

“The Mirror of Samira Makhmalbaf – or the magic of capturing and transforming life through film”

Workshop with Iranian film director Samira Makhmalbaf
6. November 2008 at Arsenal Cinema, Tuebingen, Germany

Irene Jung A warm welcome to the workshop with Samira Makhmalbaf at TERRE DES FEMMES “Women’s Worlds” Film Festival 2008.

Samira Makhmalbaf I’m Samira Makhmalbaf and I’m here as a person who is continuously learning through experience about cinema.

Workshop Participants present themselves. They are documentary and fiction film students, students of media studies, media designers, documentary film-makers, film producers and women's rights activists

Irene Jung What does this first-time workshop mean for us and our film festival? Many interesting film-makers visited us, we had fascinating conversations and learned a lot en route. They also repeatedly emphasized the importance of professional exchange not only with other guest filmmakers, but also with us on thematic issues. Therefore we always considered the idea of a workshop to pass on the unique experiences among the guest directors.

This workshop is meant to offer the opportunity for an inspiring exchange among filmmakers and to deepen and anchor the topic of Human Rights for Women in the production of films. Films are a very special medium to reach out to people and to motivate them to take solidary action.

For that purpose, during our film festival and in collaboration with affiliated film festivals, we have organized in the past discussion round tables with film-makers. We have also published the book „Human Rights of Women in the Mirror of Film“, as a feedback for the visiting film-makers and to pass on the prolific experiences that were discussed over the years.

Today it is a special joy and honor for us to inaugurate our first workshop with Samira Makhmalbaf, whose film „The Apple“ was screened at our very first film festival. We have consistently shown her movies and those of her family members, while always tracking her progress. Her father and mother were also our guests three years ago.

We’ve invited to this workshop - alongside film-makers and women's rights activists - film students and students from other disciplines in order to promote the dissemination of experience. Today we will not only discuss Human Rights issues in the production of films, but also consider questions like: How do we learn filmmaking and what kind of alternative methods can be followed? And this is where I would like to begin, before engaging with Samira’s first film work.

The Makhmalbaf Film School

Irene Jung Samira Makhmalbaf was the trigger for the Makhmalbaf Film School, since revealing at the age of 15 that she did not want to study at school anymore, but to become a film-maker. Consequently, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, her father, established the Makhmalbaf Film School for a period of five years.

Thus, my first question to Samira: What did you learn at the Makhmalbaf Film School and what do you think makes this way of learning so special and great? Also, how did it influence your art of film-making and ultimately lead to your successes?

Samira Makhmalbaf I left high school shortly before graduating. I was quite advanced in my school career. I was a good student and earnestly interested in the subject matter. But the day came when I realized that school was providing me with very little while I was missing much of the real life out there.

Since my childhood I always liked to be involved in the film-making within my family. This was natural and a matter of course, as my father and his film-making has been part of my first memories.

At school I had the impression that you had to learn a lot by heart and that there was no space for questions and curiosity. My teachers gave me the impression that they already knew everything and saw no space for questions. With my father however, I felt that he probably knew a lot more than my teachers, but that he was always in search of novelty, had always questions about unknown phenomena.

At school I also had the impression that one was deprived of one's self-confidence. Moreover, a subtle differentiation between boys and girls existed: what the ones were allowed to do and the others were not... For me as a girl this was evident.

I left school as I strongly believe that male or female film-makers cannot exist without self confidence and the readiness to question things.

I then asked my father: „Now that I left school, please tell me in one sentence what I should do?“. My father laughed: „One sentence is just not enough“. We engaged in a long conversation and at the end he came up with the idea to establish a film school. The Iranian authorities however refused him the necessary license. Hence we started classes in this small scale school privately. The students were my brother, my sister and I, some interested relatives, friends and acquaintances.

The courses combined theory and practice. I believe that my father tried foremost to help us perceive excellent artistic works with an open mind, grasping and understanding them. He familiarized us with different currents of European painting. However, we also had other teachers. They were friends of my father, writers, photographers and painters, whose children also attended the courses.

We studied the basics of painting and also of short story-telling and novels. There was an immediate bond between theory and practical activity. We did not hesitate to jump right into practical work. As soon as we had grasped some things theoretically,

we went on putting them into practice. That's why we shot stills, conceptualized blue prints and immediately shot movies with the digital camera.

