Cinema in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

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Bamyan Buddhas

When the giant Buddhas on the Silk Road at Bamyan were destroyed by radical Taliban clerics in March of 2001 in accordance with a strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia law, even the Afghan populace was stunned by the disrespect for their own cultural heritage. For in July of 1999 the leading Sharia cleric, Mullah Mohammed Omar, had issued an order for the preservation of the Bamyan Buddhas on the grounds that the Afghanistan Buddhist population scarcely existed, thus removing the possibility of the statues being worshipped. But when 400 radical Taliban clerics launched a ban on all forms of imagery - including music, sports, and television - they reached a questionable consensus that the statues were an affront to Islam. So Mullah Mohammed Omar changed his mind. "Muslims should be proud of smashing idols," he said. "It has given praise to God that we have destroyed them." The subsequent dynamiting of the Bamyan Buddhas, erected 1500 years ago in the sixth century as a classic example of Indo-Greek art, prompted an immediate protest the world over. The first filmmaker to raise his voice on film and in print was Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, whose *Safar é Gandehar* (*Kandahar)* was programmed in the Competition at the 2001 Cannes festival.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* (Iran-France, 2001)

Back in 2001, when you clicked the "Makhmalbaf Film House" website for background information on the making of *Kandahar*, you got a download of 53 pages of double-spaced printed documentation on why "The Buddha Was Not Demolished in Afghanistan - It Collapsed Out of Shame." In his treatise Mohsen Makhmalbaf wanted to make sure the viewer didn't miss the point when viewing his fiction-documentary about hunger, starvation, and death in today's Afghanistan. Set in the ancient Afghan city of Kandahar, it was shot in refugee camps scattered along the Iran-Afghan border. Makhmalbaf's lengthy treatise was, and is, equally important as the film itself. Indeed, it makes obligatory reading, simply because it offers a mountain of detailed information related to Kandahar. Thus the fictional story sets the stage for the real life drama, while at the same time evoking sympathy for the plight of Afghan refugees living abroad.

Nafas (Niloufar Pazira), a young Afghan journalist who has taken refuge in Canada during the time of the civil war with the Taliban, receives a desperate letter from her younger sister in Afghanistan, who writes that she has decided to end her life on the day before the coming eclipse of the sun. Dropping everything to hurry back to Kandahar to save her sister, Nafas tries to enter Afghanistan by the way she had previously exited the country - via the Niatak refugee camp at the Iran-Afghan border. It's here that the film really begins.

In his treatise Mohsen Makhmalbaf opens with a warning comment: "If you read this article in full, it will take about an hour of your time. In this one hour, some 14 more people will have died in Afghanistan of war and hunger, and 60 others will have become refugees of Afghanistan in other countries. This article is intended to describe the reasons for this mortality and emigration. If this bitter subject is irrelevant to your sweet life, please avoid reading it."

Why the reference to the destroyed Buddha statue in the title of the treatise? "I reached the conclusion that the statue of Buddha was not demolished by anybody. It fell down out of shame - out of shame for the world's ignorance towards Afghanistan. It broke down knowing its greatness didn't do any good." More than likely, Makhmalbaf's decision to give flesh-and-blood to statistics by introducing the motif of desperation shared by the separated sisters stems from a personal experience. "Since the day I saw a little 12-year-old Afghan girl - the same age as my own daughter Hana - fluttering in my arms of hunger, I've tried to bring forth the tragedy of this hunger. But I've always ended up giving statistics. Why have I become so powerless!"

When Makhmalbaf arrived in Kandahar with a small team, after months of wrangling with the Pakistan authorities (who had represented at that time Afghan's diplomatic interests abroad) to obtain the necessary

visas, even the veteran filmmaker was taken back by the enormity of his task. "I never forget those nights during the filming. While our team searched the deserts with flashlights, we would see dying refugees left in the desert like herds of sheep. When we took those whom we thought were dying of cholera to hospitals in Zabol, we realized they were dying of hunger. Since those days and nights of seeing so many people starving to death, I haven't been able to forgive myself for eating any meals."

As for the imminent dangers of shooting in a country that doesn't tolerate images of any kind, Makhmalbaf could draw upon his own experiences of making another film on an Afghan theme: *Bicycleran* (*The Cyclist*, 1988), shot in Peshawar. "I remember the day I was arrested and handcuffed." And although friends and colleagues warned him to be careful on the Kandahar project, because of threats of kidnapping and terrorism at the borders, "I kept saying my subject was humanitarian and not political."

