filmography

Yusuf Razikov was born in Tashkent in 1957. He started his career in the film industry as a light technician at the Uzbekfilm Studio while studying philology at the Tashkent State University. Following his military service, he was employed by Uzbek TV as assistant director and then director and the author of art programs. In 1981, he was accepted to the scripting department of the VGIK in Moscow. In 1983, his film The Ladder in the House with a Lift was awarded the Grand-Prix for Best Script of a short film at the Moscow Festival of Youth Films. After majoring in screenwriting in 1986, he had an internship at the Mosfilm Studio in Moscow for two years and began writing scripts for Uzbekfilm, Mosfilm, Gruziyafilm (Georgia) and other similar studios. In addition to the feature films that he has directed, Razikov has written screenplays for more than ten feature films and around one hundred television episodes that he directed. Between 1999 and 2004, he was the president of the Uzbekfilm Studio.

Selected feature films

1992 Olvdagi Farishta/Angel in the Fire
1998 Voiz/Orator
2000 Ayollar Saltanati/Shenskoje Zarstvo/Women’s Paradise
2002 Ortok Boykenjayev/Comrade Boykenjaev
2003 Dard/Healer
2004 Erkak/Girl’s keeper
FILMOGRAPHY

PART ONE

IRAN

Abjad/The First Letter
2003, 100 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Abolfazl Jalili
Production: NOVEM Productions
Cinematographer: Seyyed Kamal Moosavy
Sound: Mazyar Sheik, Anne le Campion and Katia Boutin
Mixing: Anne le Campion
Set and Costumes: Mohammad Taghy Jalili
Music: Jean-Claude Ghrenassia
Leading Players: Mehdi Morady, Mina Molania, Shahare Roohy

Set in Isfahan just before the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war, the film is the story of young Emkan who performs his designated duties to the best of his abilities. He works as a mokaber in a mosque, leading the prayers and follows the dogmatic instructions of his masters at school. Outside the classroom, he is the leader of his gang of friends. Gradually, he begins to be interested in drawing, painting and calligraphy and poetry, but his creativity is systematically thwarted by his superiors, including his patriarch father. Falling in love with Maassoum, a rebellious Jewish girl, does not help matters. The arrival of the revolution and the expulsion of the family of Maassoum make an important change in his life.

Abr-o Aftaab/Cloud and the Rising Sun
1997, 90 mins, colour
Director and Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Producer: Morteza Shayesteh
Production: Hedayat Film
Editor: Zhila Ipakchi
Art Director: Bita Qezel Ayaq
Sound: Bahman Heydari
Music: Hossein Alizadeh
Leading Players: Amir Payvar, Mohammad Reza Sharifi-Niya, Farshid Dehkhoda, Susan Rajabi
Awards
The Golden Ombu at the Mar del Plata Film Festival (1998) and cash prize of $625,000 by the Argentine Film Institute (INCAA) to be used by the producer to co-produce a feature film with an Argentinean producer.

The cast and crew of a feature film project in the northern part of Iran are impatiently waiting for fair weather to shoot the last scene and leave for the capital. Among the cast is a veteran film and theatre actor who leaves for Tehran when he receives news of his wife’s heart attack. It is impossible to go on shooting without the old actor who is performing one of the principal parts. The entire cast and crew then decide to shoot the last scene in Tehran.

Arusi-ye Khuban/Marriage of the Blessed
1989, 95 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter, Art Director and Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Production: Institute for the Cinematographic Affairs of the Mostafazafan and Janbazan Foundation
Cinematographer: Ali Reza Zarrindest
Music: Badak Bayat
Sound: Badi Studio
Leading Players: Mahmud Bigham, Roya Nonahali, Ebrahim Abadi, Mohsen Zehiab, Hossein Hosseinkhani, Ali Abadan

After partial recovery from the impact of explosion waves during the war against Iraq, Haji, a young photographer and combatant, leaves hospital with psychological scars. He is advised by doctors to get married for perfect recuperation. His fiancée’s father is a businessman who is planning to marry his daughter to a rich man. While resolving the problem of marriage, Haji gains a new understanding of social problems and cannot bear the contradictions between civil reality and the realities of poverty and war. He has a relapse during the wedding and is taken back to the hospital. Going over recent events, he decides that the battlefront is the only appropriate place for him and leaves the hospital before complete recovery.

Ayneh/The Mirror
1997, 95 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Jafar Panahi
Producers: Jafar Panahi and Vahid Nikkhah-Azzad
Production: Rooz Film
Cinematographer: Farzad Jadat
Sound: Yadollah Najafi and M. Delpak
Leading Players: Mina Mohammad Khani, Kadem Mojdehi

Awards
Golden Leopard for Best Film at the Locarno International Film Festival (1997); Special Jury Award and Best Director Award at the 11th Singapore International Film Festival (1998); Golden Tulip Award at the 17th Istanbul International Film Festival (1998); FIPRESCI Prize, Eisenstein Magical Crystal and Cash Awards at the 7th Arsenal Film Festival of Riga (1998); Bunuel’s Golden Era Award at Royal Archive Film Festival in Belgium (1997)
In this film within a film, a little girl with her arm in a plaster cast waits outside the school for her mother to pick her up at the end of the school day, but she does not arrive. She decides to go home alone which does not prove to be so easy as she does not know her address except for a visual memory of the journey. On the bus, she listens to adult conversations, which seem unfamiliar: a widow complains about the manners of the young, musicians bask for money, a man and a woman eye each other. When they finally arrive at the terminus, she realizes that she has gone the wrong way. A friendly driver puts her on another bus. All of a sudden, she rebels. She will not play this role anymore. She (Mina) gets off the bus, throws away the cast and decides to go to her real home alone, forgetting that she is still wearing the microphone. The film-maker follows her without her knowing. A new story unfolds.

_Bacheh-haye Aseman / Children of Heaven_
1996, 90 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Majid Majidi
Producer: Mohammad Sared Seyedzadeh
Production: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kanoon)
Cinematographer: Parviz Malekzadeh
Editor: Hassan Hassandoost
Sound Recorder: Yadollah Najafi
Sound Effects: Mohammad Reza Delpak
Music: Keivan Jahanshahi
Leading Players: Mohammad Amir Naji, Fereshteh Sarabandi, Kamal Mirkarimi

**Awards**
The Crystal Simorgh for Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Editing, and Best Amateur Actor at the Fajr International Film Festival Tehran (1997); Grand Prix of the Americas, the Ecumenical Prize, and Air Canada People’s Choice Award at the Montreal World Film Festival (1997); Oscar nomination in the Foreign Language film category; Best Asian Film Award at the 11th Singapore International Film Festival (1998)

Ali, a boy from a poor family, takes his younger sister Zahra’s only pair of shoes to the shoemaker, but loses them on the way back home. The children decide not to inform their unemployed father about the event and begin to share Ali’s ragged sneakers during shifts at school. A ray of hope dawns when the school offers a pair of shoes as the third prize in a four-kilometre running race. When the boy comes in first, all seems lost again.

_Bachehha-ye Talaqh / Children of Divorce_
1989, 100 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Tahmineh Milani
Producer: Mehdi Ahmadi
Cinematographer: Reza Banki
Music: Kambiz Roshanravan
Editor: Seifollah Dad
Leading Players: Jahanbakhsh Soltani, Mahshid Afsharzadeh, Hamideh Kheirabadi, Shahla Riahi, Arezu Ahmadi, Jafar Bozorgi, Reza Alikhani
Awards
Co-winner of the Best First Film Award at the 8th Fadj Film Festival Iran (1990)

Fereshteh, who is studying film direction, also works as a private tutor. She is looking for a social theme for a short film she has to make as her graduation work. When she meets Atefeh, a young girl whose emotional development has been severely impaired by her parents’ divorce, Fereshteh decides to make her film on the children of divorce.

*Baad Ma ra ba Khod Khahad Bord/The Wind Will Carry Us*
1999, 118 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Abbas Kiarostami (based on an idea by Mahmud Aidin)
Assistant Director: Bahman Ghabadi
Producer: Marin Karmitz
Production: MK2
Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Music: Peyman Yazdanian
Sound Recorder: Jahangir Mirshekari
Sound Editor: Mohammad Hassan Najm
Leading Players: Behzad Dorani, inhabitants of the village of Siah Dareh

Awards
Best Film Award at the 7th Belgrade Auteur Film Festival (2000); Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival (1999)

A group of strangers arrives in a village in the Kurdistan Province to shoot a documentary about funeral customs. No one in the village knows what the strangers are after. The head of the group is amused by the villagers’ suspicion that they are treasure hunters. The fact that he walks from the village, which lies in a ravine, to the village cemetery on top of a hill (to have better sonar wave transmission when he talks on his cellular phone), encourages the villagers’ suspicion. But the stranger’s attention is directed to the window on the wall of a room where an old woman is dying.

*Badkonak-e sefid/The White Balloon*
1995, 85 mins, colour
Director, Editor and Art Director: Jafar Panahi
Producer: Kurosh Mazkouri
Production: Iranian TV – Channel Two, Ferdos Film, Farabi Cinema Foundation
Cinematographer: Farzad Judat
Screenwriter: Abbas Kiarostami (based on an idea by Jafar Panahi and Parviz Shahbazi)
Sound: Mojtaba Mortazavi and Said Ahmad
Leading Players: Aida Mohammadkhani, Mohsen Kafili, Fereshteh Sadr Orfani, Anna Borkovska, Mohammad Shahani, Mohammad Bahktiari

Awards
Camera d’Or for a debut film, C.I.C.A.E. and FIPRESCI prizes for Best Film of the Directors’ Fortnight at the 48th Cannes Film Festival (1995); Jury Prize for Best Film at the 19th Sao Paulo International Film Festival (1995); Best Foreign Film 1995 chosen by New York Film Critics Circle; Bronze Dragon for Best Film of Young Cinema and Golden Award of Governor of Tokyo at the 8th
Tokyo International Film Festival (1995); Best Film Award at the Sudbury Film Festival, Toronto (1995)

The Iranian New Year coincides with the first day of spring, 21st March. For the ceremonies, as is traditional, seven-year-old Razieh dreams of buying a big goldfish to place on the *haft seen*, the traditional New Year table. She begs her mother to give her the necessary cash. With the banknote in a jar, she rushes out to buy the fish, but in the crowded city streets, she loses the money. Self-reliant, but also a bit manipulative, Razieh will do anything and use anyone to retrieve her money. While the radio counts down the last minutes before the New Year, a frantic search begins to retrieve the banknote, which leads the girl to unexpected encounters, from snake charmers and a young private on leave to Afghan refugees.

*Baduk*
1991, 89 mins, colour
Director: Majid Majidi
Production: Art Centre
Cinematographer: Mohammad Dormanesh
Screenwriter: Seyed Mehdi Shoja and Majid Majidi
Editor: Mohammad-Reza Mouini
Music: Mohammad-Reza Aligholi
Leading Players: Mohammad Kasebi, Mehrollah Mazarzehi

People of a village in Baluchistan decide to migrate because of the draught, but Heidar stays in the village and digs a well with the aid of his son Jafar and his daughter Jamal. However, when the well collapses, Heidar is buried inside. His children leave the village and they are kidnapped by a driver along a road leading to the city. Jafar is sold to a native drug trafficker called Abdollah, and Jamal is taken to Pakistan. Tormented by his captivity, Jafar seeks the help of his friend Nouredin to rescue Jamal.

*Banoo/The Lady*
1992, 113 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Dariush Mehrjui (inspired by Bunuel’s *Viridiana*)
Producers: Majid Modarresi and Mohammad-Mehdi Dadgoo
Cinematographer: Touraj Mansouri
Editor: Hassan Hassandoost
Music: Nasser Cheshm-Azar
Leading Players: Ezzatollah Entezami, Bita Farrahi, Khosro Shakibai, Gowhar Kheir-Andish

While a woman’s husband is away on a trip, she asks a poor family to come and live with her to ease her loneliness. The people settle in the house and eventually rob her. In the end, the woman takes the train to the holy city of Mashhad.

*Banoo-ye Ordibehesht/The May Lady*
1998, 88 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad
Producers: Ali-Reza Raissian and Jahangir Kosari
Cinematographer: Hossein Jafarian
Editors: Masumeh Shah Nazari and Mostafa Kherghelipoosh
Art Director: Amir Esbati
Sound: Parviz Abnar
Make-up: Mehri Shirazi
Leading Players: Minoo Farshchi, Mani Kasraian, Golab Adineh, Atefeh Razavi, Baran Kosari

Awards
Best Stage Design and Special Jury Awards at the 16th Fajr International Film Festival (1998); FIPRESCI Prize at the 22nd Montreal World Film Festival (1998); Prince Claus Award Netherlands (1998)

Forough Kia, a middle-aged documentary film-maker, lives with her son. She is successful in her profession, but her family life is full of problems, which become increasingly complicated when she meets a man. At the same time, she is making a film on the exemplary Iranian mother, which forces her to re-examine her own life.

Baran / Rain
2001, 94 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Majid Majidi
Producers: Majid Majidi and Fuad Nahas
Director of Production: Seyed Said Seyedzadeh
Production: Farabi Cinema Foundation
Cinematographer: Mohammad Davoudi
Editor: Hassan Hassandoost
Music: Ahmad Pezhman
Sound Design, Effects and Mixing: Mohammad Reza Delpak
Sound Recording: Yadollah Najafi
Leading Players: Hossein Abedini, Reja Naji, Zahra Bahrami, Hossein Rahimi, Hossein Mahjub

Awards
Crystal Simorgh for Best Director at the 19th Fajr International Film Festival (2001); Best Film, Best Director, Best Original Score (Ahmed Pezhman), Best Sound Mix (Mohammad Reza Delpak), Best Sound (Yadollah Najafi) in the National competition of the 19th Fajr International Film Festival; Critics’ Award, Audience Award and Ecumenical Special Mention at the 19th Montevideo International Film Festival Uruguay (2001); Grand Prix of Americas and the Ecumenical Award at the 25th Montreal World Film Festival (2001); Best Film at the 11th Films from the South in Oslo (2001); Best Director and Screenplay Awards at the 39th Gijon International Film Festival for Children and Young Adults (2001)

In a construction site in present-day Tehran, the site’s foreman employs workers coming from various areas of Iran as well as Afghanistan. An illegal Afghani construction worker breaks his leg and is replaced by his teenaged son, Rahmat. Lateef, a young, cocky Iranian worker is hostile towards the youngster, but when he discovers the secret of Rahmat, he undertakes a journey into that world and becomes enlightened to the values of love and kindness while coming away with a better understanding of another culture.

Bashu: Garibeh-ye Kuchak / Bashu: the Little Stranger
1986, 120 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Bahram Beyza’i
Production: Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults
Cinematographer: Firuz Malekzaseh
Sound: Jahangir Mirshekari, Asghar Shahvardi and Behruz Moavenian
Leading Players: Susan Taslimi, Adnan Ghafravian, Parviz Purhosseini, Akbar Dudkar

A black boy from southern Iran flees the war and moves to the north part of the country. People there reject him because of the colour of his skin. Na’i, whose husband is gone to war, invites him in despite opposition and treats him as her own children. The boy becomes a member of the family and helps Na’i with the chores. The husband returns from the war with one arm missing.