As a teenager, one is bold and wants to make new experiences without inhibitions. That's what we did. Nobody limited us in our urge to discover new things, on the contrary.

My dad always told us a Persian proverb which refers to the „thirst“ for knowledge: „Don't wait too long for the manifold possibilities that could satisfy your thirst, but learn to stay thirsty, only then you will encounter abundant possibilities and opportunities. But first learn to be thirsty!“

We, the students, suggested other parts of our curriculum, such as philosophy, sociology, psychology and gnostic courses. Because one part of film-making is to master the technical means of cinema; but the other part is based on the stories we want to tell, i.e. our view about the issues that we want to communicate through this medium.

My father insisted on some subjects that did not immediately become apparent to us. Sports, for instance. We could choose between swimming and bike riding. In every sport course we had to fulfill a certain pensum, like riding a certain amount of kilometers on a bike. On the other hand, he also offered a cooking course. He said: „These are all areas which are important for daily life and each film-maker has to acquire the basic skills in these areas“.

These courses were also meant to strengthen our self-confidence.

With respect to sports he emphasized that for some film work good physical condition is necessary. Maybe I have an idea in my mind, but I am not physically prepared to put it into practice. So getting exercise can help.

All of this we learned at school. In addition, from early childhood on I was immersed in the medium of film. I was very lucky.

The most conspicuous thing with regard to my father was the high esteem he showed for the ordinary, normal people. He always tried to value them, to do justice to them and their role in society. This impressed me a lot.

The first person for my father to share his observations with and discuss ideas arising from them was my mother. This always happened in the evening. Thus I could follow the process of how something happened in reality, my father talked about it and slowly a screenplay emerged out of these conversations.

What is for me the best way to learn film-making? Take a digital camera and get started, instead of getting concerned first and foremost with film theory.

Irene Jung Samira, I really enjoyed your detailed description of how you learned film-making.

Workshop Participant The portrayal of the school impresses me a lot. I wished that our film school would be somewhat similar to the Makhmalbaf Filmschool.

Workshop Participant We are not offered cooking classes, nor sport, nor philosophy courses. Everybody talks about cinema, everything centers on cinema. It is somehow one sided and a pity sometimes. I would like to know whether this school still exists, or whether there is a movie about this period.

Samira Makhmalbaf The school does not exist anymore, neither is there a movie on how this school operated. Nevertheless, the backstage movies show our different approaches to film-making. Since we ourselves are graduates of this school, we have practically shown in these "Making of" the way we have learned to work. And afterwards, every one of us gained experience on its own.

Workshop Participant I have seen one of these „Making Of“ and was very impressed with how much physical engagement is required in this film work. And I asked myself, how long could you endure this? I think three days is the maximum, afterward one certainly reaches the end of its bodily strength. So I would like to know how long you manage to bear this?

Samira Makhmalbaf The duration of the shooting varies, sometimes up to forty days. Concerning the physical energy: No, I'm not that strong, although I accomplished the sports course. But if a cause is very important to me and I want to do it justice, I forget the boundaries of my body. Later on maybe I ask myself how did I manage to do this? I believe, every human being sometimes develops unexpected energies to perform extraordinary work and asks himself afterwards: How on earth did you manage to do this?

The Apple

Irene Jung Now let's move on to the next round: the discussion on „The Apple“. As Samira already indicated, there was a narrow relationship between theory and practice prevailing in the school. She directed „The Apple“ at the age of 17, two years after she started her studies at Makhmalbaf Filmschool. The movie was part of her training.

Several movies were shot during these five years and all graduates rotated concerning the tasks they assumed: They worked as director, assistant director, sound technician and different other assignments. This was all part of the apprenticeship. I would like to briefly summarize the movie „The Apple“: It deals with an actual case of human rights violation on two twin girls by their father, who managed to lock them up at home for eleven years, while depicting the astonishing resolution of the situation. Samira performed a fictional mis-en-scene of this story by involving the real people as actors. I would like to ask some questions beforehand and then you are all invited to ask further.

The first question is how and why did you choose this story? Then: Why did you choose to have this story re-enacted in form of a fiction and did not make a

documentary? Since this is a feature movie, why did you choose to use real the life protagonists instead of actors? How did you succeed in convincing these people to participate? The parents of the twins felt already a strong sense of discrimination from the neighbors and the media. And now this story would be made accessible to a much bigger public...