Even that turned out to be an illusion: "One day, when we were finished filming at the border, I came across a group that have come either to kill or kidnap me. They asked me about Makhmalbaf. I was sporting a long thin beard and wearing Afghan dress. A Massoudi hat with a shawl covering it and half of my face, made me look like an Afghan. I sent them the other way and began to run. I cannot figure whether they had been dispatched by a political group or sent by smugglers to extort money." The film finished, Mohsen Makhmalbaf expressed his doubts on "why I made that film or wrote these notes? I don't know, but 'the heart has reasons that the mind is unaware of,' as Pascal put it." Kandahar was awarded the Ecumenical Prize at Cannes.

Later, a critic at Time magazine voted *Kandahar* among the top 100 films of all time. From an historical viewpoint, Kandahar also had a prophetic ring. Four months after its premiere at Cannes, on 11 September 2001, the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York shocked the world. In turn, that terrorist attack led to a NATO military offensive in the following October and the eventual downfall of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Their unpopular reign of repression had lasted five years, from 1996 to December of 2001. Beginning in 2002, Afghan men were now free to play chess in public, women could go the market without a male escort, boys could fly kites again, and girls were allowed to attend school.

Michael Winterbottom's *In This World* (UK, 2002)

With the words "Towards Tolerance" prominently displayed on the front cover of the 2003 Berlinale catalogue, accompanied by an appropriate essay by festival director Dieter Kosslick on contributing to "a greater understanding between cultures," the impending Iraqi war hung over the heads of the international jury like a Damocles sword. So the jury, headed by Canadian-Armenian director Atom Egoyan, appropriately awarded the Golden Bear to Michael Winterbottom's *In This World* (UK), a fiction-documentary about two young Afghans leaving a refugee camp in Peshawar to embark on an arduous journey along the ancient Silk Road - from Pakistan through Iran and Turkey to Istanbul and eventually London.

That the film was shot with a digital camera (Marcel Zyskind) on actual locations added to the immediacy of the fateful journey, but its sound recording (Stuart Wilson) could send chills up your spine when the boys are confined in a container in the dark hold of a freighter. Programmed on the second day of the festival, *In This World* set the tone for the entire Berlinale as "a statement for peace" that was to rise to a crescendo when a half-million Berliners turned out on the closing day of the festival to march through the Brandenburg Gate in an anti-war demonstration.

The film follows the perilous journey of teenagers Jamal and Enayatulla from the Peshawar refugee camp in Afghanistan on the Silk Road towards Britain, a route for drug and people smugglers. Along the way the pair travel in pick-up trucks, on crowded buses, and in an airless container. Although their odyssey is across landscapes of raw, maimed beauty - Marcel Zyskind's camera shows us debris littered roads at sunrise, sun-scorched deserts and rocks during the day, murky mountain passes at night - the boys scarcely have time to notice, so disorientated yet determined are they in their commitment to get somewhere, anywhere.

Generally recognized as Michael Winterbottom's best film, *In This World* was also awarded the Peace Prize and Ecumenical Prize at the Berlinale. And the film accurately took the pulse of the times. A month later, in March of 2003, the invasion of Iraq by American and Allied Forces began.

Makhmalbaf Film House

The author of 27 books, Mohsen Makhmalbaf is currently the President of the Asian Film Academy. After

his films had encountered countless difficulties with Iranian censors, he decided to leave Tehran to reside and teach abroad, together with his filmmaking family. For a while, he lived in post-Taliban Afghanistan, then he accepted an invitation to teach in Tajikistan. Recently, he has moved his production base to Paris.

Keeping up with the Makhmalbaf film-family tree - father Mohsen Makhmalbaf, mother Merziyeh Meshkini, daughter Samira, son Maysam, and another daughter Hana - has become a must for critics, festival directors, and cineastes deep into Iranian and Afghan cinema. Their regular presence at key international film festivals - Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Locarno, San Sebastian Karlovy Vary, Moscow, Toronto, New York - was jump-started at the 2000 Pusan International Film Festival when a retrospective titled "Salaam Cinema! Films of the Makhmalbaf Family" sparked international interest. In particular, that retro caught the eye of Kiril Masgalov, artistic director of the Moscow festival, who promptly booked it for his own 2001 event. In addition to the dozen films in the Moscow tribute, there was time set aside for an in-depth "conversation" with Mohsen Makhmalbaf on his literary output: novels, short stories, journalist tracts, theses on Islamic art and theatre, and more. But at the last minute the tribute unfortunately hit a snag: according to reports, the Russian government failed to issue the necessary visas in time for the entire Makhmalbaf family.