Baycot / Boycott
1985, 114 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Producer: Art Bureau of the Organization for the Propagation of Islamic Thought
Cinematographers: Faraj Heydari and Ebrahim Ghazizadeh
Editor: Rubik Mansuri
Leading Players: Majid Majidi, Mohammad Kassedbi, Ardalan Shojai, Zohreh Sarmadi, Sa’ide Kashanfallah, Bahman Ruzbehani, Ali Akbar Yeganeh, Reza Cheraghi

Before the Islamic Revolution, Valeh forsakes his family for his political activities and, eventually, he is arrested by the police. His wife faces personal and economical difficulties. As an inmate, Valeh questions his political ideas, while his comrades urge him to sacrifice himself for propaganda purposes. Inspired by a militant Muslim, Valeh faces death, but for a different cause.

Beed-e Majnoun / Weeping Willow
2005, 95 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Majid Majidi
Producers: Majid Majidi, Art Bureau of the Islamic Propagation Organisation
Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Editor: Hassan Hassandoost
Music: Ahmad Pejman
Set and Costume Design: Behzad Kazazi and Mohsen Mousavi
Special Effects: Mohsen Rouzbahani
Leading Players: Parviz Parastouie, Roya Teymourian, Soghra Obeisi, Melika Eslafi, Leyla Otadi, Mahmoud Behrazi

Yousef, a 45-year-old professor of literature, has been living in a different world since he lost his sight as a child. He leads a comfortable life without any complaints. When he suffers from a dangerous ailment, his rich uncle takes him to Paris to have an eye operation during which he regains his sight. On his return home, he falls in love with a younger woman and wants to change his life.

Bemani / Stay Alive
2002, 97 mins, colour
Director and Editor: Dariush Mehrjui
Producers: Mohammad Nikbin, Mahmineh Milani, Artabin and Dariush Mehrjui
Screenwriters: Dariush Mehrjui and Vahideh Mohammadifar
Cinematographer: Bahram Badakhshani  
Music: Mohammad-Reza Darvishi  
Art Director: Dariush Mehrjui and Atusa Qalamfarsai  
Sound: Asghar Shahrudi  
Leading Players: Masumeh Bakhshi, Mohammad habibian, Turan Yaghuti, Neda Aghai, Shadi heidari, Ghader Heidari, Ali-Asghar Abbas Aram, Mohsen Khayati, Morad Alipanah, Habib Rezai

Three interlinked episodes focus on self-immolations among young women in the region of Ilam. A carpet weaver pays with her life for speaking to a young soldier; a medical student is forced by her father, a doctor himself, to quit her studies, and Bemani is married to an old man so that her family can be exonerated from paying rent.

Cherikeh-ye Tara/The Ballad of Tara  
1978, 103 mins, black & white  
Director, Screenwriter and Producer: Bahram Beyza’i  
Cinematographer: Mehrdad Fakhimi  
Music: Traditional Persian folk tunes  
Leading Players: Susan Taslimi, Manutchehr Farid, Reza Babak, Siamak Atlassi.

Bahram Beyzai’s last film shot before the Islamist revolution with post-production completed after the regime of the Shah was toppled, The Ballad of Tara tells the bizarre tale of Tara, a desirable, stubborn peasant woman, a devoted mother, and her encounter with a wounded soldier in ancient attire, who surfaces from the depths of history to claim a sword his tribe has lost and Tara has inherited from a grandfather. After much argument, they fall in love, but do not consummate their love. How can one make love to the past? While the villagers either perform or watch ta’ziyeh, the religious rite, the soldier evokes a poignant tale of defeat and thanking Tara for her deep affection, disappears inside the waves of the Caspian Sea. Tara is free to face her future.

Cherikeh is a Kurdish word, meaning a recounting, in oral tradition, of any tale of individual love linked to collective destiny.

Dan  
1996, 90 mins, colour  
Director, Screenwriter, Art Director and Editor: Abolfazl Jalili  
Producers: Abolfazl Jalili and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Channel 2  
Cinematographer: Farzat Judat  
Sound: Hassan Zarfam  
Leading Players: Farhad Bahremand, Bakhtiyar Bahremand, Tayebeh Suri, Farzad Helili

Awards  
Special Jury Prize and Young People’s Solidarity Prize at the 46th San Sebastian Film Festival (1998);  
Best Film in the Cinema Prism section at the Tokyo Film Festival (1998)

A nine-year-old boy is not able to go to school or find work because he does not have a birth certificate. His illiterate mother and drug addict father did not register his birth. He works illegally in odd jobs where he is treated like a war refugee. The acquisition of an I.D. becomes a full-time job and an unattainable dream. His financial hardships take backstage when his only friend, Farzaneh, a
fourteen-year-old girl, is forced by her poor family to drop out of school to marry a rich older man.

_Dastforush/The Peddler_
1987, 95 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Production: Art Bureau of the Organization for the Propagation of Islamic Thought
Cinematographers: Homayoon Pievar, Mahrdab Fakhimi and Ali Reza Zarrindast
Music: Majid Entezami
Sound: Mohsen Roshan
Leading Players: Zohreh Sarmadi, Esmail Sarmadian, Morteza Zarrabi, Mahmud Basiri, Behzad Behzadpur, Jafar Dehghan, Farid Kushanfallah

_The Peddler_ is a philosophical journey in three parts focusing on the relationships among the members of the lower class through the story of an orphan who is passed from one family to another. Each episode depicts a different story but all three rely on predestination. The first is about the plight of a poverty-stricken couple trying to find someone to adopt their child. The second examines the social isolation of a mentally unstable man looking after his elderly mother. The third is about a peddler suspected by his fellow smugglers of having betrayed them. Though he knows he is about to be killed by the gang, the peddler is helpless in his attempt to change his fate.

_Dayareh Mina/Mina’s Cycle_
1975, 100 mins, colour
Director: Dariush Mehrjui
Production: Tel Film
Screenwriters: Gholam-Hossein Saedi and Dariush Mehrjui (based on a story by Saedi)
Cinematographer: Houshang Bahar-lou
Editor: Talat Mir-Fendereski
Leading Players: Ezzatollah Entezami, Ali Nasirian, Foruzan, Saied Kangarani

**Awards**
Prix d’Antenn 2 Paris International Film Festival 1977; the Critics’ Award Berlin 1978; Best Film Prades Film Forum, France 1980

Ali, a poor young boy, comes to Tehran with his old father, who needs medical treatment. They meet a blood-dealer named Sameri. Ali quickly learns how to get blood from the addicts and destitute in the poor neighbourhoods and sell it on the black market. Although his father dies, he continues his new way of life.

_Dayereh/The Circle_
2000, 90 mins, colour
Director and Editor: Jafar Panahi
Production: Jafar Panahi Film Productions/Mikado – Lumiere &Co.
Screenwriter: Kambozia Partovi (from a story by Jafar Panahi)
Cinematographer: Bahram Badakhshani
Art Director: Iraj Ramin-Far
Leading Players: Fereshteh Sadr Orafai, Fatemeh Naghavi, Nargess Mamizadeh, Maryam Parvin Almani

Awards
Golden Lion, FIPRESCI Prize, UNICEF Prize, Ecumenical Special Mention, Sergio Trazzati Award and the Italian Film Journalists’ Award for the Best Actress at the 57th Venice International Film Festival (2000); Freedom of Expression Award at the National Board Review USA (2001); Best Film at the 19th Montevideo International Film Festival (2001)

The film starts with the screams of a woman at a maternity ward who is giving birth to a girl. She and her daughter are already unwanted. In the following scene, we see three women who have just left prison. Arezou and Nargess are on parole, but Pari has escaped because she needs an abortion. Nargess who has a purple bruise under her eye tries to go to her village, but has difficulties obtaining a bus ticket as a single woman. Pari is rejected by her family and refused help from an old cell mate who has become the respectable wife of a Pakistani doctor. She meets a desperate mother who tries to abandon her child. A prostitute lights a cigarette on the way to prison as defiance to all man-made laws.

Delbaran/Charmers
2001, 96 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter, Art Director and Editor: Abolfazl Jalili
Producers: Abolfazl Jalili and Ichiyama Sho佐
Executive Producer: Mori Masayuki
Production: T-Mark Inc. (Japan) and Film e Aval (Iran)
Cinematographer: Mohammad Ahmadi
Sound: Hossein Zarfam and Mahmud Musavi-Nezhad
Leading Players: Karim Alizadeh, Rahmatollah Ebrahimi, Hossein Hashemian, Ahmad Mahdavi

Awards
Special Jury Prize, 3rd prize of the Junior Jury, and Don Quixote Award at the Locarno Film Festival (2001); Golden Mongolfier at the festival des 3 continents – Nantes (2001)

In a small desert town near the Afghan border, patrol officer Mahadavi frequently stops by old Khan’s to look for illegal Afghans. Khan runs an isolated café and service station where truck drivers, merchants and opium smokers stop. Fourteen-year-old Karim, an illegal Afghan, works for Khan spending the day running back and forth between the café and the garage. The only attention or affection he receives is from Khan’s elderly wife or the local doctor. He learns to be tough to find his place in the harsh adult world. After the opening of a new road, largely built by illegals, the trucks no longer stop at the café. Khan buys nails and spreads them on the new highway. Then he goes home and dies. Karim decides to see his act of rebellion through.

Derakhte Golabi/The Pear Tree
1998, 100 mins, colour
Director: Dariush Mehrjui
Producers: Dariush Mehrjui, Faraamarz Farazmand and Farabi Cinema Foundation
Screenwriters: Dariush Mehrjui and Goli Taraghi (based on a story by Taraghi)
Cinematographer: Mahmus Kalari
Editor: Mostafa Kherqepoosh
Art Director: Faryar Javaheriyan and Bita Qezel-Ayaq
Sound Recorder: Jahangir Mirshekari and Samad Baqerpoor
Sound Mix: Mirshekari and Solleimani
Leading Players: Homayun Ershadi, Golshifte Farahani, Mohamad Reza, Shaaban Noori, Nematollah Gorji, Jafar Bozorgi, Maryam Majd, Maryam Moqbeli

Awards
Silver Hugo Chicago International Film Festival; Best Actress (Golshifte Farahani), Best Photography (Mahmud Kalari) 16th International Fajr Film Festival 1998

61-year-old Mahmud, a poet and writer, travels to his birthplace in the Bagh Damavand to write a book. The pear tree in the garden reminds him of his childhood and youth, which involves an infatuation when he was twelve. The old nagging gardener keeps reminding him that all trees in the garden have borne fruit, with the exception of the pear tree. But the writer's attention is directed to other aspects of life beyond such daily details. The pear tree takes him back to his childhood and, finally, he discovers the secret behind the silence of the tree.

_Det, yani dokhtar / Det, Means Girl_
1994, 86 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter, Editor and Art Director: Abolfazl Jalili
Producer: Ali-Reza Zarif
Production: Irib Marz-E Nour Co.
Cinematographer: Mehdi Majd Vaziri
Sound: Ali Salehi and Gholam-Abbas Ghanbari
Leading Players: Hossein Saki, Zeinab Barbandi, Nabi Jalilian, Dr. Adibifar, Dr. Bahman Maroufi

Awards
Best Child Actor for Hossein Saki at the 17th festival des 3 continents – Nantes (1995); UNICEF Award at the 52nd Venice International Film Festival (1995)

Schwan is a young cook and factory guard who is in charge of the workers’ well-being. His father and sister arrive from the countryside to seek medical treatment for the girl. Traumatized since the death of her mother, the girl is afflicted with a mysterious illness that has caused paralysis, muteness and psychological depression. All efforts to restore the girl's health remain useless. Schwan, who has established a 'mystical communion with God,' discovers an alternative way to seek a cure for his sister. The ending is open to interpretations.

_Doucharkhe Savar Bicycle-ran / The Cyclist_
1989, 75 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter, Editor and Art Director: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Production: Institute for the Cinematographic Affairs of Janbazan Foundation, Seyyed Jamalebbin Hosseini Cultural Foundation
Cinematographer: Ali Reza Zarrindast
Music: Majid Entezami
Leading Players: Moharram Zeynalzadeh, Esmail Soltanian, Mohamad Reza Maleki, Mahshid Afsharzadeh, Firooz Kiyani
Awards
First Prize at Rimini Cinema (1989)

Nasim has fled Afghanistan with his family to settle in a small Iranian village. Penniless, he cannot pay for the hospital for his seriously ill wife. To earn the necessary money, he accepts an impossible bet: to pedal a bicycle non-stop for a whole week. He has to turn in circles frantically for seven days without a single pause. A number of people lay bets and decide to go along. To ensure his success, Nasim’s little son as well as all the spectators who have betted on him, support him and try to help him with the gamble.

Do Zan / Two Women
1998, 96 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Tahmineh Milani
Production: Arta Film and Arman Film
Cinematographer: Hossein Jafarian
Sound: Parviz Abnar
Editor: Mostafa Kherqepush
Music: Babak Bayat
Art Director: Malek Jahan Khazai
Leading Players: Niki Karimi, Atila Pesiani, Mohammad Reza Forutan, Merila Zarei, Reza Khandan

Awards
Crystal Simorgh for Best Script at the Fajr International Film Festival (1992); Titra – Film Award at the 5th International Festival of Cinema and Television – Tout Ecran Switzerland (1999); Best Actress for Niki Karimi at the 29th Taormina Film Festival (1999)

Fereshteh and Roya meet as university students in Tehran and become friends during the tumultuous period of the Iranian revolution. Universities are closed for three years. Roya, who comes from a liberal background, marries a man of her choice and eventually completes her studies to become an architect to be a partner to her husband in her career as in family life. Fereshteh, who is the more intelligent and the more beautiful of the two, is forced to an inappropriate marriage in the turmoil of threats from a stalker. Her husband keeps her locked in the house and refuses to let her finish her studies. The courts can neither recognize her as the victim of the stalker nor grant her divorce on the grounds of psychological abuse from her husband. Years later Fereshteh and Roya meet in the corridors of a hospital.

Gabbeh
1995, 75 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter, Editor and Art Director: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Producers: Khalil Dorudchi and Khalil Mahmudi
Production: Iranian Handicraft Organization
Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Music: Hossein Alizadeh
Sound: Mojtaba Mir Tahmaseb
Leading Players: Seyyed Abbas Sayyahi, Shaghayegh Jodat, Hossein Mohrami, Roghieh Mohrami, Parvaneh Ghalandari
Awards
Best Film Award at the Singapore International Film Festival (1997); Best Artistic Contribution at the 9th Tokyo International Film Festival (1996); Best Direction at the 29th Sitges International Film Festival (1996); Crystal Symorgh for Best Photography at the 14th Fajr International Film Festival (1996)

An old man and a woman bring *gabbeh*, a tribal handwoven carpet, to a spring to wash. A tribal girl named Gabbeh, who wove the carpet, appears on the rug and begins to talk about her love. She belongs to the Ghashgai tribe, the colours and patterns of whose weaving reflect their lives and observations of nature. She is in love with a young man riding a fiery horse, but her father insists that to marry the boy, she must wait until her uncle arrives from the city and takes the grandmother to live with him. But the uncle arrives too late and the grandmother dies in the meanwhile. Now Gabbeh has to wait until her uncle gets married. The uncle marries a girl he has seen in his dreams singing by the spring. Now it is time for Gabbeh’s mother to give birth to a baby, then Gabbeh’s sister dies falling off the cliff when she is chasing a goat, and the family has to serve a period of mourning. Gabbeh cannot wait any longer. Her uncle indirectly suggests that she elope with the young man and provides the opportunity by taking the father away from the tribal camp. When the father finds out about the elopement, he hunts down the lovers. The sound of gunshots signals their death, but the father only pretended to kill the lovers in order to dissuade his other daughters follow suit. The design on the *gabbeh* carried by the old couple to the spring shows the young lovers riding towards the horizon.