Samira Makhmalbaf I heard about the story through a television report and at first considered it awful and asked myself: How is it possible for parents that love their children to lock them up for such a long time? This really touched me in a way, that I could not go to sleep at night.

I imagined how it would be to have been born in this particular family instead in my own, how it would be to have experienced the same situation and to have lived in a marginal social surrounding. These thoughts captured me. I had learned not to be afraid of the dark – also in a metaphorical way, and that it is precisely there that one is supposed to have a closer look, in search of an illuminated string, which elucidates new matters that one was unconscious of before.

More and more I'm led to believe that before making a movie about a person, you have to deeply put yourself in somebody's position and try to find out what is happening within the person. Then, and only then I can eventually start to make a movie.

Going back to the courses offered at our school: In one of our sociology classes I had read in a book by Gillens about two cases in human history, in which a person had been completely cut off from other humans and from all social relationships. Well, you cannot turn a person in a society into a guinea pig to see what happens if you isolate him from all human beings. That's why we are not very familiar with these cases.

For me it would have been unimaginable to theoretically discuss the tangible case of the two girls, i.e. what happens if you isolate people for such a long period of time, what would be possible intentions of parents that intuitively love their children, but nevertheless become their jailer. It was clear for me that I would have to get involved with the real occurrences.

My first thought was: „Samira, if you're getting involved in this case, then without any prejudice“. It would have been too easy to demonize the parents, to see in them the culprits and the sinful, like so many other perhaps did. Nevertheless, I wanted to fathom without any prejudice what had happened there.

That could have been a risky undertaking. For example to shoot scenes with two girls that were not even able to speak properly. And a father that had locked up his own children: How would he receive me, would he be ready at all to welcome me? The father was a lot more accessible than I thought, certainly because I was ready to listen to him. Prior to me, he was probably confronted with people who demonized, condemned and confronted him with reproaches. And as I listened to him, it was he himself that took the initiative. He invited me at home, told me about his life, how he

thinks, showed me his notebook. This way, I did not have to act a lot, it was he who opened up.

I was not sure if the children saw a living human being in me. They had an indifferent look at me and I did not know: Do they look at me or do they look through me as through glass?

I asked myself: „Samira, what are you going to do with both girls?“. I decided to work on a nonverbal level, since the verbal was not helping me so far. A cat knows, whether she feels secure with you or not. If you pet the cat, she will understand.

I had to shoot the film within a very short period of time, within eleven days. It had to be this way, since the girls were progressing fast, communicating and building a relationship with our filmteam. They had no organic defects in their brains.

Why not a documentary but a feature movie? I believe that a movie may not only reflect the reality, it may also change reality.

My main idea in this movie was: The father has to be put in the same situation as the children, i.e. to be locked up, in order to make the same immediate experience as the children. And the children were supposed to develop themselves freely through communication with other people in order to cut their own path.

There were no definite dialogues in the script for the acting persons just to repeat. After every shooting day I planned the film work of the next day together with my father, based on our observations and experiences – also the dialogues. So far my recount.

Workshop Participant How much time was there in between the public announcement of the case and the beginning of the shooting?

Samira Makhmalbaf Three days. This was possible at such a short notice because my father had the permission to shoot another film, so I could resort to that.

If we had been used to film with digital cameras back then, we could have started the shooting a lot sooner, regardless of the permission, but at that time we were not so far yet and I did not dare to shoot digitally. In the interim, my sister Hana shot „Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame“ with a digital camera and this is not conspicuous at all, particularly because the content of the movie stands in the foreground.

Also, the first sequences of „The Apple“ were shot digitally, the material was then transferred to 35 mm.

Workshop Participant I would like to ask if Samira heard about the two horrible cases in Austria during the last three or four years, where girls were held for years as prisoners in dungeons, in one case even for 18 years? And the second question: I imagine that here you would not be able to get permission to shoot three days after the public emersion of such a case; authorities and psychologists would intervene to prohibit any filming. And this is what I would like to ask Samira, how was it back

then in 1997 in Iran, were there any authorities that intervened and what about today?

Irene Jung Which authorities?

Workshop Participant At first you have the parents of the girls who have been arrested and you are not supposed to film with arrested persons and then you have the girls who immediately are being monitored psychologically. Psychologists would not permit this at all.