With some 25 shorts, documentaries, and features to his name, Mohsen Makhmalbaf is recognized in Iran and abroad as an authentic film revolutionary. Born 1957 in Tehran, he was thrown into prison at 17 for five years for resisting the Shah regime. Set free after the Revolution, he published a novel, several short stories, and directed his first film, *Tobeh Nosuh* (*Nosuh's Repentance*, 1982). With the success of his neorealist *Dastforoush* (*The Peddler*,1987) and *Bicycleran* (*The Cyclist*, 1988), the latter about an Afghan refugee in Iran and the forerunner of *Safar é Ghandehar* (*Kandahar*), Makhmalbaf found himself increasingly in conflict with Islamic authorities. His *Nobat e Asheghi* (*Time of Love?*, 1990), programmed in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes, was banned for "deviant religious views" at home.

Thereafter, Mohsen Makhmalbaf became a regular at Cannes: *Salaam Cinema* (1995), *Gabbeh* (1996), "The Door" episode in the portmanteau film *Ghessé hayé kish* (*Kish Tales*, 1999), and *Kandahar* (2001). But he also premiered *Nun va Goldoon* (*A Moment of Innocence*,1996) at Locarno and competed at Venice with *Sokout* (*The Silence*, 1998). In addition, he wrote the scripts for Samira Makhmalbaf's *Sib* (*The Apple*, 1998), the debut feature of his 18-year-old daughter selected for the Un Certain Regard at Cannes, followed by *Takhté siah* (*Blackboards*, 2000), in the Competition and awarded the Prix de Jury. Also, he wrote the script for Merziyeh Meshkini's *Roozi ke zan shodam* (*The Day I Became a Woman*, 2000), his wife's awarded Venice entry. The best illustration on how the family members are interlinked on mutual productions can be found in Maysam Makhmalbaf's *Samira cheghoneh takté siah rol sakht* (*How Samira Made 'Blackboards'*, 2000), a brother's view of why his sister left school to work as an assistant for their father and learn firsthand the art of cinema and the craft of filmmaking. This was only possible because the Makhmalbaf Film House functioned as a film school as well as a clearing house for information on the family's film productions.

Hana Makhmalbaf - the youngest member of the family - joined the circle of filmmakers at Makhmalbaf Film House at the tender age of ten. The story goes that she picked up a video camera as a play-toy and, with the help of her father and brother, shot *Rouzi keh khalam mariz bood* (*The Day My Aunt Was Ill*, 1998) - whereupon this 26-minute short film about "playing with a camera" was invited to Locarno and Pusan. In 2002, the 14-year-old Hana accompanied her sister Samira to Afghanistan to shoot *Lezate divanegi* (*Joy of Madness*, 2003), a chronicle of how Samira had cast nonprofessional actors for *Panj é asr* (*At Five in the Afternoon*, 2003). When the film was invited to the 2003 Venice festival to compete in the Opera Prima section, Hana was nearly forbidden to appear in person at the premiere of *Joy of Madness* because Italian law forbade minors from attending unrated films.

Samira Makhmalbaf's *Panj é asr* (*At Five in the Afternoon*, Iran-France, 2003)

At 18, Samira Makhmalbaf was the youngest director ever to present a feature film in the Official Selection at Cannes. Moreover, her *Sib* (*The Apple*), an Un Certain Regard entry at the 1998 Cannes festival, was not only scripted but edited by her father, Mohsen Makhmalbaf. In *The Apple*, the original point of departure was an ordinary street in a poor district of Tehran. Several families had written to the Social Services Office about a father who had locked up his two young daughters since birth. When a social worker called on the family, the father responded: "My daughters are like flowers - expose them to the sun, and they will wither away!" The moral quest for answers prodded Samira Makhmalbaf to go further: "I wanted to discover who

had forced the parents, despite their love, to lock up their own children. And I wanted to know why some neighbours chose to ignore the affair, and even remain indifferent, for such a long time."