*Gal/Scabies*
1987 96 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Abolfazl Jalili
Producer: Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting
Cinematographer: Ataollah Hayati
Editor: Reza Khozui
Leading Players: Mahdi Asadi, Hossein Malumi, Asghar Golmohammadi, Mohsen Panahi, Hossein Panahi, Fatemeh Naghari, Hushang Beheshti, Yousef Khojasteh, Mahmoud Hosseini, Abolfazl Karimi, Mohammad Gorgani

Awards
Best Film at the 10th Aubervilliers Film Festival France (2000)

Hamed, a fifteen-year-old juvenile delinquent, is arrested for distributing political pamphlets and is sent to a reformatory institution. The boy gradually adjusts himself to the hostile atmosphere of the institution, but during his trial, he refuses to cooperate. He is sent back to the reformatory to face an uncertain future.

*Gaw/The Cow*
1969, 104 mins, black & white
Director: Dariush Mehrjui
Producer: Ministry of Culture and Art
Screenwriters: Gholam Hossein Saedi and Dariush Mehrjui (based on the novel *The Mourners of Bayal* by Saedi)
Cinematographer: Fereidoun Ghovanlou
Hamoon
1990, 120 mins, colour
Director and Producer: Dariush Mehrjui
Production: Pakhshiran Co.
Cinematographer: Touraj Mansourie
Editor: Hassan Hassandoost
Music: Nasser Cheshm-Azar
Leading Players: Khosro Shakibai, Ezzatollah Entezami, Hossein Sarshar, Bita Farrahi

Awards
Five Cristal Simorghs at the Fajr International Film Festival (1990); Bronze prize Houston International Film Festival (1991)

The film narrates twenty-four hours in the life of an intellectual writer named Hamid Hamoon, who is having problems with his Ph.D. thesis on Love and Faith in Abraham; going through a divorce; struggling with the forces of tradition and modernity; trying to keep his business in marketing of medical instruments and trying to find his old friend, Ali. At the end, he shoots his wife with his antique gun and leaves for the north in search of Ali. As he is trying to commit suicide in the sea, he is rescued by Ali.

Kakadu
1994, 100 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Tahmineh Milani
Production: Artafilm
Cinematographer: Hassan Gholizadeh
Editor: Shirin Vahidi
Set Design and Special Effects: Valiyollah Khakdan
Sound: Behruz Moavenian
Leading Players: Elsa Firuz Azar, Asadollah Yekta, Atene Faghih Nasiri, Fariborz Arabnia, Rahman Moradi, Hossein Moheb Ahari

A professor of the earthly language from the Kakadu planet ruled by environmentalists is exiled to Earth once a week for polluting the planet. A relationship develops between the extraterrestrial and the earthlings, particularly an eight-year-old girl named Golnaz.
**Kandahar/The Sun Behind the Moon**
2001, 85 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Producer: Makhmalbaf Film House/Bac Films
Cinematographer: Ebrahim Ghafoori
Music: Mohammadreza Darvishi
Leading Players: Niloofar Pazira, Hassan Tantai, Magdalna Ozdavesca, Monica Hankievich

**Awards**
Ecumenical Jury Award at the 54th Cannes International Film Festival (2001); UNESCO Fellini Award (2001)

Nafas (Breath), an Afghan journalist, is an immigrant in Canada. Her sister Hayat (Life), who remained in Afghanistan, intends to commit suicide at the time of the last solar eclipse of the century, as she can no longer bear the hardships of living there. Upon receiving Hayat’s letter, Nafas joins a group of refugees on their way back to Afghanistan, speaking to her sister in her tape recorder.

**Khaneh-ye Dust Kojast?/Where is the Friend’s House?**
1987, 83 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Abbas Kiarostami
Producer: AliReza Zarrin
Production: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kanoon)
Cinematographer: Farhad Saba
Sound: Jahangir Mirshekari, Asghar Shahverdi and Behrooz Moavenian
Leading Players: Babak Ahmadpoor, Ahmad Ahmadpoor, Khodabaksh Defai, Iran Otari, Ayat Ansari, Sedigheh Tohidi, Peiman Moafi, Tayebeh Soleimani, Mohammad Reza Parvaneh, Frahang Akhavan

**Awards**
Bronze Leopard, FIPRESCI Prize, Prize of the International Federation of Arthouses and Prize of the Ecumenical Jury at the Locarno International Film Festival (1989); in Iran, Film of the Year 1989, one of the best twenty films in the history of Iranian cinema and one of the best five films of post-revolutionary cinema

Ahmad is about to do his homework when he discovers that he has taken his classmate Mohammad Reza’s notebook by mistake. Mohammad has already been reprimanded for having given his written homework on loose sheets on two consecutive days and warned that he would be expelled if he does it again. Ahmad wants to spare his friend this unfair punishment and decides to return the notebook. After a hard journey, he arrives at Mohammad’s village, but since he does not know where he lives, he is unable to find him. Finally, he returns home and decides to do his friend’s homework so that Mohammad will not get into trouble.

**Kharej Az Mahdueh/Off the Limits**
1988, 100 mins, colour
Director: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad
Producers: The Institute of the Cinematographic Affairs of Janbazan Foundation and Filmsazan Cooperative Group
Screenwriter: Farid Mostafavi
Cinematographer: Ali Reza Zarrindast
Editor: Ruhollah Emami
Music: Mohammad Reza Aligholi
Leading Players: Mehdi Hashemi, Parvaneh Masumi, Mahmud Jafari, Jamshid Layegh, Mahmud Bahrami, Hassan Raziani, Mohammad Varshochi, Soruch Khalili, Esmali Mohammadi, Mehri Mehrnia, Ali Asghar Garmsiri

After years of hard work, Mr Halimi finally buys a house in a remote corner of Tehran. Having hardly moved in, the thief breaks in and Mr Halimi catches him, determined to have the man prosecuted although the neighbours think it is of no use. But the honest and stubborn Halimi drags the thief from police station to the headquarters and the Ministry to eventually find out what complex problems blockade his strange district. With the help of all his neighbours, he decides to bypass the authorities and solve the problem in another way.

Leila
1997, 110 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Dariush Mehrjui (based on a story by Mahnaz Ansarian)
Producers: Dariush Mehrjui and Faramarz Farazmand
Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Editor: Mostafa Kherghelpoush
Leading Players: Leila Hatami, Ali Mosaffa, Jamilikhi, Mohammad-Reza Sharifinia

On her birthday, Leila, a newly wed modern woman, finds out that she is infertile. With pressure from her mother-in-law, she accepts her husband to take a second wife and even encourages him, but she is miserable when he finally chooses someone. The second wife gives birth to a daughter, and the marriage does not last, but Leila also is estranged from her husband.

Mashq-e Shab/Homework
1990, 86 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Abbas Kiarostami
Production: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults
Cinematography: Iraj Safavi
Music: Mohammad-Reza Aligholi
Sound Recorder: Ahmad Asghari
Leading Players: Students and instructors at the Shahid Masumi School

Using a documentary-narrative format, in a series of interviews with school children, the film examines various aspects of the practice of assigning homework. The primary school children express their views on the subject and point out drawbacks such as illiterate or exasperated and impatient parents who are not familiar with modern educational methods.

Mehman-e Maman/Mom’s Guest
2004, 104 mins, colour
Director and Producer: Dariush Mehrjui
Cinematographer: Tooraj Mansoori
Screenwriters: Dariush Mehrjui, Vahideh Mohammadifar and Houshang Mouradi Kermani
Editor: Mehdi Hosseinvand
Music: Emad Bonakdar
Costume Designer: Mohsen Shah Ebrahimi
Leading Players: Golab Adineh, Amin Hayayi, Parsa Pirouzfar, Hassan Poorshirazi, Amir Hoseini

A mother tries to keep up appearances when cousins are coming for dinner. Neighbours put their grudges behind and help to prepare a banquet, which they all share, enjoying a sense of community, love and reconciliation.

*Mosaferan/Travelers*
1992, 90 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Bahram Beyza’i
Producers: Bahram Beyza’i, Abbas Sheikhzadeh, Majid Rudiani and Khosro Khosravi
Production: Lisar Film Group
Cinematographer: Mehrdad Fakhimi
Set Design: Iraj Fakhimi
Music: Babak Bayat
Leading Players: Majid Mozaffari, Homa Rusta, Mozhdeh Shamsai, Jamileh Sheikhi, Fatameh Motamed Aria

A young woman’s wedding becomes a ritual of mourning when her sister and family die in an auto accident on the way to the wedding. The sisters’ mother refuses to accept her daughter’s death and, in the midst of wedding guests and mourners, including the drivers of the truck that caused the accident, she orders the wedding to take place. But how can the daughter marry in the midst of a wake and without the family’s traditional mirror, which the sister was bringing to the service?

*Nam-y Nazdik/Close-up*
1990, 100 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Abbas Kiarostami
Producer: Hasan Aghakarimi
Production: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kanoon)
Cinematography: Ali-Reza Zarrindast
Sound: M. Haqiqi
Leading Players: Hossein Sabzian, Hassan Farazmand, Abolfazl Ahankhah, Hushang Shahai, Mehrdad Ahan-Khah, Mohsen Makhmalbaf (as himself)

Hossein Sabzian, a recently divorced and unemployed film buff, introduces himself as Mohsen Makhmalbaf (the celebrated Iranian film-maker) and under the pretext of working on a film and looking for interesting locations, enters the life of a bourgeois family. The father of the family becomes suspicious of the man’s claims and starts an investigation, which leads to the arrest of the impostor. Based on a real event, the narrative is structured around actual events – such as the trial of Sabzian – with the main characters playing themselves.

*Nargess*
1992, 100 mins, colour
Director: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad
Producers: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Armand Film
Screenwriters: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Feraidun Jeirani
Cinematographer: Hossein Jafarian
Editor: Shirin Vahidi
Art Director: Amir Esbati
Music: Mohammad Reza Aligholi
Sound: Parviz Abnar
Set Designer: Amir Esbati
Leading Players: Farimah Farjami, Atefeh Razavi, Abolfazl Poorarab, Reza Karamrezai, Vajiheh Loghmani, Mohammed Reza Khamseh, Majid Golpayegani, Mohammad Zarandi-Nia

Awards
Crystal Symorgh for best director and musical score at the Fajr International Film Festival (1992)

Adel is an irresponsible young man who lives with Afagh, an older woman who took him off the streets as a boy and fell in love with him. They lead a life of petty thievery. On meeting innocent and beautiful Nargess, he decides to leave Afagh to start a clean life with Nargess. Although Afagh still loves him, she agrees to pose as his mother so that a formal marriage contract can be drawn. When Adel is arrested for theft, Nargess has no one to turn to except the ‘mother-in-law.’

Naseroddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema / Once Upon a Time, Cinema
1992, 98 mins, black & white
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Producers: Masud Jafari, Josani and Mohammad Mehdi Dadgu
Cinematographer: Nemat Haghighi and Faraj Heidari
Sound: Ahmad Asgari
Music: Majid Entezami
Leading Players: Ezzatollah Entezami, Mehdi Hashemi, Fatameh Motamed Aria, Dariush Arjomand, Akbar Abdi, M. A. Keshavarz

Awards
Jury Special Award at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (1992); Carridi d’Oro Prize at the Taormina International Film Festival (1992); Istanbul International Film Festival (1992)

An Iranian monarch with 84 wives and 200 children has prejudice against cinema, but on viewing his first film, falls in love with the heroine who, every time she falls off the cliff in the film, ends up in his court. His passion is so intense that he gives up everything for her and becomes a film actor himself.

Neemeh-ye Penhan / The Hidden Half
2001, 106 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Tahmineh Milani
Producers: Tahmineh Milani and Mohammad Nikbin
Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Editor: Bahram Dehghani
Music: Amir Moini
Art Director: Iraj Raminfar
Sound: Parviz Abnar
Leading Players: Niki Karimi, Mohammad Nikbin, Atila Pesiani, Afarin Obeisi, Akbar Moszezi

Awards
Best Actress for Niki Karimi and Best Artistic Contribution for Tahmineh Milani at the 25th Cairo International Film Festival (2001); Audience Award at the 12th Festival of Iranian Films in Gene Siskel Film Center of Chicago (2001)

Judge Mohtasham Khosro is going to Shiraz to investigate the case of a woman prisoner on death row. Although she claims to be innocent, no one listens to her statements. He finds his wife’s diary in his luggage. She has written about her past to make him understand who she really is.

Nobat-e Asheqi/Time of Love
1991, 75 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Producer: Abbas Randjbar
Production: Green Film House and Khaneh Film Sbaz
Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Sound: Djahangir Mirshekari
Leading Players: Shiva Gerede, Abdolrahman Yalmai, Aken Tunc, Menderes Samancilar

Shot in Turkey with Turkish actors, this film about adultery is divided into three parts, each one telling a different version of the same story. In the first episode, Gozal, who has a dark-haired husband, falls for a light-haired man. When an old man reveals this secret love, the dark-haired husband kills his wife’s light-haired lover. He is sentenced to the death penalty while the woman commits suicide. In the second episode, Gozal is married to the light-haired man, while the dark-haired man is in love with her. Again, the old man reveals their secret love. The dark-haired man kills the light-haired husband resulting in the same dramatic outcome. The third episode is similar to the first, only now they find out that the old man is also in love with Gozal. All four are in love with love and not with the beloved.

Nun va goldun/Bread and the Flower Pot a.k.a.A Moment of Innocence
1996, 78 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Producer: Abolfazl Alagheband
Production: Pakshiran Co. / MK2 Production
Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Music: Majid Entezami
Set Designer: Reza Alaghmand
Sound: Nezam Kiai
Leading Players: Mir Hadi Tayebi, Ali Bakhshi Jozam, Ammar Tafti, Elham Mohammad-Amini, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Moharam Zinal Zadeh

Awards
Jury Special Mention at the 49th Locarno International Film Festival (1996)
In Tehran, a former policeman asks director Makhmalbaf to give him, as promised, a part in his next film. The two men had met twenty years ago, when young Makhmalbaf, a dissident under the Shah’s regime, had stabbed him while trying to steal his revolver. Then, Makhmalbaf was sent to prison and the policeman to the hospital, thus failing to meet and propose marriage to the girl he loved. The director suggests to the policeman who comes to his door asking for a role in his film to become the director and reconstitute that scene. Each will make his version of the event and try to understand the facts and resolve the differences. The only weapon this time will be the camera.

Pari
1995, 115 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Dariush Mehrjui
Producers: Dariush Mehrjui and Hassan Shafiee
Cinematographer: Ali-Reza Zarrindast
Editor: Hassan Hassandoost
Leading Players: Niki Karimi, Khosro Shakibai, Ali Mosaffa

Awards
Cyristal Simorgh for Best Director, Best Supporting Actor, Best Photography Fajr International Film Festival 1995

Pari, a university student in literature, is confused after reading the Green Book, which is about the mystical behaviour of a Gnostic. The book belongs to her older brother Asad who had committed suicide. After spending a night in the burnt hut where Asad died, she calms down and tries to deal with mystic powers in a more practical way.