Samira Makhmalbaf The Iranian social welfare office had already been involved in this case and we had to accommodate and take care of the children.

Usually, if you plan to shoot footage for a movie in Iran, you have to turn in the script to the censorship authorities. They have to approve it and issue a shooting permission. The movie materials have to go through the same process. But, as I said, it was not the case with this film.

Perhaps they did not properly understand the circumstances and thought that I was making some sort of a reportage. Or perhaps everything evolved so fast, that they were not able to intervene. It is also possible that they were not really interested in the issue or did not think that it was socially relevant. In the end we succeeded in making the film.

But the social welfare office collaborated with us through the social worker. We were united in the same concerns.

Concerning both cases that you talked about: Was there any effort to scrutinize the issue and identify on a deeper level the reasons behind the events?

Workshop Participant The girls were immediately taken charge of psychologically and totally isolated from the public. Nobody was able to trespass that line.

Therefore: were you scared of the situation, how the girls would be affected just three days after they saw the light of day for the first time? Well, I would be very afraid to behave in an inappropriate manner towards them by having them act in a movie right away, since I have never been confronted with such a situation before.

Samira Makhmalbaf Well, there were social workers and psychologists on scene who made sure that no damage was caused. And concerning fear: You are afraid, if you have not established a relationship to the persons. Once you have made that step and reach a more intimate level, then the fear disappears.

I believe that this movie has immensely accelerated the process of social integration. There were many people around them who dealt with them, talked to them and were helpful in many ways. That stimulated the girls.

Irene Jung I thought that the youth welfare office did not agree to take responsibility for the girls. They emphasized the fact that they were indeed not disabled and possessed normal developmental prospects. That's correct, right?

Samira Makhmalbaf Yes, that's right. And it was not possible for the children to remain with the parents, because it was diagnosed that they would go on acting the same way as before.

Workshop Participant Why were the parents not incarcerated?

Samira Makhmalbaf Do you think that the incarceration would have had a positive impact?

Workshop Participant No, but that probably would have happened in Germany.

Samira Makhmalbaf There was indeed an effort to penalize them legally, but we intervened and convinced the authorities not to imprison them.

Workshop Participant Who is we?

Samira Makhmalbaf My father, me and also my relatives.

Workshop Participant I believe there is an important difference at stake: The case that Samira dealt with, was not in any way connected to sexual violence. The cases in Austria were different: A father abused his little daughter. Society reacts in a different way to this situation. Also for the girls, it has other social implications. Therefore, I find it difficult to compare these cases.

Workshop Participant I would like to know: mother and father act out in a different way in their respective roles. What was it like to work with the mother? Was it very different? Was she supposed to be more involved and then it did not work out?

Samira Makhmalbaf Indeed, the father played a more active role and in the real events he was also the more active person, incarcerating the children, closing the lock etc.. The mother on the other hand was in a comparable situation to that of the children. The house as a prison was not sufficiently safe for her. Additionally, she hid herself behind the veil, the chador, because – although she was blind – she was in dire need of a second prison wall in order to feel safe. She also tried to secure the children behind the chador.

The role of the mother in the movie, as well as her actual role in life stands as a symbol for the future that awaited these children, if there had been no intervention. Since they grew up that way, they were going to accept this role voluntarily and would have felt fine. But when they were able to leave the house, they did this in a very natural way – as a matter of fact without any fear, whereas the mother was the one to have problems with that.

It is painful for me if you accept your own prison, come to terms with it and say: „That's the way it should be“.

The final scene is very symbolic: The mother leaves the house as the boy is playing with the apple. At first she feels harassed, but then reaches out to the apple and this symbolizes the beginning of life. As is the case with Adam and Eve: They reach out

to the apple on the tree of knowledge, which was the initiation of life. You have to commit a sin in order to start life or life is a sin...

The start can also be the starting point of an affectionate – or however defined – relationship to another human being. Then that's life.

Workshop Participant For me, the most fascinating feature of this film is its ability to effectively bring about change. I was fascinated by its artistic statement, the arising poetry and the power of the pictures that is only to be found in a handful of films. Well, and some people could think that it might be harmful to the involved persons and that's the topic that we are talking about today.

But I'm utterly convinced that the eye of the cameraman or camerawoman define the situation, whether it's hurtful or not. Samira's vision is full of understanding and love, and that cannot be hurtful. That's what furnishes the pictures with an unbelievably fascinating power.