In *Pan é asr* (*At Five in the Afternoon*), Samira Makhmalbaf picks up where her father had left off two years before at Cannes with *Safar é Gandehar* (*Kandahar*). In *At Five in the Afternoon,* photographed by Ebrahim Ghafori, Afghan refugees have crossed the borders from Iran and Pakistan to return to their former homes in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Among these is a young woman, Nogreh (Agheleh Rezaïe), who returns to Kabul accompanied by her father and mother. Sent to a religious school in her blue burqa, Nogreh slips away "at five in the afternoon" to discard her head-covering and don a pair of high-heeled shoes. She wants to hear the music long forbidden by Taliban rules. And she wants to breathe the fresh air of a liberated society. When she meets a poet in the streets, she proclaims her secret desire to become the "president of the country."

Meanwhile, her father, steeped in religious ways and traditions, is horrified at the "blasphemy" he encounters in Kabul - particularly the appearance of unveiled women in the streets. Finally, he can stand no more. Together with his family, which now includes the sick baby of his step-daughter, he flees into the desert. At Five in the Afternoon was awarded the Prix de Jury at Cannes and the Ecumenical Prize.

But the story of the Makhmalbaf Film House doesn't end there. While Iranian cameraman Ebrahim Ghafori was working with Samira Makhmalbaf on *At Five in the Afternoon* in Afghanistan, he was approached by Afghan director Sedigh Barmak, who asked him to shoot *Osama*, the first Afghan feature film made in the country since the war. Both films were invited to the 2003 Cannes film festival, *At Five in the Afternoon* in the Competition and *Osama* in the Directors Fortnight.

Sedigh Barmak's *Osama* (Afghanistan-Japan-Ireland, 2003)

"*Osama* is a bitter and tragic story of our life," said Sedigh Barmak about the first feature film to emerge from Afghanistan since the country's liberation from the Taliban regime. "It was a time when nobody had the right to make their own decision. It's a story about those who had lost their identity under Osama's name. A story about being scared, where people are afraid of even the sounds of the shadows. A story about the permanent and endless story of women in prison. And a story about a little girl and all the injustice and religious nonsense that is being carried on her shoulders."

As for the film's title, it refers to the name given to a 12-year-old girl to hide her female identity in order to find employment to support her family since the death of her father and older brother. For a time, her disguise works - until the religious police force people to attend the noon prayer in the mosques. Since she is not familiar with the prayer formalities, she is sent to the religious school at Madrassa, which is also the Centre for military training under the Taliban. It's there that her true identity is discovered. Taken to a judicial court, the sentence of death by stoning is set aside in her case because an old mullah would like to take her for his fourth wife.

How Sedigh Barmak found his young nonprofessional to play the role of Osama makes for a story as good as the movie itself. One day, on a Kabul street, a young girl in tattered clothes approached him to beg for money. Her eyes caught his attention, and he asked her what made her so sad. Marina Golbahari responded that when she thought about her sisters, who had died during the war, she just started to cry. Then, when Barmak offered her the role, she felt he was just joking. "I just thought he was trying to make me feel better." Screened in the Directors Fortnight at the 2003 Cannes festival, *Osama* received a Special Mention by the Caméra d'Or Jury.

Sedigh Barmak, born 1962 in Afghanistan, studied cinema at the Moscow Film School (VGIK), where he made a number of student films. Graduating in 1987, he returned to Afghanistan and was put in charge of the Afghan Film Studio. His two short films, *The Disaster of Withering* (1988) and *The Hadith of Conquer* (1991), were not only banned when the Taliban took control of Kabul, but hundreds of metres of addition film footage at the studio were also destroyed by radical clerics. Escaping to Pakistan, Sedigh Barmak made the acquaintance of Ebrahim Ghafuri, the cameraman on Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* and Samira Makhmalbaf's *At 5 in the Afternoon,* who agreed to be the cinematographer on Osama. Currently Barmak manages the Afghan Children's Education Movement (ACEM), an agency in Kabul to promote literacy, culture, and art. Mohsen Makhmalbaf has also taught there.