Pedar/The Father
1996, 96 mins, colour
Director: Majid Majidi
Production: Centre for Promotion of Documentary and Experimental Cinema
Screenwriters: Majid Majidi and Seyed Mehdi Shojai
Cinematographer: Mohsen Zolanvar
Editor: Hassan Hassandoost
Art Director: Behzad Kazazi
Music: Mohammad-Reza Aligholi
Sound: Yadollah Najafi
Leading Players: Hassan Sadeghi, Mohammad Kasebi, Parivash Nazarieh, Hossein Abedini, Neda Ebrahimzadeh, Shamin Khezri, Nasim Khezri

Awards
Jury Award at the 44th San Sebastian Film Festival (1996); Jury Special Mention at the 20th Sao Paulo International Film Festival (1996); Special Jury Award, CICAE Prize and Holden School Prize for Best Screenplay at the 14th Torino International Film Festival (1996); Best Film Award the Golden Dophin and the Global Church Letter of Recommendation at the Troia International Film Festival (1997); Best Film, Best Supporting Actor and Best Screenplay at Penang East Asia International Film Festival (1997); CIFEJ First Award at Oulo International Film Festival (1997); Best Film and Best Young Actor Awards at the 16th Ale Kino International Film Festival Poland (1998); Best Film and Best Director Awards at the Seoul International Family Film Festival (1998)
Mehrollah is a fourteen-year-old boy forced to provide for his family after the death of his father. To find a job, he travels to the southern parts of the country. Upon his return to his hometown, he finds out from his friend Latif that his mother has married the local policeman. Mehrollah refuses to accept his stepfather as his legitimate father. Convinced that he is the sole head of the family, he sets up house and kidnaps his sisters. Latif discloses the hideout of Mehrollah’s sisters. In the meanwhile, Mehrollah gets sick. The policeman takes him home, but his patience runs out when Mehrollah runs away with his gun. A desperate chase turns out to be decisive for their relationship.

Pool-e Khareji/Foreign Currency
1990, 90 mins, colour
Director: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad
Producer: Hedayat Film
Screenwriters: Farid Mostafavi and Daryush Moadabian
Cinematographer: Hassan Gholizadeh
Editor: Shirin Vahidi
Music: Mohammad-Reza Aligholi

Morteza is an insignificant government official who is trying his best to deal with his financial problems. One day he finds fifty thousand dollars and decides to keep his newly found treasure a secret from everyone. Later, he sells the dollars at the foreign exchange black market and ends up becoming a foreign currency dealer.

Postchi/Postman
1972, 115 mins, black & white
Director and Screenwriter: Dariush Mehrjui (inspired by Woyzeck by Georg Buchner)
Producer: Mehdi Misaghieh
Cinematographer: Houshang Bahar-lou
Editor: Talaat Mirfendereski
Music: Hormoz Farhat
Leading Players: Ali Nasirian, Ezzatollah Entezami, Zhaleh Sam, Ahmad Reza Ahmadi, Bahman Forsi

Awards
Golden Plaque for Best Film from the Evangelical Church at Berlin International Film Festival 1972; Critics Award Rotterdam 1972

Taghi, an impotent postman, lives with his beautiful wife on his master’s land. A veterinarian treats him with herbal medicine. The master’s nephew who is an engineer plans to build a pig-breeding farm on his uncle’s property. He also sleeps with Taghi’s wife. When Taghi finds out, he kills his wife and goes mad. He is taken to a mental institution.

Ragbaar/Downpour
1971
Director and Screenwriter: Bahram Beyza’i
Producer and Cinematographer: Barbad Taheri
Leading Players: Parvis Fannizadeh, Jamshid layegh, Mohammad Ali Keshavarz
Hekmati, a peaceful intellectual schoolteacher, begins to work at a school in a poor district of Tehran. Then he falls in love with the young and beautiful sister of one of his pupils. Soon the neighbourhood find out about the affair and start making trouble for him. A rich intellectual man is also in love with the girl. The two men face each other, and Hekmati is obliged to leave the neighbourhood. Before leaving, he launches the school theatre.

**Rang-e Khoda/The Colour of Heaven/Colour of Paradise/Colour of God**

1998-99, 90 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Majid Majidi
Producers: Mehdi Karimi and Varahonar
Production: Varahonar Film Co.
Cinematographer: Mohammad Davudi
Editor: Hassan Hassandoost
Sound: Mohammad Reza Delpak
Sets: Asghar Nezhad-Imani
Music: Keyvan Jahanshahi
Leading Players: Mohsen Ramezani, Hossein Mahjub, Selime Feizi, Elham Sharifi, Farahnaz Safari

**Awards**
Crystal Simorgh for Best Film at the 17th Fajr International Film Festival (1999); Grand Prix of the Americas at the Montreal World Film Festival (1999); one of the five nominees for the 1999 Oscar for the Best Foreign Film; Special Jury Prize and Youth Jury Best Film Award at the 37th Gijon International Film Festival (1999); Best Fiction Film Award at the 17th Environment Film Festival France (1999); Best Director Award at the 14th Isphan International Festival of Film and Video for Children and Young Adults (1999); Best Film Audience Award at the Rennes Film Festival (2000); Grand Prize, Best Director, Best Actor (Hossein Mahjub) and Audience Best Film Prize at the 11th Valenciennes Film Festival (2000); Grand Prix and the Best Actor Award (Mohsen Ramezani) at the 2nd Manila Film Festival – Cinemanila (2000); Silver Plaque at the 30th Giffoni Film Festival (2000)

Mohammad is an eight-year-old blind boy who goes to a boarding school for the blind in Tehran. Summer vacation has arrived. Parents come to pick up their children but Mohammad’s father, a poor, widowed coal worker, is late. Finally, he shows up with evident reluctance. Mohammad is overjoyed to be home after a year, and he shares his happiness with his grandmother. However, his happiness is threatened when his father sees him as an obstacle to his hopes of re-marrying. Their journey to the countryside in the high plains of northern Iran serves as a mature meditation on nature and existence for Mohammad, but his father is unaware of any of these feelings.

**Raqs-e Khak/Dance of the Dust**
1992, 73mins, color
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Abolfazl Jalili
Production: Cima Media International (CMI)
Director of Photography: Atta Hayati
Music: Nezamoodin Kia’ie
Leading Players: Mahmood Khosravi, Limua Rahi
Awards
Silver Leopard, Environmental and the Young Jury Awards at the 51st Locarno International Film Festival (1998); Best Asian Film at the 11th Tokyo International Film Festival (1998); Best Director Award at the 20th festival des 3 continents – Nantes (1998)

Ilia, a very young man, works in a brick kiln and leads a solitary life. He is attracted to Limua, a young girl who has come with her mother as a seasonal worker. Ilia is haunted by mysterious whispers calling him to other realms. With the coming of the rain, signalling the end of the season, Limua gives Ilia the present of an imprint of her hand. This object becomes sacred to him. When she leaves, frustration and pain make him rush out to dismantle religious relics.

Rusariye abi / The Blue Veiled
1995, 85 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad
Producer: Majid Modarresi
Production: M. Modarresi Production Film Company
Cinematographer: Aziz Sa’ati
Editor: Abbas Ganjavi
Music: Ahmad Pezhman
Sound: Parviz Abnar and Morteza Dehnavi
Art Director: Farhad Farsi
Set Designer: Farhad Farsi
Make-up: Abdollah Eskandari
Leading Players: Ezzatollah Entezami, Fatemeh Motamed-Aria, Golab Adineh, Afsar Asadi, Jamshid Esmailkhani

Awards
Bronze Leopard at the Locarno International Film Festival (1996); FIPRESCI award at the Thessaloniki International Film Festival (1996); Silver Peacock Special Jury Award at the 27th International Film Festival of India (1996)

Rashul Rahmani, a man in his late sixties, is the kind-hearted owner of a tomato farm and factory. A widower for several years, he lives alone. Nobar Kordani is a poor young woman who has to support her insane mother, her drug-dealer brother and her sister. She is selected to go and work for Rashul who soon falls in love with her. Afraid of unfriendly rumors, Nobar keeps her distance, but when she realizes that Rashul’s love is sincere, they decide to resist the social pressure and begin to meet discreetly.

Sag Koshi / Killing Rabids
2000, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Bahram Bayzai
Producers: Bahman Bayzai and Behrouz Hashemian
Production: Lisr Film
Cinematographer: Asghar Rafi’i Jam
Music: Vartan Sahakian and Saba Khou’ee
Leading Players: Mozhdeh Shamsai, Majid Mozaffari, Reza Kianian, Dariush Arjmand, Ahmad Nakha’ee
Writer Golrokh Kamali, who left her husband Nasser Mo’aser a year earlier after suspecting him of cheating on her with his secretary, returns to Tehran from the provinces. It is the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Her husband is in hiding due to bad checks he wrote, so she rushes to his aid as a dutiful wife and to ease her conscience about doubting him. She pays off one-third of his debt and tries to work out a solution with his creditors. In return, Nasser presents her with the divorce papers announcing his intention to honeymoon abroad with his secretary.

Salaam Cinema
1995, 75 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Producer: Abbas Ranjbar
Production: Green Film House (Tehran)
Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Music: Shahrdad Rohani
Sound: Nezam Kiyai
Leading Players: Azadeh Zangeneh, Maryam Keihan, Feyizollah Gheslaghi, Shaghayegh Judat, M. H. Mokhtarian

Awards
Best Documentary Feature Film at the 11th Munich International Documentary Film Festival Germany (1996)

Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf is preparing a film for the centenary of cinema. He runs a casting ad in a big Tehran newspaper in order to recruit the 100 actors required for the project. For the audition, he has printed 1,000 questionnaires, but when the studio gates open, a crowd of no less than 5,000 aspiring actors shows up. Inside the studio, behind the table, Makhmalbaf begins to screen the hopeful applicants who represent a microcosm of contemporary Iranian society: workers, intellectuals, students but, most of all, women. Asked to justify their desire to be in a movie, candidates undergo what resembles a police interrogation, the director relentlessly using and abusing his unquestioned authority.

Sara
1993, 102 mins, colour
Director and screenwriter: Mariush Mehrjui (adapted from Ibsen’s A Doll’s House)
Producers: Hashem Sayfi and Dariush Mehrjui
Production: Farabi Cinema Foundation
Cinematographer: Mahmud Kalari
Editor: Hassan Hassandust
Sound: Asghar Shahverdi and Sasan Nakhai
Art Director: Faryar Jahaverian
Leading Players: Niki Karimi, Amin Tarokh, Khosro Shakibai, Yasmin Malak-Nasr

Awards
Crystal Symorgh for Best Supporting actress (Yasmin Malak-Nasr) and Best Script (Dariush Mehrjui) Fajr 1993; The Golden Shell for Best Film, Silver Shell for Best Actress (Niki Karimi) San Sebastian International Film festival 1993; Silver Mongolfiere for Best Film and Best Actress, Public Prize festival des 3 continents Nantes 1993
To pay for her husband’s medical treatment, Sara borrows money from one of the employees of the bank where her husband is the manager. She tells her husband the money is from her father. To pay back her debt, she embroiders secretly, ruining her eyesight. When her husband finds out, instead of thanking her, he accuses her of dishonesty. The experience teaches Sara to take a different look at her life.

*Shayad Vaqhti Digar / May Be Some Other Time*
1987, 159 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Bahram Beyza’i
Producer: Housang Nourollahi
Production: Novin Film
Cinematographer: Asegh Rafyie Jam
Music: Babak Bayat
Sound: Fereydoon Khooshabafard
Leading Players: Susan Taslimi, Dariush Farhand, Alireza Mojalla, Jamshid Layegh, Sirous Nasiri, Ghodrat Latifi

While reviewing a film on traffic, Modabber, a TV documentary commentator, accidentally spots his wife sitting in a car next to a stranger. Suspecting her of infidelity, he begins to observe her every move and begins to follow her. His investigation leads to a melodramatic confrontation, which is also very revealing.

*Sokut / Silence*
1998, 76 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter and Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Producer: Marin Karmitz
Production: MK2 Productions, France 3 Cinema
Cinematographer: Ebrahim Ghafori
Sound: Behroz Shahamat
Leading Players: Tahmineh Normatova, Nadereh Abdelehyeva, Golbibi Ziadolahyeva, Hakem Ghassem

**Awards**
Golden Medal at the 55th Venice International Film Festival (1998)

The blind boy Khorshid works as a tuner for an instrument maker in a town in Tajikistan and lives alone with his mother. His father has gone to Russia and his mother lives off fishing. He takes the bus to work every day but, sometimes, on the way, he is distracted by a conversation or a melody and is lost as he follows the sounds. It is particularly through the fifth symphony of Beethoven that he relates to life. One day he meets a fascinating musician, follows him through the streets and is consequently late for work. He is sacked. He sets off to find the mysterious musician.

*Talay-e Sorgh / Crimson Gold*
2003, 97 mins, colour
Director, Editor and Producer: Jafar Panahi
Production: Jafar Panahi Productions
Screenwriter: Abbas Kiarostami
After an attempted robbery goes wrong, Hussein kills the owner of a jewellery store and then commits suicide. The film goes back to the beginning to unfold the events that led to such desperation. Hussein is an overweight pizza deliveryman who wants a better life for himself and his fiancée. With his friend, purse-snatcher Ali, they plan the robbery.

\textit{Tam-e Gilas/Taste of Cherry}  
1996, 98 mins, colour  
Director, Screenwriter, Editor and Producer: Abbas Kiarostami  
Cinematographer: Homayon Payvar  
Sound: Jahangir Mirshekari  
Mixer: Mohamad Reza Delpak  
Leading Players: Homayon Ershadi, Ahdolhossein Bagheri, Afshin Bakhtiar, Safar Ali Moradi, Mir Hossein Noori, Ahmad Ansari

\textbf{Awards}  
Palme d’Or (shared) at the Cannes Film Festival (1997)

Badi’i, a weary and increasingly desperate middle-aged man, tries to find someone to bury him after he is dead. Driving around in the outskirts of Tehran, he meets an assortment of characters: Afghans, Kurds, Turks, a vagabond, a soldier, a seminarian and a museum employee and asks each one to help him in his quest. They all try to dissuade him from his intent though their responses are quite varied.

\textit{Zane Ziyadi/Unwanted Woman}  
2005, 103 mins, colour  
Director and Screenwriter: Tahmineh Milani  
Producer: Mohammad Nikbin  
Cinematographer: Faraj Heidari  
Editor: Shahrzad Poya  
Music: Amir Moinie  
Sound: Eshaq Khanzadi  
Set and Costume Design: Keivan Moqaddam  
Leading Players: Amin Hayat, Merila Zareie, Parsa Pirouzfar, Elssa Firouz Azar, Keikavous Yakideh

Sima starts a long journey with her husband Ahmad and their five-year-old daughter, Homa, to take a young widow, Saba, to their village. During the journey, Sima finds out that Saba is her husband’s mistress. In the meanwhile, the police are looking for a man who killed his wife and her lover. Sima identifies with the murderer.
**Yek dastan-E Vaghe’i/A True Story**

1995, 140 mins, colour
Director, Producer and Screenwriter: Abolfazl Jalili
Production: IRIB Television
Cinematographer: Masud Korani
Editors: Manuchehr Oliai and Abolfazl Jalili
Sound: Saleh Habibi and Hassan Zarfam
Leading Players: Samad Khani, Mehdi Asadi, Abolfazl Jalili, Dr Mohammad Ashayeri, Dr Fazl-Ali Ashayeri, Dr Omid Rohani

Awards
Grand Prize of Best Film and Young Jury Prize at the 18th *festival des 3 continents* – Nantes (1996)

Director Abolfazl Jalili has been casting for a young boy for the leading role in his new film. He made his choice among hundreds of non-professionals and young Samad Khani at the baker’s shop is chosen to play the lead. When the director goes to hire the boy, he finds out the shopkeeper has fired him. The search for the homeless boy reveals his solitude, his battle for survival and the mental and physical state of adults and children around him. When the director finally finds the boy, he discovers that his actor is facing a serious health problem, which is threatening to cripple him forever. Now Jalili has to decide whether to go on with his film or stop everything and try to find ways to help Samad. The choice is not difficult for the director, who puts aside his film project and resolves to assist the young boy. From there on, the film actually chronicles the process of helping the boy overcome his condition.