I believe it is very important to underline what our colleague just said, i.e. to be careful with comparisons. In our European film world we hardly achieve this immense naturalness, modesty, but also terrific statement. And we would never be allowed to create anything similar, related to rape or abuse. It would only be possible to produce it as a fictional movie with alien actors and moreover, we would have to alienate the story. There I see the importance of Samira's contribution. You deserve my utmost and highest esteem for this!

Samira Makhmalbaf Thank you

Workshop Participant I would also like to express my highest esteem for this movie. Since I'm in the same profession as Samira, I tend to automatically compare my work to that of other film-makers. And then, I ask myself: Would we be able to do then same thing?

I would like to tell Samira some of my experiences with authorities in Germany. I filmed a 17 year old Pakistani girl who lives here in Germany. As she had a boyfriend she fled from her Pakistani family, which intended to send her back to Pakistan in order to murder her or marry her to a considerably elder man, since she was accused of having "injured the family honor".

She wanted to participate in my film and had given her consent. We used to live together for a considerable time in an apartment in Berlin, thus we had an immense bond of trust. She was under the protection of the German youth welfare office and this office did not release a filming permission because she was still a minor, according to German law. We fought hard with the youth welfare office and when her custodian fell ill, his substitute allowed only one day of shooting, during which she told her whole life in front of the camera. I'm recounting so you can make yourself a picture about our situation as film-makers in Germany, who deal with human rights topics. Thus, my high esteem for you is mixed with regret: that we are not able to shoot these kind of films in Germany.

Samira Makhmalbaf After seeing the making-of "Two Legged Horse", I believe that you will see things in a different light. Other questions will certainly come up.

Irene Jung We are already diving into the topic of the responsibility for the protagonists of a film. We have repeatedly discussed this issue with other guest directors at our film festival. I believe there are three kinds of responsibility toward one's protagonists or actors.

On the one hand, to what extent one shows consideration for their feelings during the shootings. This is especially crucial when it is their own story that is being depicted.

On the other hand, and particularly with respect to Samira's work, film making may represent a danger for the protagonists. This was the case with „At five in the afternoon“: it was extremely difficult to find actors or real-life-protagonists. There was a tremendous fear in Afghanistan after the downfall of the Taliban, who were still able to impose pressure upon actors, making them fear for their own life. And then there was a bomb explosion during the shootings for Samira's recent film, which aggravates the responsibility towards the actors.

And then, there is a third form of responsibility. That is, after I have finished the movie: Do I leave the protagonists to their own resources or do I continue to stay related to them? Film director Elke Jonigkeit expressed once at our festival, that year after year she was making her documentaries and she felt like she was taking and taking away from life. Until she told herself: Well, I have to give something in return. As a consequence, she developed a project in Afghanistan together with the women about whom she had made her films.

Now, regarding „The Apple“, I would like to ask: What was your responsibility there? For we have seen that you intervened. You tried to change the father's perception and comprehension. You also tried to facilitate social contacts for the children. Thus, you engaged in reality. After the shooting you stayed in contact with them. What kind of responsibility did you feel and did you take over?

Samira Makhmalbaf Before a movie is able to bring about change on people that are just spectators and have not been related to it's production, the movie must first bring about a change in the lives of the protagonists. Only then one can expect for it to possibly bring about additional transformations.

At first, we change and ameliorate the real life circumstances of the people, whose life we are depicting. This depends on their situation and on our possibilities. For this purpose we use a part of the budget we have for the movie.

For example, after the shooting of „The Apple“ we built a house for the family on their plot of land. A two story building.

We also had to be creative regarding the everyday living costs of the family. For instance to provide a starting capital for the family to build on and later be able to afford sending the children to school. In this case we stayed in contact with the social workers. We collaborated with them, because they had to find another family,

as the girls could not stay with the parents. Then we had to take into consideration what kind of school was appropriate for them. Thus, we accompanied the girls over a long period of time.

Very important is hereby: I do not make any promises before the start of a new project. To return to the example of the house: we did not built it for them until after the shooting. If you make promises beforehand to attract people, then this calls for an unhealthy relationship. This would not correspond to my intention and it would mean that you render a service and expect another service in return. It should be an enterprise important for both sides, even without return services. It is **after** the shooting of the film that I try to fulfill my responsibility.