Atiq Rahimi's *Khakestar-o-khak* (*Earth and Ashes*, France and Afghanistan, 2004)
Awarded the "Prix du Regard vers l'Avenir" in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2004 Cannes film festival, Atiq Rahimi's *Khakestar-o-khak* (*Earth and Ashes*) is a French-Afghan coproduction based on the filmmaker's own novella and shot in Afghanistan. Currently, the exiled writer-director lives in Paris. Following its premiere at Cannes, *Earth and Ashes* went on from there to win a number of awards at international film festivals. Atiq Rahimi received Best Director awards at Flanders, Belgium and Bratislava, Slovakia, in addition to the film winning the Ecumenical Prize at Bratislava.

A poetic fable about loss and redemption, endurance and the human spirit, *Earth and Ashes* underscores how humanity can persevere even when confronted with the bitter atrocities of war. Dastaguir, an old man, sits on the side of a road with his mute grandson Yassin at his side. The road seems to lead to nowhere - in the distance are mountains, nearby a partially destroyed bridge over a dried-up river bed. Down the road is a mine that Dastaguir needs to reach, although he dreads the possibility. He has undertaken the journey to find his son, Yassin's father, who works in the mine. And he brings with him a searing message: the old man's village has been bombed and most of their family killed, including the boy's mother.

Torn between grief and a code of honour, Dastaguir encounters strangers on the wayside, each encounter serving as a metaphor on conditions both during and after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Shot in present-day Afghanistan, the film is packed with symbolic references: a grouchy guard at his sentry post. a shell of a tank, a veiled woman mourning the loss of home and husband, a tradesman babbling philosophical nonsense. All, to one degree or another, are beaten-down victims of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, coupled by a destructive civil war that brought the Taliban to power.

This November, Atiq Rahimi was awarded the prestigious Goncourt prize for his new novel, *Syngue Sabour*, Persian for *Stone of Patience*. The story of a woman caring for her invalid husband, who has suffered brain damage from a war-wound, its title again serves as a metaphor: it refers to a Persian folktale about a black stone that absorbs the distress of anyone who embraces it. Given Atiq Rahimi's proven record at Cannes, *Stone of Patience* may well be his next film project.

Christian Frei's *Im Tal der grossen Buddhas* (*The Giant Buddhas*, Switzerland, 2005)
Christian Frei's documentary *Im Tal der grossen Buddhas* (*The Giant Buddhas*, Switzerland), awarded a Silver Dove in the Long Documentary section at the 2005 Leipzig International Festival for Documentaries and Animation, begins with documentary footage (shot for the most part with hidden cameras) of the destruction of the giant Buddhas in Afghanistan, two statues hewn into the face of a cliff in the Bamyan valley more than 1500 years ago. Viewed up close, one is overwhelmed by the size of the larger Buddha - so large in fact that initial attempts by inexperienced Taliban religious fanatics to dynamite the statue failed completely. In the end, they had to be assisted in their act of barbarism by more experienced Saudi and Pakistani engineers. Today, Swiss scientists are exploring ways to reconstruct this World Cultural Heritage.

Even more fascinating is the decision by the director to accompany a Strasbourg professor on his search to find a third Buddha, one said to be buried underground and believed to be 300 metres long in a reclining position. An engrossing and questioning documentary, *The Giant Buddhas* shows the callous approach by the media to the sensational side of the news while overlooking the plight of Islamic peoples, in Afghanistan and around the globe, who lamented this philistine act. Programmed on opening night at Leipzig DOKfestival, *The Giant Buddhas* was a recurring attraction throughout the week - not surprising when one considers that among the contributors to the film's musical score were Philip Glass and Arvo Pärt.

Hana Makhmalbaf's *Buda az sharm foru rikht* (*Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame*, Iran-France, 2007)
Some 1,500 years ago, when the Buddha statues (measuring over thirty metres in height) were carved into the rock at Bamyan, they were the Centre of a cave monastery once inhabited by as many as 3,000 monks. At that time, too, Bamyan was known as the spiritual Centre of Afghanistan. In 2001, when the Taliban clerics dynamited the statues in accordance with Islamic Sharia law, they destroyed a world heritage of immense cultural importance. The film's title refers to film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's reaction when he saw the blown-up Buddha statues: "Even a statue can collapse out of shame when confronted with all the violence and hardship against innocent people." Six years later, Hana Makhmalbaf, Mohsen's younger daughter, returned to the site to make *Buda az sharm foru rikht* (*Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame*, 2007),

awarded the Special Jury Prize at the 2007 San Sebastian film festival and the Peace Prize at the 2008 Berlinale.