**Zendegi-va Digar Hich/Va Zendegi Edameh Darad/And then Nothing/And Life Goes On**

1992, 91 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Abbas Kiarostami
Producer: Ali Reza Zarrin
Production: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults
Cinematographer: Homayon Payvar
Editors: Abbas Kiarostami and Changiz Sayyad
Music: Antonio Vivaldi
Sound Recorders: Hassan Zahedi and Behroz Abedini
Sound Effect: Changiz Sayyad
Leading Players: Farhad Kheradmand, Pooya Pievar, Hossein Rezai

Awards
Best Film in the *Certain Regard* section of the Cannes Film Festival (1992); Special Critics’ Award at the Sao Paulo Festival (1993)

Immediately after the earthquake, which shook northern Iran reducing whole towns into rubble and killing an estimated 50,000 people, a film-maker father and his son set out from Tehran towards Koker, the village where Kiarostami’s earlier film, *Where is the Friend’s House?* (1987), was shot, to discover if the boys who played in that film have survived.

**Zir-e Derakhtan-e Zeytun/Through the Olive Trees**

1994, 103 mins, colour
Director, Screenwriter, Editor and Producer: Abbas Kiarostami
Assistant Director: Jafar Panahi
Production: CiBy 2000
Cinematographers: Hossein Djafarian and Farhad Saba
Sound: Mahmoud Samakbashi and Y. Nadjafi
Leading Players: Hossein Rezai, Mohammad Ali Keshavarz, Farhad Kheradmand, Zarifeh Shiva, Tahareh Ladanian

**Awards**
Silver Hugo and Public Prize at the 30th Chicago International Film Festival (1995); Critics Award for Best Film at the 18th Sao Paulo International Film Festival (1995); Golden Rose for Best Film at Bergamo Film Meeting (1995); Best Director at the 8th Singapore International Film Festival (1995); Audience Third Film Award at the 44th Melbourne International Film Festival (1995)

A film crew arrives at a northern Iranian village, which has been devastated by an earthquake, to shoot another version of *And Life Goes On*. Hossein, a young stone-mason is offered a part in the film. By chance, Farkhonde, a young girl he has been courting unsuccessfully in 'real' life (her family refuses his offer of marriage because he has no house), is given the role of his wife in the film. Insisting on his intentions, he reminds them "now that everyone is without a roof to live under, we are all equal."

*Zir-e poust-e shahr/Under the Skin of the City*
2001, 93 mins, colour
Director: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad
Producers: Jahangir Kosari and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad
Screenwriters: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Farid Mostafavi
Cinematographer: Hossein Jafarian
Editor: Mostafa Khergheh-Poush
Art Director: Omid Mohit
Sound: Ashgar Shahverdi
Leading Players: Golab Adineh, Mohammad-Reza Foroulan, Baran Kosari, Ebrahim Sheibani, Mohsen Ghazi-Moradi, Mehraveh Sharifi-Nia

**Awards**
Special Jury Prize at the 23rd Moscow International Film Festival (2001); NETPAC Prize at the 36th Ebensee International Film Festival of Nations (2001)

The parliamentary election campaign for the Sixth Majilis is in full swing. The atmosphere is charged with expectation and anxiety. Tuba has a permanent cough from assembly line work in a factory. Her husband is handicapped and bedridden. Her eldest son, Abbas, works for a clothing manufacturer and dreams of getting married to a girl in an office, but he also wants to go to Japan, a common trend in working-class Iranian youth, to earn money to change the destiny of the family. In order to obtain his visa and air ticket, he places the modest family house at risk. Tuba tries hard to hold the family together.
**Turkey**

*Aaah Belinda / Oh, Belinda*
1986, 96 mins, colour  
Director: Atıf Yılmaz  
Producer: Cengiz Ergun  
Production: Odak Film  
Cinematographer: Orhan Oğuz  
Screenwriter: Barış Pirhasan  
Editor: Mevlut Koçak  
Sound: Erkan Aktaş  
Leading Players: Müjde Ar, Macit Koper, Yılmaz Zafer, Tarık Pabuçuoölu, Güzin Özipek, Azmi Örses, Füsun Demirel

Serap, a young actress with a strong, lively personality and a special dislike for middle-class family life, takes part in a TV commercial for a recently marketed shampoo, “Belinda”. She plays the role of a typical housewife called Naciye. During one of the rehearsals, she suddenly finds that the stage has disappeared, the crew has vanished and all the elements of the script have become real. Now she is Naciye. No one around recognizes her as Serap anymore. Even worse, her ‘family’ thinks that she is suffering from depression, while Serap desperately tries to prove otherwise.

*Adı Vasfiye / Her Name is Vasfiye*
1985, 88 mins, colour  
Director: Atıf Yılmaz  
Producer: Cengiz Ergun  
Production: Promete Film  
Cinematographer: Orhan Oğuz  
Screenwriter: Barış Pirhasan (based on the stories by Necati Cumalı)  
Art Director: Şahin Kaygun  
Music: Atilla Özdemiroğlu  
Leading Players: Müjde Ar, Aytaç Arman, Yılmaz Zafer, Macit Koper, Levent Yılmaz, Erol Durak, Suna Tanrıverdi, Oktay Kutluğ

**Awards**
Best Turkish Film of the Year 1985-Istanbul International Film Days

A young man with a writer’s block walks around the streets of Izmir early one day and sees the poster of a female singer, Sevim Tuna, and while he is wondering who she might be, a man approaches him and tells him that her real name is Vasfiye. Then he begins to tell him her story. Vasfiye marries her childhood admirer Emin but after marriage Emin starts frequenting other women. Disillusioned, Vasfiye forms a liaison with nurse Rustem. When Emin finds out, he wounds Rustem on the leg with a knife and ends up in jail. Left alone, Vasfiye marries Hamza, but when Emin is released from jail, she divorces her husband and goes back to Emin. However, the prison did not change Emin. This time, he forms a relationship with doctor Fuat and finally becomes a fallen woman of the bars. Emin never gives her up. The film is based on five stories by Necati Cumalı and tells the story of Vasfiye from the point of view of four men who enter her life.
Ah Güzel Istanbul / Oh, Lovely Istanbul
1966, 97 mins, black & white
Director: Atıf Yılmaz
Producer: Nusret İkbal
Production: Be-Ya Film
Cinematographer: Gani Turanlı
Screenwriter: Safa Önal
Editor: İsak Dilman
Music: Metin Bükey
Leading Players: Sadri Alışık, Ayla Algan, Diclehan baban, Feridun Çölgeçen, Danyal Topatan

A man from a respected family has fallen into bad ways due to his alcohol dependency. He tries to earn his living as a freelance photographer and lives in a dilapidated shack. One day he meets a young woman who ran away from her home in the village to become a movie star in Istanbul, but has fallen into prostitution. A tender relationship develops between the two.

Asiye Nasıl Kurtulur? / How Can Asiye be Saved?
1987, 105 mins, colour
Director: Atıf Yılmaz
Producer: Cengiz Ergun
Production: Odak Film
Cinematographer: Kenan Davutoğlu
Screenwriter: Barış Pirhasan
Editor: Mevlut Koçak
Music: Sarper Özsan
Sound: Ertan Aktafl
Leading Players: Müjde Ar, Ali Poyrazoğlu, Hümeysa, Nuran oktar, Yaman Okay, Güler Ökten, Füsun demirel, Fatoş Sezer,Yavuzer Çetinkaya

The President and several members of the Association Against Prostitution pay a visit to the brothels in Şirinkent, as a result of a letter, which they have received from a prostitute named Asiye. The letter was a complaint about the inadequacy of the advice given in the booklets distributed by the very same Association. The members are astonished to discover that Asiye is alone and friendless. Moreover, each girl has more or less been through similar experiences. They decide to stage Asiye’s life for their visitors.

At / The Horse
1981, 116 mins, colour
Director and Producer: Ali Özgentürk
Production: ZDF (Germany), Kentel Film (Kenan Ormanlar) and Asya Film (Turkey)
Cinematographer: Kenan Ormanlar
Screenwriter: İşıl Özgentürk
Music: Okay Temiz
Editor: Yılmaz Atadeniz
Leading Players: Genco Erkal, Harun Yeşilyurt, Güler Ökten, Ayberk Çöloğlu, Yaman Okay, Macit Koper, Selçuk Ulüergüven
Awards
Sao Paola Film Festival, second prize (1983); Lecce Film Festival, first prize (1983); Valencia Film Festival, second prize (1982); Tokyo Film Festival Grand Prize (1985); Antalya Film Festival, second prize, Best Actor, best supporting actress (1982); Cinema critiques of Turkey- Best Film, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Supporting Actor and Best Photography (1983)

In a village struggling with difficult living conditions, a man mortgages his house and moves to the big city to earn money and to give his son a good education. He starts to work as a street vendor but never makes enough money. When he seeks state help for his son’s schooling, he is told that this help is given only to the children of dead fathers. He is happy when someone stabs him in the market, but the film ends with the son taking the coffin back to the village.

**Avcı/The Hunter**
1997, 83 mins, colour
Director and Producer: Erden Kıral
Production: Erden Kıral Film Production, Intensefilm Budapest and Pragafilm
Cinematographer: Jürgen Jürgens
Screenwriter: Osman Şahin
Music: Arto Tunçboyacıyan
Editor: Mevlüt Koçak
Leading Players: Ahmet Uğurlu, Fikret Kuşkan, Jale Arıkan, Tomris Öğuzalp, Erol Demiröz, Suavi Eren

Based on a popular legend about a beautiful woman whose grave lies under the lake, the film narrates her story from different points of view. Osman the Noble loves his young and attractive wife, Zala. During a journey to her native town, a rainstorm breaks out and they seek shelter. There they meet a young hunter. Zala and the hunter have a mutual attraction that turns to passion. Osman kills the hunter and loses Zala. In another version, the hunter rapes Zala.

**Ayna/The Mirror**
1984, 88 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Erden Kıral (based on a story by Osman Şahin)
Producer: Christoph Holch
Production: VVF Film-ZDF
Cinematographer: Kenan Ormanlar
Sound: Luc Yersin
Music: Bryanmor-Jones
Art Director: Nikos Perakis
Costume Designer: Heidun Brandt
Leading Players: Nur Surer, Suavi Eren, Hikmet Çelik, Vasilis Tsaglos, Vera Delud,

Awards
Best Film (Figuera de Foz), Best Film (Film Critics’ Award in Bastia), Special Jury prize (Istanbul)

A rural couple, Necmettin and Zelihan, live at the mercy of nature and under the shadow of the feudal lord. When the lord’s good-looking brother tries to seduce the woman, the husband wants to restore the family honour, but the question of whether anything can be more important than human
life haunts him. A psychological drama that focuses on a *menage-a-trois*, the film also holds a mirror to the generally ignored lives of the poor peasants, examining their loves, passions and dreams, particularly those of the women.

*Balalayka/Balalaika*
2000, 115 mins, colour
Director: Ali Özgentürk
Producer: Erol Avcı
Production: TMC Füm
Cinematographer: Mirsad Herovic
Screenwriter: İșıl Özgentürk
Editors: Hakan Akol and Onur Tan
Music: Aşkın Arsunan
Leading Players: Uğur Yücel, Cem Davran, Yekaterina Rednikova, Ozan Güven, Ercan Yazgan, Nadezha Gorelova, Alla Juganova, Anna Voronova, Atılay Uluuşık

On a misty morning, a run-down bus leaves from Batum to go to Istanbul. As the bus stops at various places, Russian women of all ages get on. Each one has her tale to tell. Also travelling on this bus are three Turkish brothers, who have come together after so many years to carry their father’s last wish. The eldest, Necati Bey, views life through the eyes of his father; Hasan is a sailor and a womaniser; the youngest, Mehmet, grew up in Germany with his mother and has lessons to learn on life and love from his brothers. A chain of irreversible events leads them to heartbreak, tragedy and growth.

*Bekçi/The Guard*
1985, 115 mins, colour
Director and Producer: Ali Özgentürk
Production: Asya Film (Turkey), ZDF (German TV), Atriascop (France) and CNC
Cinematographer: Ertunç Şenkay
Screenwriter: İșıl Özgentürk (based on a novel by Orhan Kemal)
Editor: Khadicha Barha
Music: Sarper Özsan
Leading Players: Müjdat Gezen, Güler Ökteen, halil Ergün, Macit Koper, Orhan Çağman, Ferda Ferdağ, İhsan Yüce, Menderes Samancilar

*Awards*
Strasbourg Human Rights Festival, second prize (1986); Turkish Film Critics- Best Third Film and Best Supporting Actress (1986)

Murtaza, an immigrant from the Balkans, works as a nightwatchman in a textile factory, but when he takes the rules of his job too seriously, he alienates himself from his family and his environment. He is unable to grasp the life he leads outside the rules and becomes helpless.

*Bereketli Topraklar Üzerinde/On Fertile Land*
1980, 130 mins, colour
Director: Erden Kıral
Screenwriters: Erden Kıral, Mahmut Tali Öngören and Tuncel Kurtiz (from a story by Orhan Kemal)
Production: Doğa Film, Focus Film and Polar Films
Cinematographer: Salih Dikişçi
Music: Sarper Özsan
Lighting: Jan Pershon
Leading Players: Tuncel Kurtiz, Yaman Okay, Nur Sürer, Menderes Samancılar, Osman Alyanak

Awards
Best Director and thirteen other prizes, Antalya National Film Festival, 1980; Best Film (Strasbourg); Special Jury Award (Nantes); Award of AFCAE (Locarno)

During the 1946 through 1950, in the town of Çukurova poor peasants try to survive under the yoke of the feudal lord, where human life has no value. When a worker, who tries to do his work faster to please the lord, loses his arm to the machine, the lord does not want to take him to the hospital in his car not to smear the vehicle with blood. The man who gives a woman suffering from malaria a tablet of aspirin, subsequently rapes her. Another man falls in love with a woman he has met in a brothel. The film is a gallery of human characters caught in a web of backwardness and poverty.

*Bir Yudum Sevgi/A Taste of Love*
1984, 96 mins, colour
Director: Atıf Yılmaz
Production: Yeşilçam Filmcilik
Cinematographer: Çetin Tunca
Screenwriter: Latife Tekin, Atıf Yılmaz, Fehmi Yaşar
Editor: Nevzat Dişiaçık
Music: Yalçın Tura
Sound: Erkan Aktaç
Leading Players: Kadir İnanır, Hale Soygazi, Macit Koper, Meral Çetinkaya, Dursun Ali Sağiroğlu, Füsun Demirel, Serra Yılmaz

Awards
Best Turkish Film of the Year 1985-İstanbul International Film Days

The film begins with an image of children playing in a graveyard near the city slums. The neighbourhood prostitute gives lessons to housewives about the ways to seduce their husbands. Aygül’s husband Cuma is neither a good provider, nor a good lover. She finds a job in the factory with the help of Cemal, who is not happy in his arranged marriage to his cousin. A love affair begins between the two lonely people which leads to several confrontations with the relatives and neighbours but resolves in a happy ending.