For example, the girl of „At five in the afternoon“ urged me to make a promise before the shooting. I categorically rejected everything. I said: No, that’s not going to work. This would have complicated our work. There must be another basis for cooperation. Amazingly enough, although I had rejected her desire, she was ready to collaborate.

But I’m convinced of the fact that after the shooting of the movie you have to do much more for them than they had expected in the first place, and I do that. Because it is also their film, it’s their life and I’m making a film about it, so they can claim it as theirs. But the starting point is: no promises or conditions.

Workshop Participant I have another question: As far as I know, you work preferably with non-professional actors. Perhaps the difference is that when you work with actors, you have a professional relationship, while working with non-professionals you remain on a more personal level. Could you imagine working with professional actors in the future or are you not interested in them at all?

Samira Makhmalbaf It is possible for me to work with professional actors in the future, although I do not want to conceal the fact that I rather prefer to work with non-professional actors. They have both feet on the ground, it is their life and that’s the reason why I prefer to work with them. Nonetheless, I do not exclude the possibility to work with professionals in the future.

By the way, the woman in „The Blackboard“ is a professional theater actress and one of the teacher is played by Iranian director Bahman Gobadi.

We had another professional actor in another role. He is to be seen in „How Samira made the Blackboard“. However, during the shooting we had to terminate the cooperation with him because on the one hand I was not able to harmonize his play and that of the others. And also the professional actor was not able to play on a level with the other actors.

Irene Jung This was already a good transition to „Samira and Non- Professional Actors“. Many of these questions appear there. So let’s stop for a moment at this point, see the movie and continue our discussion afterward.

Samira and Non-Professional Actors

Workshop Participant I'm very impressed with Samira's physical appearance during the shootings. I'm fascinated by the way she involves with her spirit, her own being in the work. My highest esteem and compliments!

Workshop Participant I was also very much impressed by her physical and bodily appearance. And as a spectator, you feel that painful boundaries have been transgressed.

Irene Jung I would also like to express my observations and impressions. As I saw Samira in this film, the most interesting feature was her way of explaining the context of the story to the non-professional actors. She said: „You have be more a horse than a horse itself. Otherwise you will be sold“. Samira tried this way to place them in those imaginary worlds. The next step was to pragmatically demonstrate the way she had imagined. So she took the boy on her shoulders and started running in order for them to learn through imitation. Most fascinating though, was the way you acted as a mirror: While the boys were acting, you expressed the corresponding feeling. First I thought that you produce an emotion and then express it, but you told me that it is different: It is not a one sided undertaking, but two-sided. Could you please describe that in detail?

Samira Makhmalbaf In the ideal case, I or the one who writes the script are touched and influenced by the life of others. I internalize it and then I give it a form. Further, I express it, practically reminding the amateur actors of themselves.

Workshop Participant How much of the movie is already being shaped during the casting?

Samira Makhmalbaf A large part. The selection of the protagonists was of great importance for this particular movie. It is important that the mind, the inner being of the protagonist is consistent with the script, although the script was based on reality. Thus is it crucial to find and select such an actor.

Sometimes it is possible that certain qualities of the chosen person complement and broaden some of the aspects that I had in mind for them, while they make others of my ideas disappear.

Concerning the real life of the protagonists, they are human beings whose daily lives could be described as a painful outcry.

All of this happens in a time of globalization where we believe that people are thoroughly informed through the media on what's going on in the world. Nevertheless, there are areas where we are not able to hear the painful outcry, where there are no windows through which one can have a look at these people and perceive their lives.

If one is to choose this particular protagonist, he/she does not necessarily have to have experienced everything he/she is supposed to embody in the movie. Moreover,

it has to be a person who mirrors everything in its face, in its gestures, who transmits all of that in front of the camera.

There are different aspects that determine the magic of a movie. The non-professional actors not only must have experienced these circumstances in real life, they also have to be persons that are, like the professional ones, in love with cinema. You find these characteristics in ordinary people who have an affinity and willingness to tell stories to other people that they themselves may have experienced. All of this has to be bundled up in order to achieve this sort of magic.

Another important feature is the responsibility of the director toward the actors and that there is a mutual trust for a common undertaking.

If all of this is present, then there is not only a human relationship between director and protagonist, but also a relationship full of love.