In Hana Makhmalbaf's *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* a poor 6-year-old girl named Bakhtay lives with her family in one of the old monastery caves. When told that a girls' school has opened on the other side of the river, she wants to attend so that she can learn to read and write. But since her mother is rather indifferent to the idea, she must find a way to barter eggs for pen and paper. Worse, she has to suffer the humiliation of submitting to brutal prisoner-of-war games played by neighbourhood boys whenever she tries to cross the river. Her plight reflects the reality of an illiterate Afghan society blunted by the scars of war and suppress of the human spirit.

In an interview on the film's moral message, Hana Makhmalbaf spoke in no uncertain terms about how "the children of this country have learnt violence by witnessing some of the harshest ones happening to their relatives in front of their eyes. They have witnessed their fathers being beheaded in their gardens in front of their eyes. The irony is that even those who had come to rescue Afghanistan, first destroyed it, then didn't find time to rebuild it, until the next so-called 'rescue group' came along and went through the same destruction and violence, again and again and again. First, the Russian communists came, then the Taliban showed up, and now the Americans are here. They all had one thing in common - violence."

Marc Forster's *The Kite Runner* (USA, 2007)
Nominated for an Oscar, Marc Forster's *The Kite Runner* is based on a best-seller with the same name by Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini. Shot partially in Afghanistan, it tells the story of an Afghan refugee, a novelist living like Hosseini in the United States, who feels obliged to plumb his memory and relive his childhood experiences with a boyhood friend who shared his joy of flying kites. As literary adaptations go in Hollywood guise, authenticity of the cultural code was sacrificed for the story line. Nevertheless, when Marc Forster (*Monster's Ball*, 2001) cast hundreds of candidates to play the boys in the film, finding none to suit the demands of the roles, he decided in the end to choose two authentic Afghan lads to play the leads in *The Kite Runner*.

Set in the 1970s, before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, *The Kite Runner* is the story of Amir, a well-to-do Pashtun boy, and Hassan, his Hazzara friend, who also happens to be the son of the household servant. The twist in the story comes when Amir witnesses the brutal rape of Hassan by a local tough and does nothing to come to his aid. Indeed, his shame is so great that he finds a way to expel father and son from the house on a trumped-up theft charge. Years later, as a grown man and successful writer, Amir is forced to face his guilty conscience when a family secret is revealed to him by a dying acquaintance. It necessitates a return to Kabul.

The story doesn't end there, however. Efforts on the part of a distributor to release the film in Afghanistan met with protests and a threatened ban. Not only was the rape scene considered morally offensive (although presented impressionistically on the screen), but the tensions between Pashtuns and the Hazzara were also reviewed as a rehash of ancient conflicts between the wealthy and the underprivileged. One should also note that since movie theatres had been destroyed under Taliban rule, the Afghan audience was generally unprepared for adult cinema fare of this nature. The upshot? The boy actors had to be spirited out of the country for their own safety.

15 Afghanistan Documentaries (2006-2008)
One of the festival hits at the 2008 Leipzig International Festival for Documentary and Animation Films was the special program titled "Afghanistan - Innenansichten" (Afghanistan - From Inside), featuring 15 current films by Afghan filmmakers. Curated by Cologne-based radio journalist Martin Gerner, who has been regularly visiting Afghanistan since 2004, the program embraced 13 documentaries and 2 animation films. Each film mirrored everyday social and political struggles, focusing in particular on the plight of women and children in both rural and urban communities. Seven of the documentaries were directed by women. Not surprising at all, these drew the most audience attention and found a supportive critical echo in the press.

Arguably, the most important documentary in the series was Abdul Hassain Danesh's *Gozar gah* (*Passageway*, 2006). Work on this 52-minute Afghan chronicle began back in 1993, when a raging civil war reaped more

destruction on Kabul than by the Taliban afterwards. Later, when Danesh left Afghanistan for Iran, he assembled his footage into *Passageway*, which has yet to be screened in Afghanistan in its original version - simply because many of the political leaders of the 1990s are back in power again today.