*Bulutları Beklerken/Waiting for the Clouds*
2004, 92 mins, colour
Director: Yeşim Ustaoğlu
Producers: Yeşim Ustaoğlu and Behrooz Hashemian
Production: Ustaoğlu Filmcilik
The story of a woman haunted by her memories for half a century, the film begins in the 1970s with the arrival of the census clerks at the small port town of Tirebolu near the Black Sea. The streets are empty since not everyone can afford to be counted. Ever since her sister’s death, Ayşe has gradually become a recluse, shutting herself off from the rest of the village community. Two village boys, Mehmet and Cengiz, show genuine concern for the old lady, but the rest of the village are suspicious about her behaviour. When a stranger named Thanasis arrives on the scene, the boys are convinced that he is a spy until they discover his connection to Ayşe as a result of something that happened long ago. For 50 years, Ayşe kept her past a secret to protect her sister. Now that she is dead, she has the urge to go back to her roots as the daughter of a Greek family expelled from the area during World War I. She goes to Greece to search for her brother Niko. The meeting of the brother and sister is emotional as Ayşe, alias Eleni, realizes that the country she dreamed of all these years is alien to her.

**Çıplak/Nude**

1993, 91 mins, colour

Director and Producer: Ali Özgentürk

Production: Asya Film (Turkey), Dream Factory (France) and Astriafilm (Greece)

Cinematographer: Vilco Filac

Screenwriters: Ali Özgentürk and Sadık Karlı

Editor: Mevlut Koçak

Mix: Alain Garnier

Leading Players: Sumru Yavrucuk, Meral Çetinkaya, Erdal Küçükkomürçü, Hülya Karakaş, Adnan Tönel, Sami Hazinses

**Awards**

Golden Orange Film festival of Antalya 1993–Jury Special Prize, Best Director of Photography, Best Sound, Best Laboratory

Two housewives, Ayla and Seher, try nude modeling at the fine arts academy to augment the family income. As they become involved in the work and artistry, their macho husbands find it difficult to adapt to the new situation. They loaf around and get drunk. An off-screen voice (the director Özgentürk’s) monitors the events. When the director gets bored, he shows the husband of Ayla what she is doing, and the story accelerates towards a dark spot. Soon the women find out that their husbands are also posing naked, but they decide to keep quiet about it.

**Dilan**

1986, 92 mins, colour

Director: Erden Kıral

Producer: Luciano Gloor

Cinematographer: Martin Gresmann
Screenwriters: Erden Kıral and Ömer Polat
Music: Nizamettin
Leading Players: Derya Arbaş, Hakan Balamir, Yılmaz Zafer, Mehmet Erikçi, Gülen Ökten, Dilaver Uyanık

Shown in Cannes Film Festival’s Directors’ Fortnight section

In a remote village in southeastern Turkey, two men are in love with beautiful peasant girl Dilan. She chooses to marry a poor brave man, Mirkan, instead of the son of the rich feudal village head Paşo. When Paşo has Mirkan killed by one of his men, Dilan decides to take revenge by marrying Paşo and then killing him in the nuptial bed, after which she becomes an outlaw. The film blends a tragic love story with the realistic portrait of the existence of the rural people of Anatolia.

Düş Gezginleri / Walking After Midnight
1992, 110 mins, colour
Director, Producer and Screenwriter: Atıf Yılmaz
Production: Yeşilçam Filmcilik
Cinematographer: Ertunç Şenkay
Editor: Mevlut Koçak
Music: Selim Atakan
Leading Players: Meral Oğuz, Lale Mansur, Yaman Okay, Selçuk Özer, Deniz Türkali

The story begins with the arrival of a female medical doctor to a town by the Aegean coast. While doing her routine check-up of the prostitutes from the local brothels, she comes across her childhood friend. A relationship develops between the two, which creates gossip among the conservative people of the town. The doctor is recently divorced and the prostitute was sexually abused and raped in her childhood. Unable to bear the social pressures, they move to Istanbul but realize that it is their inner conflicts regarding their backgrounds that is affecting the relationship.

Eğreti Gelin / Borrowed Bride
2004, 117 mins, colour
Director and Producer: Atıf Yılmaz
Production: Yeşilçam Filmcilik
Cinematographer: Kenan Ormanlar
Screenwriters: Atıf Yılmaz and Gül Dirican (from a novel by Şükrən Kozalı)
Art Director: Meral Özen
Editor: Aylin Zoi
Music: Atilla Özdemiroğlu
Leading Players: Müjde Ar, metin Akpınar, Nurgül Yeşilçay, Onur Ünsal, Fikret Hakan, Füsun demirel, Pınar Öğün

In an Aegean town in the early 1930s, the local mayor plans to marry his son to the daughter of a prominent family. To prepare the boy for marriage, a woman who is a professional trainer is hired according to old customs. Things get complicated when the two fall in love.

Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar / The Night, Angel and Our Gang
1994, 105 mins, colour
Serap, who is a prostitute working in nightclubs and on the sidewalks, meets Hakan, and they fall in love, but Serap catches Hakan with his male lover. Serap decides that the only thing worth living for is money. This change in Serap also affects the lives of an old prostitute, Melek (Angel), and a young transvestite, Arif.

Güneş Yolculuğu/Journey to the Sun
1999, 104 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Yeşim Ustaoğlu
Producer: Behrooz Hashemian
Production: Ifr, The Film Company Amsterdam, Medias Res Berlin, Fabrica, Arte / ZDF
Cinematographer: Jacek Petrycki
Editor: Nicolas Goster
Music: Vlato Stefanovski
Leading Players: Nevruz Baz, Nazmi Kırık, Mızgin Kapazan, Nigar Aktar, İskender Bağcılar, Ara Güler

Awards
Berlin Film Festival-Peace Prize and the Blue Angel Prize

Mehmet and Berzan are two young men from Anatolia, a Kurd and a Turk, who immigrate to Istanbul. Mehmet works for the water department of the municipality and Berzan sells cassettes of the music of his southeast culture. Mehmet is in love with Arzu, who works at a laundromat. A coincidence brings the two men together, but their simple lives are disrupted when Mehmet is falsely accused of being a terrorist and Berzan is killed by the police. A long journey begins for Mehmet to take his friend’s coffin to his natal village, which is a journey of self-discovery.

Hakkari’de Bir Mevsim/A Season in Hakkari
1983, 113 mins, colour
Director: Erden Kıral
Production: Data Inc. and Kentel Film
Cinematographer: Kenan Ormanlar
Screenwriter: Onat Kutlar
Editor: Yılmaz Atadeniz
Sound: Cemal Kıvanç
Music: Timur Selçuk
Leading Players: Genco Erkal, Erkan Yücel, Şerif Sezer, Rana Cabbar, Erol demiröz, Berrin Koper, Macit Koper
Awards
33rd Filmfestival Berlin: Silver Bear, FIPRESCI, CICAK (Prix de la Confederation de Cinemas d’Art et d’Essai), Interfilm (Otto Dibelious Preis); Audience Prize in Hamburg Film Days; Best Film Bastia; Audience Prize in Luxembourg Film Festival

An intellectual is exiled as a schoolmaster to a little village in the highlands of southwest Turkey, to a village without road, without electricity, covered by snow for seven months of the year. The hero experiences human misery and the impossibility of communication. As he tries to reach over the bridge and understand the tragic existence of these people, he comes closer to understanding himself.

Hazal
1979, 90 mins, colour
Director: Ali Özgentürk
Producer: Abdurrahman Keskiner
Production: Umut Film
Cinematographer: Muzaffer Turan
Screenwriters: Ali Özgentürk and Onat Kutlar (inspired by Kutsal Ceza by Necati Haksun)
Music: Arif Sağ
Editor: Özdemir Artan
Leading Players: Türkan Şoray, Talat Bulut, Meral Çetinkaya, Harun Yeşilyurt, Hüseyin Peyda

Awards
Best film: Prades, La Hague and San Sebastian Film Festivals; Mannheim Film Festival People’s Award, the Catholic Church Golden Ducat and the critics' award; Antalya Film Festival-Best Supporting Actress
In a feudal village in southeast Anatolia, a young woman is engaged to the elder son of the alderman. When he does not return from his military service, she is forced to marry his eleven-year-old brother. She falls in love with a construction worker and tries to change her fate, but this is not possible in such a closed society. The dead bodies of the two lovers are brought back to the village on a white horse as the explosions are heard for the construction of a new road.

Hiçbir yerde/Innowhereland
2002, 90 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Tayfun Pirselimoğlu
Producers: Zeynep Özbatyr, Kadri Yurdatap and Gudrun Ruzickova-Steiner
Production: Mine Film (Turkey) and Media Luna (Germany)
Cinematographer: Colin Mounier
Editors: Şevket Uysal and Hamdi Deniz
Music: Cengiz Onural
Sound: Nuh Mete Deniz
Art Director: Natali Yeres
Leading Players: Zühal Olcay, Mizhael Mendl, Parkan Özturan, Meral Okay, Ruhi Sari, Cezmi Baskın, Devin Özgür Çınar
Awards:
Best Actress for Zühal Olcay at the Istanbul Film Festival; Special Prize of the Jury at the Montreal World Film Festival, 2002

After the death of her activist husband, Şükran, a forty-ish mother who works for the national railways ticketing office tries to raise her son, VeySEL, politically ‘clean’. One day he disappears. Refusing to believe her missing son is dead, she approaches the police for help but they advice her to go home. When she receives information that a young man named VeySEL is on the run, she embarks on an arduous journey to deep Anatolia. Arriving at the ancient city of Mardin, near the Syrian border, she is met with curiosity bordering on hostility.

Iz/Traces
1994, 118 mins, colour
Director: Yeşim Ustaoğlu
Producer: Kadri Yurdatanp
Production: Mine Film
Cinematographer: Uğur İçbak
Screenwriter: Tayfun Pirselimoğlu
Editor: Thomas Balkenhol
Music: Aydın Esen
Leading Players: Aytaç Arman, Nur Süreär, Derya Alabora

Award
The Best Turkish Film of the Year 1995 Istanbul International Film Festival

A man is found dead in his hotel room. Lieutenant Kemal, who is assigned to the case, is haunted by the photograph of a clarinet player who committed suicide. During the investigation that takes him from cheap nightclubs to a lighthouse, he meets strange people from the migrant community and minority groups, but receives little information as to the identity of the dead man, Cezmi Kara.

Kalbin Zamani/The Time of the Heart
2004, 112 mins, colour
Director: Ali Özgentürk
Production: Asya Film and Niki Film
Cinematographer: Ertunc Şenkay
Screenwriters: Ali Özgentürk and Onur Ünlü
Music: Attila Özdemiroğlu
Editor: Mevlut Koçak
Leading Players: Hülya Avşar, Halil Ergün, Oktay Kaynarca, Birol Ünel, Zeki Alasya

A love story involving three men and a woman, the film takes place in the historical Pera Palace Hotel in Istanbul, which becomes the fifth character. A retired police detective tries to solve a murder committed almost half a century ago.

Kanal/The Channel
1978, 90 mins, colour
Kuma/The Second Wife
1974, colour
Director: Atif Yılmaz
Producer: Erman Film
Screenwriters: Tarık Dursun K. and Atif Yılmaz
Leading Players: Fatma Girik, Hakan Balamir, Nuran Aksoy, Aliye Rona, Tuncer Necmioğlu, Ülkü Üner

In eastern Turkey, hunter Ali falls in love with orphan Hanım and marries her despite opposition from the villagers. When she cannot bear children, he is forced to take a second wife. Adapted to screen from a play by Cahit Atay, called Ana Hanım, Kız Hanım, the film draws attention to the issue of polygamy that is rooted in the feudal system of rural Turkey.

Mavi Sürgün/The Blue Exile
1993, 108 mins, colour
Director: Erden Kıral
Producer: Kenan Ormanlar
Production: Elly Scheller-Ormanlar
Cinematographer: Kenan Ormanlar
Screenwriters: Erden Kıral, Kenan Ormanlar and Elly Scheller-Ormanlar
Music: Timur Selçuk
Editor: Karin Fischer
Sound: Simon Happ
Costume: Zepür Hanmyan
Leading Players: Can Togay, Hanna Schygulla, Özay Fecht, Ayşe Romey, Tatiana Papamoshou, Halil Ergün

Awards
Golden Tulip for Best Film Istanbul Film Festival; Golden Orange for Best Film, Best Director, Best Sound in Antalya Film festival; Best Film, Best Director, Best Director of Photography, Best Actor, Best Film Music and Best Supporting Actress by Film Critics’ Association of Turkey; Golden Cocoon in Adana Film Festival 1993
Based on a real event, the film tells the story of journalist Cevat Şakir (1890–1973), who was sentenced to three years of exile for writing an article about deserters in World War I who were shot without a trial. During the six-month journey, by bus and train, by horse and on foot, to his place of exile in today’s Bodrum, he tries to come to terms with his turbulent past—his childhood, his loving mother, the relationship between his wife and his father and the patricide, the guilt of which haunts him. At the end of his journey, he starts a new life.

*Mektup/The Letter*
1996, 100 mins, colour
Director, Producer and Screenwriter: Ali Özgentürk
Production: Asya Film, Filma-Cass, Etamp Film and Zebra Film
Cinematographer: Mirsad Heroviç
Lighting: Haydar Tuna
Set: Hikmet Palabıyık
Sound: Haldun Çıvgınlı
Music: Goran Bregovic
Leading Players: Tarık Akan, Zısan Uğurlu, Nail Çakırhan, Ahmet Mekin, Necdet Mahfi Ayral, Alev Emre, Suna Selen, Cüneyt Gökçer

Ragıp is a nuclear engineer who settled in the US with his mother when he was very young. After many years, he comes to Turkey to search for his father, which helps him to discover his country, but he would always remain a tourist. In the meanwhile, he begins an affair with her guide, who is a rock singer.

*Nihavend Mucize/Miracle Ma Non Troppo*
1997, 94 mins, colour
Director and Producer: Atıf Yılmaz
Production: Delta Film
Cinematographer: Erdal Kahraman
Screenwriters: Atıf Yılmaz and İpek Çalışlar
Editor: Mevlüt Koçak
Music: Erhan Şakar
Leading Players: Türkan Şoray, Haluk Bilginer, İale Mansur, Beyaz, Şükran Güngör

Erol is the co-owner of a film studio. Unlike his partner Nejat, he has a melancholy disposition, which makes it difficult to form relationships with women. The reason behind his problem is his obsession with his mother, who was killed 25 years ago in an accident caused by his father. He calls the spirit of his mother every night in his sleep. One day she appears; she is the same as she was when she died. Erol presents her to everyone as his aunt. To solve her son’s problem, the mother decides to destroy the ‘mother’ image that he has preserved. She begins to flirt with Erol’s partner, Nejat.

*Selvi Boylum Al Yazmalım/The Girl with the Red Scarf*
1977, 90 mins, colour
Director: Atıf Yılmaz
Production: Yeşilçam Filmcilik
Cinematographer: Çetin Tunca
Screenwriter: Ali Özgentürk (from a novel by Chingiz Aitmatov)
Music: Cahit Berkay
Leading Players: Türkan Şoray, Kadir İnanırı Ahmet Mekin, Nurhan Nur, Hülya Tuğlu

**Awards**
Best Director, Best Cinematography, Second Film Antalya Film Festival; Best Actress, Tashkent

Ilyas, a truck driver, is married to Asya. They have a son, Samet. Their happiness is marred by the drinking habit of Ilyas, who finally deserts the family. Asya begins a love affair with a sympathetic man but one day her husband returns.