Workshop Participant This is obvious!

Samira Makhmalbaf I'm happy that this is to be perceived in the film.

I believe that this movie could not have been made, if we had not put a lot of effort in precisely selecting the protagonists.

I did not select the boy who played „the horse“ in the movie because perhaps his face was deformed. That was not the criterion. Merely I wanted to know for sure that there was a spirit in that human being, who was able to walk the path of „becoming a horse“ until the very end.

Workshop Participant With respect to the story of „Two Legged Horse“. First I am very impressed with your kindness. In the course of the whole movie you see the commitment and the kindness you show towards other people. Also, I was impressed by your physical endurance. And I wanted to ask: you spoke the Afghani dialect as if you were an Afghani. How long did you stay in Afghanistan for the movies and with your family? And second: perhaps the movies with Iranian or Afghani non-professional actors succeed best, because they possess a natural disposition for acting?

Samira Makhmalbaf Well, concerning my kindness, it is rather your own kindness that allows you to see things this way. For it would also have been possible only to see the violence within the movie. It depends on the perspective of the spectator whether one sees the superficial violence or whether one has the empathy to look behind the story and grasp the essential substance.

Regarding my contacts with the Afghani in Afghanistan: There were many Afghani refugees in Iran and I was confronted with them from my early childhood on. I got to know many of them as my father shot „Bicycle Rider“. As he shot „Kandahar“ I made stills of the Afghani around the set. Thus, I have had contact with Afghani people from very early on.

Concerning the special disposition of the Iranian or Afghani people for acting: I would not confine it to geographical borders. You detect this everywhere with human beings: If they are given the opportunity, then they may show their talents. Perhaps you could say that this is especially the case among people who live under difficult circumstances.

Workshop Participant How long does it take for you to find such an actor or actress?

Samira Makhmalbaf It depends. Sometimes it happens fast, sometimes it takes longer. Fast means maybe a week. Sometimes it can take up to two, three months. For this movie I would have waited even one year. As the selection of these actors was very important.

Workshop Participant So you stay the whole time on the location or in the region?

Samira Makhmalbaf Yes, of course. That's the way it should be. The time that is needed to select the protagonists is important also to get familiarized with the living conditions. This leads to a better understanding of the entire situation and its implementation in the film. This is terrific.

We always rent a house where we live together in a similar situation as the other people. This way we are able to develop a „backstage“ life, where we approach one another, understand the others and have closer contacts. The more and the better this gets, the better you can implement it in front of the camera.

Workshop Participant For me it is part of this magic that you don't create divisions, but rather unite. It is a sort of real life cinema. Real life and film amalgamate in one. This is an extraordinary artistic act, this is where magic starts. It is not so much the movie itself, rather what's happening. A movie could not be that magical, if it was not interwoven with this life.

I have to add something with respect to violence. Although it touches your stomach and heart, most impressively, it does not expose anything. It does not make fun of or insult anybody. Maybe it is because you utterly give your whole being and become part of the occurrence.

Workshop Participant You perceive intensely how much effort is put in working with people. It shows that the most important issue is that people change during the shooting of the movie. What would you say, what changed in this case with both protagonists?

Samira Makhmalbaf Regarding the actor of the horse: He was physically and psychologically deformed due to a bomb explosion and he was supposed to carry a child on his shoulders for the movie. However, he was not able to do so physically. That's why we trained him for 40 days. First, we let him carry two pounds of salt and then augmented the weight. Four pounds and a little more. This work-out program

was supposed to help him play the part in the movie. He became stronger and looked a lot better.

Let me say in one sentence that all actors that have played in my movies have developed for the better during the process of film-making. This was the case with all of them. We also discuss a lot during the shootings. This leads to development, expands their knowledge, their ability to reflect. They developed to a higher stage after the movies. The actors eventually reached a higher level of self-confidence as a result of what they had learned en route.

People grow simultaneously within their social circumstances and relations. During the process of film-making we had many social contacts as we discussed matters together or person-to-person. This enriched the social life of the people considerably. As a result, they embrace their society in a more open way as they develop further.

The greater self-confidence also develops because they realize time and again what they are capable of doing.

This is also a kind of a mirror that you hold in front of the actor. They see a part of their life and this experience leads them to become self-confident of what they go through in life, maybe they finally realize the difficult circumstances they live under.