Of course, there was a documentary set against the background of the destroyed Buddha statues: Ghulan Reza Mohammadi's *Buddha, dukhtarak wa ab* (*Buddha, the Girl and Water*, 2006) details the workday of a young girl before the gaping niche where the Buddha statues once stood. By contrast, Reza Hosseini Yamak's *Bulbul* (*Bulbul - The City Bird*, 2008) another documentary on child labour, chronicles the routines of a young lad named young Bulbul (Sparrow) who, together with two companions, washes passing cars at street intersections in Kabul. A contrasting view of Kabul was then offered in Dil Afruz Zeerak's *A Day in the Life of Rahela* (2006), about a 13-year-old girl daily hauling canisters of water up a hillside in order to help support her family and pay for her schooling. Another and more promising view of child labor is seen in Taj Mohammad Baktari's *Sahar javani qalin baf* (*Sahar, the Young Carpet Maker*, 2008), about an intelligent 14 year-old girl who combines her schooling with managing the family's business of making portrait-carpets based on photos.

The series opened with Wahid Nazir's *My Kabul* (2006), a portrait of city life viewed through the eyes of a talkative taxi driver struggling to make ends meet with his rickety jalopy. The film contrasts sharply with Ibrahim Bamiani's *Roja roshani* (*Dream of Light*, 2006), where we see 1969 archival footage of Kabul bathed in glittering light on the 50th anniversary of Afghan independence. Today, after seven years of foreign input by aid workers and consulting firms, power is a scarce item in the city.

The day-to-day hardships suffered by Afghan women were treated with insight and compassion in two documentaries by director-camerawoman Shakiba Adil. In *A Girl from Kabul* (2007) a young woman seeks to reconcile her thirst for social independence with the repressive forces that traditionally hinder the equality of the sexes. In Manija Gardizi and Karim Amin's *Moral Crimes* (2007) the focus is on women inmates in the Mazar+Sharif prison, women who were betrayed by their families for standing on their rights to marry on their own initiative. Afghan feminists and Islamic jurists speak out on seeking means to reconcile Sharia traditions with modern civil law. And in *Kahia Did Stand Up* (2008) the focus is on the murder of Zakia Zaki, the founder of an independent women's radio station who paid with her life for her outspoken convictions. Along the same lines, Afghan woman filmmaker Alka Sadat chronicles in *Dar dhakataye ka nagesol aglam medanand* (*Half Value Life*, 2008) the courage of a woman states attorney in her fight for women's rights. Although a wife and mother with obligations at home, Mariya Bashir finds ways to combine her domestic duties with her job as an investigating attorney. She has already survived one attack on her life.

Back-to-back documentaries by young women Afghan filmmakers raised relevant questions about traditions and modernity. In her *Va man zani tanhaa dar astaneye fasli sard* (*Behold a Woman Alone at the Beginning of a Cold Season*, 2006) Sahraa Karimi confronts her life in Europe as a film director by speaking directly into the camera about the loneliness of celebrating her 23rd birthday when there is no one from the family to blow out the candles with her. Now freed of the burqa, the full-bodied veil, but with images in her head of home where war is raging again, she attempts to measure the pros and cons of her double-identity. And in *Tar e-tu, pud-e-man* (*Mesh*, 2008) 23-year-old Aarzoo Burhani examines the question why some women still prefer to wear the burqa in public, although this is no longer compulsory since the fall of the Taliban regime. Besides touching on the rift between the older and younger generation, she states with clarity that she could nothing about the burqa in Kabul history.

Last, but not least, two Afghan animation films were standouts as well. In Sayed Mohsen Hossaini's *Shelter* (2006) the filmmaker's own drawings are animated to tell the story of a small boy living in a cart. And in Sayed Alireza Sajjadi's *Akherin fariad* (*The Last Shout*, 2008) a love story between two matchsticks delivers a subtle metaphorical meaning when the matchsticks kiss, something quite impossible in public life. When *The Last Shout* was presented at this year's Kabul Film Festival, it triggered a hefty discussion among the audience. Some in the audience viewed it as an affront to the prevailing moral code.

Figure 1: Ron Holloway (1933-2009) ¶ *Kinema* is profoundly saddened by the passing of Ron Holloway, a great film journalist and historian who was also a regular contributor to our journal for the past fifteen years. We shall miss his insightful and informative festival reports and articles which he generously shared and which will always remain a pleasure to read.

Author Information

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit), Polish Rings, Cannes Gold Medaille, the American Cinema Foundation Award, the Diploma for Support of Russian Cinema and an honorary award from the German Film Critics' Association.

Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.