*Su da Yanar/ Water Also Burns*
1987, 115 mins, colour
Director, Producer and Screenwriter: Ali Özgentürk
Production: Asya Film
Cinematographer: Ertunç Şenkay
Music: Sarper Özsan
Editor: Peter Przygodda
Leading Players: Tarık Akan, Nathalie Duverne, Şahika Tekand, Ayberk Çölok, Meral Çetinkaya, Suna Selen

A film-maker obsessed with the idea of filming the poetry of Turkey’s outlawed poet, Nazım Hikmet, wonders if he is capable of it and if he will get the permission from the authorities.
PART TWO

CENTRAL ASIA

KAZAKHSTAN

1997- Sapisi Rustema S Risunkami/1997-Rustem’s Notes with Drawings
1998, 75 mins, colour
Director: Ardak Amirkulov
Producer: Ard-film
Cinematographer: Renat Kusayev and Nariman Turebaev Screenwriters: Erzhan Rustembekov and Nariman Turebaev
Art Director: Larisa Reshetova and Gaziz Tleulin
Leading Players: Erzhan Rustembekov

At the end of the 1990s, aimless youth in modern Almaty run in circles. Rustem is lazy and indifferent in comparison to his hard-working sister. When his boss at the zoo fires him, he begins to wonder around the city without a destination. One day he meets Miko, a well-mannered pretty girl, but his feelings for her are confused, as he does not know anything about her. Together they try to discover the world for themselves and record all in words and drawings. The film shows the city of Almaty shrouded by inertia, similar to the insomnia suffered by the citizens of Makondo in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ novel One Hundred Years of Solitude when exhaustion from lack of sleep causes amnesia.

Abai
1995, 135 mins, 2 series, colour
Director: Ardak Amirkulov
Producer: Kazakhfilm
Cinematographer: Khasan Kidiraliev
Screenwriters: Ardak Amirkulov, Layla Akhinzhanova and Alexander Baranov
Art Director: Umirzak Shmanov
Leading Players: Gabiden Turikbaev, Tungushpay Al’-Tarazy, Bolot Beyshinaliev, Farida Zhantelova, Dinmukhamed Akhimov, Umirzak Shmanov, Beken Rimova

Awards
Grand-Prize of Tashkent Film Festival (Uzbekistan); Karol Vary (Czech Republic)

The film pictures Abai, an epic character and a historical person, poet and philosopher, whose poetry is regarded as the mirror of the Kazakh soul.

Akcyat/Aksuat
1989, 94 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Serik Aprimov
Production: Kazakhfilm
Cinematographer: Boris Troshev
Art Director: Sabit Kurmanbekov
Leading Players: Sabit Kurmanbekov, Erzhan Ashim, Makangali Abdullaev, Nurzhuman Ikhtimbaev, Gulnazit Omarova

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the small village of Aksuat is in a hopeless situation. The economy is bad and injustice and corruption are widespread. The life of a promising man in the village starts to take an unexpected turn when his brother arrives with his girlfriend and their baby. The brother who lives in the village is an honest and upright man, whereas the one from the city is an amoral, irresponsible idler running away from his debtors. Conflict is bound to surface.

*Alciz Shurek/Coeur fragile/Tender Heart*
1994, 85 mins, colour
Director: Ermek Shinarbaev
Producers: Ken Legargeant and Romaine Legargeant
Production: Kazakhfilm Studios and ACC Productions
Cinematographer: Sergei Kosmanev
Screenwriter: Leila Akhinzhanova
Art Director: Vladimir Trapeznikov
Sound: Sergei Lobanov and Thierry Delor
Editors: Marie-France Poulizac and Khadisha Urmurzina
Cast: Natal’ya Arinbasarova, Adilkhan Yesenbulato, Saule Suleymenova

*Awards*
San-Sebastian (1994); Geneva (1994)

An unexpected encounter changes the existence of a fifty-year-old woman, disappointed in life after three husbands and two children. Ageing ballerina Aijan gives dance classes in an Alma-Ata theater. Her son is away studying in Paris, and her troubled daughter is about to move out of their apartment. Returning home one evening, Aijan is attacked by young Adik, who tries to rape her. Understanding the loneliness that drove the young man to such an extreme, Aijan does not take legal action and, one day, when he appears at her doorsteps totally drunk, she lets him in and a relationship begins. However, Aijan is tormented by love and fear of humiliation due to their age difference.

*Anshi/The Hunter*
2004, 93 mins, colour
Director and Scriptwriter: Serik Aprimov
Director of Photography: Hasan Kidiraliev
Editors: Dina Bergusugurova and Tatiana Suhorukova
Music: Kazbek Spanov
Production Designer: Gulmira Aprimova
Executive Producer: Gulmira Aprimova
Producers: East Cinema, Kazakhfilm/NHK/Hubert Bals Fund/Sud Fond/Fondazione Monte Cinema Verita

Leading players: Dogdurbek Kidiraliev, Alibek Zhuasbaev, Gulnazid Omarova
Brought up by a young, free-spirited and sexually liberal woman, the protagonist suffers from peer incrimination, which augments his adolescence pains in an environment that is cold, cruel and indifferent. He particularly has a certain aversion toward the lover of his surrogate mother, a mysterious hunter. One night, while the couple are taking care of sexual matters, he vents his anger by stealing the hunter’s gun for a target practice on the local bar. The hunter saves him from jail on the condition that he accompany him on his journey. Hence begins the initiation of Erken into the world of adults, which brings with it certain emotions such as warmth for the opposite sex or for one’s own mother.

*Azghyin Ushtykzyn’ Azaby / The Place on the Tricone*
1993, 82 mins, colour
Director: Ermek Shinarbaev
Production: Alem
Cinematographer: Sergey Kosmanev
Screenwriter: Nikita Jelkybaev
Cast: Adil Yesenbulatov, Saulye Suleymenova, Yulia Sukhova, Andrei Melnik, Kasim Jakibayev

**Awards**
Golden Leopard Locarno Film Festival, 1993

Divided into 22 episodes, the film is a psychological drama about a young man with a very cynical view of life who decides to kill himself. The suicide attempt fails and causes him to re-evaluate the meaning of life.

*Diki vostok / Wild East*
1993, 95 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Rashid Nugmanov
Producers: Murat and Rachid Nugmanov
Production: Studio Kino Almaty
Cinematographer: Murat Nugmanov
Art Directors: Rustem Abdrashev and Baurzhan Aldekov
Music: Alexander Aksyonov
Editor: Hadisha Urmurzina
Leading Players: Konstantin Fyodorov, Alexander Aksyonov, Gennadi Shatunov, Konstantin Shamshurin, Zhanna Isina, Pavel Shpakovsky

**Awards**
Prix Special du Jury at the 5th Festival of Action and Adventure Films Valenciennes (1994)

During the civil war in the ex-Soviet Empire, a troupe of midgets, named ‘Children of the Sun,’ escape to the faraway mountains of Tian Shan. When they are threatened by roving bands of evil bikers, they find the Lone Cowboy and convince him to gather a motley crew of unlikely heroes to fight the gangs and save the day.

*Ghibel Otrara / Otrar’s Death*
1991, 160 mins, colour
Director: Ardak Amirkulov
Producer: Kazakhfilm
Cinematographers: Saparbek Koychumanov and Aubakir Suleev
Screenwriters: Svetlana Karmalita and Alexei German
Music: Kuat Shildebaev
Leading Players: Bolat Beyshinaliev, Dogdurbek Kadiraliev, Tungishpay Jamankulov, Sabira Ataeva

**Awards**
Montreal World Film Festival (1991); Figuera da Foz (1991); Ashgabat (1992); Kinotavr (1992); Almaty (1993)

The story is based on the Mongol invasion led by Ghingiz Khan of Otrar, a city in central Asia. A personal drama is revealed through the story of a native Otrar now serving in the Mongol army. His patriotic feelings take over and he decides to save his fatherland from the Golden Horde.

**Igla/The Needle**
1988, 81 mins, colour
Director: Rachid Nugmanov
Producer: Kazakhfilm Studios
Cinematographer: Murat Nugmanov
Screenwriters: Alexander Baranov and Bakhit Kelebaev
Designer: Murat Mussin
Music: (written and performed by) Victor Tsoi
Leading Players: Victor Tsoi, Marina Smirnova, Petr Mamonov, Alexander Bashirev, Archimed Iskakov, Alexander Konko

**Awards**
Zolotoy dyuk in Odessa (1988); Nuremberg (1990)

Moro (played by Viktor Tsoi, who was the leader of the popular rock band Kino) returns to his hometown Alma-Ata to collect money owed to him. He visits his former girlfriend Dina and discovers that she has become a morphine addict. He decides to help her kick the habit and takes her away to the shores of Aral where he finds again the woman he loved once. But the dealers are omnipresent. He decides to fight the local drug mafia responsible for her condition and comes face to face with a deadly opponent in "the doctor", who happens to be the mafia kingpin exploiting Dina.

**Konechnaya Ostanovka/Qijan/The Last Stop/The Terminus**
1989, 77 mins, colour
Director and Screenwriter: Serik Aprimov
Producer: Kazakhfilm Studio
Cinematographer: Murat Nugmanov
Art Director: Sabit Kurmanbekov
Leading Players: Sabit Kurmanbekov, Murat Akhmetov, Bakhytzhan Alpeisov, Nagimbek Samaev

**Awards**
Grand Prix at the Youth 90 Film Week in Kiev (1990); Molodost Film Festival (1989)
After his military service, Erken returns to his home in Aksuat, a village in the desolate steppes of Kazakhstan, and discovers that people from his generation have become alcoholics, thieves or corrupt degenerate beings with no respect for any one. His old girlfriend, who is now married, is reprimanded by her tyrannical supervisors for stopping work to talk to him while repairing a building. After a drunken brawl at a wedding, he witnesses an intoxicated man firing on local police from a rooftop. He realizes that his old friends and relatives are only interested in petty concerns of a daily routine dominated by inertia and indiffERENCE. Bitterly disillusioned, he decides to leave this suffocating milieu. The film is shot in the director’s native village with non-professional actors — friends and family — giving an authentic look to this examination of a society in crisis.

Karalisulu/Krassavitsa v traure/The Mourning Beauty
1982, 40 mins, black & white
Director: Ermek Shinarbaev
Production: Kazakhfilm
Screenwriter: Ermek Shinarbaev
Cinematographer: Fedor Aranishev
Art Director: Abdrashit Sidikhanov
Music: Edward Artemev
Leading Players: Natal’ya Arinbasarova, Nurmukhan Janturine

When Karagoz, a young nomad woman, loses her husband prematurely, she takes a vow of abstinence for several years, a vow she has difficulties to keep.

Meist/The Revenge
1989, 106 mins, colour
Director: Ermek Shinarbaev
Production: Kazakhfilm/Alem Union
Screenwriter: Anatoli Kim
Cinematographer: Sergey Kosmanev
Music: Vladislav Shoot
Set: Elena Elisseeva
Sound: Gulsara Mukateva
Leading Players: Alexander Pan, Valentina Tieu, Kasim Zhakibayev, Lubov Germanova, Oleg Lee, Yuzas Budraitis, Zinaida Em, Maxim Munzuk

Awards
Podolsk (1991); Tour (1992)

The film starts with a brief prologue set in the court of a young king during the eighteenth century. Flash forward to Korea at the end of the last century where a teacher murders a child in a fit of rage and flees the village. The parents seek revenge and the father spends ten years tracking the teacher but loses his chance the last moment. The mother lets her husband take a second wife so that she can give birth to a son who would take over the task when he grows up. The boy becomes a poet and asks the god to let him commit the murder, accepting the fate of a murderer instead of a poet. Destiny, though, keeps him from fulfilling his sinful duty.
Sergelden / A Dream in A Dream
1993, 90 mins, colour
Producer: Kazakhfilm
Director and Screenwriter: Serik Aprimov
Cinematographer: Fyodor Aranishev
Art Director: Umirzak Shmanov
Music: Kuat Shildebayev
Leading Players: Baurzhan Ibragimov, Gulnara Dosmatova, Bakhitzhan Alpesov, Dana Zhamanbalina

Awards
Almaty (Kazakhstan/1993)

A young theatre director is preparing a new play inspired by Dostoevsky’s story The Meek. All events in the film are free translation of this story and the destiny of the protagonist Erken who kills his girlfriend and then tries to reconstruct the events leading up to the murder. His diary, the only evidence of the crime, contains four subjects: theatre, dreams, love and friends. The police investigator studying the diary explores the psyche of the director. The film has the same theme as The Last Stop except that instead of focusing on the disintegration of society, this one focuses on the individual. The protagonist is in a void; his only aim is to flee into imaginary worlds.

Sestra moia Liussia / My Sister Lucy
1985, 94 mins, black & white
Director: Ermek Shinarbaev
Production: Kazakhfilm Studio
Cinematographer: Georgi Guidt
Screenwriter: Anatoli Kim
Art Director: Vladimir Trapeznikov
Music: Nikolai Karetnikov
Sound: Gulsara Mukateva
Leading Players: Khamar Adambeva, Olga Ostrumova, Nikolai Grinko, Anuar Moldabekov, Larissa Velikotskaya

Awards
Special Prize at Minsk Film Festival; Special Mention of the Jury and the Public Prize at the Amiens International Film Festival (1987)

The narrative focuses on two women in a Kazakh village, one Kazakh and the other Russian, and their struggles to survive as widows after World War II. The Russian, Klava, lives with her 12-year-old daughter Liussia next door to Kazakh Aigul, who lives with her 7-year-old son. The story is told by the boy as a grown-up man.

Tri Brata / Three Brothers
2000, 80 mins, colour
Director: Serik Aprimov
Executive Producer: Gulmira Aprimova
Producers: Serik Aprimov and Sano Sinju
Production: East-Cinema Production and NPC
Cinematographer: Fedor Aranishev
Screenwriters: Serik Aprimov and Meirman Karbozov
Art Directors: Sabit Kurmanbekov and Svetlana Chigrinova
Music: Manas Karakulov
Sound: Alia Mirzasheva
Editor: Dina Bersugurova
Leading Players: Aibar Temenov, Shakir Vilyamov, Yura Dankov, Baurzhan Syetbayev, Bakhtiyar Kuatbayev

Three brothers live in a little village near a military airbase and a cemetery of old locomotives, where the old man, Klein, works. He tells the children about a wonderful lake behind the mountains where beautiful women live. That is where, he says, he drives the officers from the military airbase. Obsessed with the idea to see the lake, the boys steal an old locomotive that can still work, little knowing that the officers use the old trains for target practice.

KYRGYZSTAN

Bakajdyn zajyty / Nebo nachego detsiva / Bakay’s Summer Pasture / The Sky of Our Childhood
1967, 78 mins, black & white
Director: Tolomush Okeev
Cinematographer: Kadirjan Kidiraliev
Screenwriters: Tolomush Okeev and Kadirkoul Omurkulov
Music: Tachtan Ermatov
Set: S. Ichenov
Leading Players: Aliman Djankorozova, Mouratbek Ryskoulov, Nasret Doubachev, Sovietbek Djoumadylov, B. Ryskoulova, Samak Alymkoulov

Kalika, who studies in the city, returns to his native village and to his herdsman father, Bakai. The old grazing grounds are soon to be replaced by the construction of a new road. Bakai is forced to move his herd to a new pasture. After trying his best to keep his youngest son in the mountains, the patriarch reluctantly accepts his son’s departure for the town.