Irene Jung Over here, we would call this psychotherapy.

Workshop Participant But was this your primary concern? Or did you just want to make a movie and then the circumstances produced these changes in social life?

Samira Makhmalbaf I don't think that you can penetrate this deep into the matter if your only concern is to shoot a movie. One has to experience reality, get influenced and feel it deep inside. And this happened to my father who wrote the script for the movie.

Workshop Participant Your father wrote the script?

Samira Makhmalbaf Yes, this is my father's script.

I utterly oppose the idea of shooting a movie just to show that you're able to do so. Then the idea would be based upon a perception that you already had from the beginning and be imposed on reality.

Irene Jung Also we have to consider that Samira has experienced this from early on through her father. That's exactly what her father does and she has lived through it since she was a baby. It was never the kind of process that ignites suddenly, rather it began when life started.

Workshop Participant I'm interested to know: You had a very intensive experience with violence. What did you learn personally through the making of the film?

Samira Makhmalbaf Since making this movie, I have become more sensitive with respect to my relations with other people. The question is whether you become a horse for another person or whether another person makes you his/her own horse. And that's what I observe thoroughly. I ask myself every time I meet people, in every relationship: Samira, are you becoming the horse of the other person or are you turning the other person into your horse?

This is crucial in a consumer society, where the human being is sometimes seen as a commercial product. After consuming the product, you do not pay attention to it anymore. So in this kind of society it is all the more important to observe closely the relationships that reign there.

It's all the more important regarding the question of violence. We live in a time in which many Hollywood films not only depict bare violence, but they also portray it in a pleasurable manner. The spectator is given a feeling of pleasure. It is all the more important in such a time.

In this film about the relationships between two people, I wanted to follow this path till the very end, i.e. that the relationship between two people: may be, on the one end of a scale one of love and friendship and on the other end besieged with questions of to what extent one is ready to speed up the exploitation to make the other person his/her own horse.

Regarding violence, sometimes I notice the somewhat uncanny way of people making violence a part of their mind, their composure and close their eyes in front of violence. As long as you don't recognize the phenomenon, you cannot change it.

Some people may ask me now: „Samira, you've gone too far, one is not allowed to go this far“. And I say: Why? Why is the camera, our window, only allowed to film to a certain degree and then turn around? We do live under different circumstances in our world. We have hot areas with many degrees above the zero point and ice cold ones under the freezing point. But many say: You have to be moderate. The temperature in you film must always be balanced. I say: Why? There are areas on this world that possess democratic standards. There are other regions, where people live under strong political pressure. We have everything. Why must movies depict a well tempered history? One should be able to show everything.

Workshop Participant What happened to the little girl, the beggar: There was a scene, where she apparently took a wrong decision. That's where you said: „I'm so sorry“, the girl cried...

Samira Makhmalbaf Yes, this girl played excellently in my mother's movie „Stray Dogs“.

After her experience there she was almost a professional actor, but she did not play well in that particular scene. She knew that she was not doing well and it bothered her, because as a professional she was, she should have played in a perfect way. She was ashamed and started crying.

Then I went to her and told her: No, that's my mistake. I did not communicate well enough.

Workshop Participant I have another question about the time before the shooting. How did you manage to communicate the script to the actors? Did you integrate their ideas in the script? Moreover, were these children familiar with the medium film? Did they ever see a movie or a script?

Samira Makhmalbaf Yes, they had watched movies before, but they were mostly Indian movies. The children, the actors knew the general idea of the film, the story, but they were not familiar with every single sequence. I had talked very often to them about the content and the terminology that was used there. But they did not know exactly what sequence would follow. And for each scene they knew their part of the dialogue, but not the one of their counterpart.

As we were living together, there were different moments. There were moments of joy, there were quarrels, competition, for example among both protagonists. All of this I tried to implement in the movie.

All of this might be difficult to understand, because you only watched the making of. First you should have seen the real movie.

Workshop Participant The movie is quite new, when is it going to be released?

Samira Makhmalbaf There was a bomb explosion during the shooting that led us to quit. This movie was then shot in two stages in two years. The movie is finished now in 2008. However, I do not know when it is going to be released in Germany, but it will make it here, I'm sure.

Workshop Participant A last question: Are you interested in opening your own film school?

Samira Makhmalbaf Not at the moment. Perhaps in the future, but not at the moment.