Beket / Bus Station
1995-2000, 22 mins, black & white
Directors and Screenwriters: Aktan Abdikalikov and Ernest Abdizhaparov
Production: Kyrgyzfilm Studio
Cinematographer: Hassan Kidiraliev
Editor: Rosa Umuralieva
Sound: Bakitt Nijasaliev
Leading Players: Mirlan Abdikalikov, Ernest Abdizhaparov, Taalajkan Abazova, Emil Ibragimov

It is almost dark on a winter day. The ground is covered with snow. Few people are waiting for the bus at a stop in the middle of nowhere. They wait. The light fades and the cold becomes more unbearable. A drunk intruder bothers the woman but is chased away by a man in a fur coat. The
woman almost intervenes to protect the drunk intruder, who begins to cry. Everyone huddles around him protectively. There is no sign of the bus although the traffic keeps circulating, mostly in the other direction.

_Beshkempir/The Adopted Son_
1998, 81 mins, black & white/colour  
Director: Aktan Abdikalikov  
Producers: Irizbai Alibaev, Cedimir Kolar, Marc Baset and Frederique Dumas  
Production Company: Kyrgyz Film and Noé Productions  
Cinematographer: Hassan Kidiraliev  
Screenwriters: Aktan Abdikalikov, Avtandil Adikulov and Marat Sarulu  
Editor and Set Designer: Tilck Mambetova  
Music: Nurlan Nishanov  
Leading Players: Mirlan Abdikalikov, Albina Imasheva, Adir Abilkassimov, Bakit Zilkiejev

**Awards**  
Silver Leopard for Best Director at Locarno Film Festival, 1999, and four awards at the Angers Film Festival

Little Azate’s parents follow an old Kyrgyz tradition and give him away to a childless couple since their family is already big enough. When he learns the truth, Azate is upset, but his feelings are quickly resolved when a more important calamity befalls him—his adoptive grandmother dies. With maturity, he declares that he will pay her debts if there are any, as according to Kyrgyz customs, a person who owes to people cannot be buried. The film is the second part of Abdikalikov’s trilogy about growing up that he started with his short film _Selkinchek/Swing._

_Lyuty/The Ferocious One_
1973, 90 mins, colour  
Director: Tolomush Okeev  
Screenwriters: Andrei Mikhalkov Kontchalovski and Ernest Tropinine  
Cinematographer: Kadirjan Kidiraliev  
Set: Victor Lednev  
Music: D. Botbaev  
Leading Players: Kambar Valiev, Suimenkul Chokmorov, Aliman Djangorozova

In pre-revolutionary Kazakhstan, a young boy, Kurmash, is trusted to the care of his uncle and grandmother. His uncle is a brutal man, although, he justifies his cruelty to the boy as a process of education to prepare him for a cruel world. Kurmash raises a wild wolf cub that he saves from death at the hands of his brutal uncle and becomes attached to the animal.

_Maimyl/The Chimp_
2001, 98 mins, colour  
Director: Aktan Abdikalikov  
Production: Noé Productions, Beshkempir Studio and Bitters End  
Director: Aktan Abdikalikov  
Cinematographer: Hassan Kidiraliev  
Scriptwriters: Aktan Abdikalikov, Aftandil Adikulov and Tonino Guerra
Editors: Tilek Mambetova and Natalia Vavilkina  
Sound: Bakit Nijazaliev and Dominique Warnier  
Music: Alexander Ortaev  
Leading Players: Mirlan Abdikalikov, Ajnagul Essenkoeva, Jylkychy Jakypov, Aleksandra Mitrohina, Sergei Golovkin  

**Awards**  
Fipresci award Bratislava Film Festival and the Jury Special Prize the Festroia-Troia Film Festival 2002  

In a desolate Kirghiz village, a young man called ‘chimp’ by his friends because of his slightly protruding ears waits to be called for military service. The youth of the village pass the time fighting, partying and trying to have their first sexual experience while waiting to be drafted. The chimp experiences his first fears and his first wounds. His father’s addiction to alcohol puts a heavy burden on the family’s everyday life and causes his mother and his little sister’s departure. The film is the third part of Abdikalikov’s trilogy about growing up that he started with his short film *Selkinechek/Swing*.  

*Samancynyn Zolu / Materinskoe Pole/The Mother’s Field*  
1968, 72 mins, black & white  
Director: Gennadi Bazarov  
Production: Kyrgyz Film  
Cinematographer: V. Vilenski  
Screenwriters: Chingiz Aitmatov, B. Dobrodeev and I. Talankine  
Set: K. Yusupov  
Music: You Chein  

Tolgonai’s husband and sons are killed in the war and her daughter-in-law prefers to die also, but Tolgonai does not accept defeat. She talks to her dead husband’s picture and teaches her grandson to work in the fields.  

*Saratan/Village Authorities*  
2005, 84 mins, colour  
Director and Screenwriter: Ernest Abdizhaparov  
Producers: Tinai Ibragimov, Kanat Sartov, Herbert Schwering and Hans-Erich Viet  
Production: Kyrgyzfilm Studio, Icon Film and Viet Filmproduktion  
Cinematographers: Jorzsh Hamitski and Talant Akyubekov  
Editor: Saida Sadykova  
Music: Ernest Abdizhaparov  
Sound: Bakyt Niazaliev  
Leading Players: Abylov Kumondor, Aktanov Tabyldy, Sulaimanov Askat  

**Awards**  
Special mention at Fipresci Fribourg International Film Festival, 2005
A small Kyrgyz town serves as a metaphor for the condition of the country ten years after independence. Village people are not much different than before: diehard Communists; the cattle thief Tashmat, who still carries on with his business; the policeman Salamat, who is busy chasing after him; and village administrator Kabylbek, who has to listen to all the grievances. There is serious lack of money; pensions are not paid and everyone is determined to do what is necessary to survive even resorting to dubious dealings if need be. To the villagers, nothing seems to be fair or right any more. Losing their faith in a better future or a just God, the villagers decide to devote themselves to earthly pleasures. However, in spite of all their bitterness, life seems to go on as usual; some manage to take great advantage of the situation and others less so. Then comes the surprising and shocking news that the cattle thief has finally been captured by the village policeman; moreover, unable to bear the humiliation, he has committed suicide. Community spirit is put to the test as the headman struggles to keep his village in one piece.

Selkinchek/The Swing
1993, 48 mins, black & white
Director: Aktan Abdikalikov
Producers: M. Abakirova and P. Eliferenko
Production: Maek Film
Cinematographer: Hassan Kidiraliev
Screenwriters: Aktan Abdikalikov, Ernest Abdizhaparov and Talgat Asirankulov
Editor: Hadicha Urmurzina
Sound/Music: Sergei Lobanov
Sets: Talgat Asirankulov
Leading Players: Mirlan Abdikalikov, Bakit Toktokojoev, Ainur Tolokabilova

A young boy and a retarded man love pushing a beautiful girl on a swing. These are the happiest moments of their lives. But their joy is suddenly stifled by the arrival of a marine coming home from service and taking the girl far away with him. Whereas the retarded man dies of boredom, the young boy makes drawings of the girl on the swing to help him bear his grief.

Urkui/The Worship of the Fire
1971, 91 mins, colour
Director: T olomush Okeev
Production: Kyrgyzfilm
Cinematographer: Kadirjan Kidiraliev
Screenwriters: N. Baitemirov, G. Orlov and T olomush Okeev
Set: Syganbek Ichenov
Music: T. Ermatov
Leading Players: Tattabubu Tursunbaeva, Isken Riskulov, Suratbek Mumushaliev

In the 1930s, collectivisation is in full force on the Fergana valley, Ali proposes to vote for a young peasant mother to be the head of the Kolkhoz, but the rich Koulak are sure that she cannot do the job. But she may have a chance because the construction of a canal will change life in the village. The village chief is a wise man who is counting on the strength of tradition, but one night a man enters the house of the woman and kills her and her husband.
TAJIKISTAN

Ashk va Samshed / Tears and a Sword
1991, 129 mins, colour
Director: Tachir M. Sabirov
Producer: Munavar Mansurchodaev
Production: Tajikfilm
Cinematographer: Vladimir Saposnikov
Screenwriters: Tachir M. Sabirov and Semen Lungin
Music: Abdilfatach Odinaev
Leading Players: Muhammadsaid Pririon, Buchon Radshabov, Chotam Nurov, Madina Machmudova

The subjects of the emir of Bukhara are suffering. Grain prices are low and taxes are exorbitant. Then a son finds out that he is to be held responsible for the debts of his deceased father, who had mortgaged his lost plot of land and sold his horse. He decides to rise up against this injustice.

Margi sudhur / Death of an Extortionist
1966, 90 mins, black and white
Director: Tachir Sabirov
Cinematographer: Anvar Mansurov
Screenwriters: Igor Lukovski and Tachir Sabirov
Décor: David Iliabaev
Music: Ziodullo Shakhidi
Leading Players: Zokir Dusmatov, Khabibullo Abdurazzakov, Ato Mukhamedjanov, Zulfia Assanova

In Bukhara, before the revolution, a young man who arrives at the city is attacked and robbed of the little money he has. The young man has to fight the rich merchants wearing poor clothes to find his fiancée. The gang leader of the thieves agrees to help him find his fiancée and they kill the moneylender.

TURKMENISTAN

Ogul / Syn / The Son
1988, colour
Director: Halmammet Kakabayev
Production: Turkmenfilm
Cinematographers: Sergei Shugarov and Alexander Udashev
Screenwriters: Sergei Bodrov and Halmammet Kakabayev
Set: Salim Amangeldiev
Music: Aman Agadikov
Leading Players: Salih Bairmarov, Bekmurad Kutlimuradov, Tamara Shakirova

After the departure of his musician father for the front, Batyr stays behind in a village that is populated mostly by women. Although he is not willing to learn to play the dutar (a traditional cord instrument) in the beginning, he changes his attitude after the death of his father and decides to become a great dutar player.
UZBEKISTAN

Askar Ertagi/Soldatskaja Skazka/A Soldier’s Story
1989, 60 mins, colour
Director: Zulfikar Mussakov
Production: Uzbekfilm, Cooperative EKVIS and Superior Directing Classess
Cinematographer: Talgat Mansurov
Screenwriters: Zulfikar Mussakov and Nikolai Gueiko
Leading Players: Nikolai Gueiko, Aleksandr Zavialov, Pavel Egorov, Abduljamil Mamedov, Bekzad Mukhamedkarimov, Elena Lopatko

Life in the barracks has its ups and downs when young men from different corners of the Soviet Union are gathered under the same roof. Conflict arises not because of hate or enmity but rather boredom and ignorance in an atmosphere that is conducive to tension.

Ayollar Saltanati/Shenskoje Zarstvo/Women’s Paradise
2002, 75 mins, colour
Director: Yusuf Razikov
Production: State Joint Stock Company and Uzbekfilm
Cinematographer: Chotam Fayziev
Screenwriters: Yusuf Razikov and Mahmud Tucev
Editor: Olga Morova
Music: Dzamsid Izamov
Leading Players: Bachtiar Zakirov, Mokhira Nurmetova, Fatihh Jalolov, Nigora Rachimova, Zakir Ismailov

A middle-aged writer, Olim, is having a mid-life crisis as well as a writer’s block. While his wife is trying to give birth, he is visiting his lover. He escapes through the window not to be caught at his mistress’ house by his pregnant wife, and spends the night on the window ledge as the baby is born to the sound of high (western) opera. At his deathbed, his best friend hands down his beautiful wife (according to custom) to him and divulges the secret of the magical root, part of which is a woman. Obsessed by the thoughts of this root, Olim begins his holy quest, encountering various male comic buffoons and beautiful women on the way, his journey culminating in a women’s market, a paradise on earth.

Dilxiro/Men’s Dance
2002, 77 mins, colour
Director: Yusuf Razikov
Production: Uzbekfilm
Leading Players: Tuti Yusupova, Zikir Mukhammedzhanov, Seving Muminova

With the titled dance serving as a sign of the communal joy taken in the cyclic events of social life, director Razikov creates an observational narrative that follows a young man’s entry into the adult world of Islamic Uzbekistan. The boy endures physical pain as his bride-to-be undergoes her own rite of passage. The complications that impede the marriage of this young couple not only suggest the actual conflicts that abound in the culture, but give the work a spiritual and philosophical dimension.
Genosse Boykendschajew / Comrade Boykenjayev
2002, 78 mins, colour
Director: Yusuf Razikov
Producers: Murad Mukhammad Dost and Yusuf Razikov
Production: Uzbekkino/Uzbekfilm Studios
Screenwriters: Yusuf Razikov and Abdulkhalik Abdurrazakov (from a novel by Abdulkhalik Abdurrazakov)
Cinematographer: Khotam Fayziyev and Bobur Ismailov
Editor: Olga Morova
Sound/Music: Djamshid Izamov
Leading Players: Farkhad Abdullayev, Matluba Alimov

During the last years of the Soviet Union, the humble Party servant Boykenjayev is entrusted with the task of setting up a graveyard for the mortal remains of Uzbek people, regardless of their ethnic or religious background. But Boykenjayev’s mission is thwarted by ethnic conflicts, religious quarrels and mafia manipulations. The film satirizes the Soviet regime before its demise at the same time evoking a sense of nostalgia. ‘After all, why did we make a revolution?’ is the last sentence spoken by the high-ranking official.

Osmondagi Bolabar / Malchiки V Nebe / Boys in the Sky
2002, 86 mins, colour
Director Zulfikar Mussakov
Producer: Yusuf Razikov
Production: Uzbekfilm
Cinematographer: Abduralhim Ismailov
Screenwriters: Zulfikar Mussakov and Risivoy Muhammadonov
Leading Players: Timur Mussakov, Muzaffar Sagdullev, Davron Gulyamov, Aziz Sultanov, Kristina Taipova, Malika Alimova

A gentle comedy about four boys growing up in Tashkent (modelled after Fellini’s Amarcord), the film combines a series of loosely connected episodes to convey the pains and pleasures of adolescence. Some of the scenes, such as the Michael Jackson homage or watching a pirated copy of Emmanuelle, are hilarious.

Voiz / Orator
1998, 83 mins, colour with black & white inserts
Director and Screenwriter: Yusuf Razikov
Production: Uzbekfilm Studio
Cinematographers: Ulugbek Khamrayev and Daniar Abdurakhmanov
Editor: Olga Morova
Music: Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky and Nariman Chadiev
Leading Players: Bakhodir Adilov, Asal Alikhodzhayeva, Javokhir Zakirov, Lola Altoyeva, N. Rakhmonova, Sh. Khamrakulova

Awards
Grand prix of Kinoshok-99; Moscow Film Festival, 2000
In 1915, just before the Bolshevik revolution, Iskander, a cart driver in his forties, lives happily with his three wives, one he married by choice and two that he inherited after the death of his brother. The arrangement is permitted under the Islamic law of sharia, but not tolerated by the Bolsheviks. He provides refuge to a wounded revolutionary fighter and, after the revolution, receives the honorary title of ‘national cadre’. His life becomes complicated when his oratory skills attract the love interest of a revolutionary activist. He ends up marrying her as well, but she gives birth to their son in jail (arrested for the distortion of the policies of the Communist party) and dies. Iskender does not claim his son; the boy is brought up by the three wives. The story is told by his grandson.
Selected Bibliography

General Works


**IRAN**


TURKEY


**CENTRAL ASIA**


An original collection of recent interviews with filmmakers whose works represent the trends in the film industries of their respective countries. In addition to creative concerns, the focal point of the interviews is to position the filmmaker within the social or political context of their respective country. The striking variety in approaches towards each interview creates a rich diversity of tone within the text. Cinemas of the Other offers a carefully researched and detailed first-hand account of the developments and trends in specific regional film industries.

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