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## ***Salaam Cinema: Unlikely Journeys in Documentary***

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This short paper engages in a brief critical reflection on the historical and theoretical journey of the documentary film. It does so through the analysis of the highly meta-textual, deconstructive and self-reflexive documentary *Salaam Cinema* (1995) by the controversial Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf.

After such roller-coaster fiction films as *The Peddler* (1987), *The Cyclist* (1989) and *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989), the Iranian film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf went on to celebrate the first centenary of cinema with the production of an explosive hybrid, *Salaam Cinema* (1995), with which he managed to rock the increasingly complacent boat of Western cinema at Cannes that year. The film opens with *verité* sequences that show a crowd of thousands of aspirants, who responded to an advertisement by the renowned director, to audition for a part in his next film. Thereafter, *Salaam Cinema* depicts Makhmalbaf and his assistants in a film studio interviewing and recording the performances of those selected. In doing so, the film paints a fascinating portrait of the role that cinema's mythologies, especially those of Western cinema, play in Iranian culture. Drawing a powerful parallel between the cinematic and the social realms, this is a furiously self-reflexive and meta-textual film (where the second film is only an imagined and desired one), which effectively complicates any easy distinctions between fiction and documentary. Indeed, in order to generate this culturally situated meditation on the universal phenomenon of cinema, Makhmalbaf moves away from the fictional approach of his previous films. *Salaam Cinema*'s key motivation is a desire to engage with the real, as witnessed in early cinema.

One hundred years earlier, as a new technology of visual representation and expression, cinema had attempted its very first steps in the form of semi-narrativised snapshots of social reality in the single-take films of the Lumière brothers.<sup>1</sup> More often than not these early cinematic images have been perceived as direct windows onto the plenitude of a bygone world. Although not unproblematic, this perception<sup>2</sup> may prompt the claim that at the moment of its inception cinema would have actually been delivered as the visual documentation rather than fictionalisation of the filmmaker's surrounding reality. Thus, a direct line can be drawn between the Lumière's first Paris public screenings in December of 1895 and Makhmalbaf's 1995 international hit, a line whose edges and interstices tell us about the minoritarian story of the documentary as the cinematic *par excellence*. This is so despite the overwhelming way in which fiction has become synonymous with cinema in the globalised mainstream culture. Thus, if cinema were to begin with the Lumière and end with Makhmalbaf, then we would have it that cinema both arises and closes as documentary. This inclination towards the document, however, is not the only element connecting *Salaam Cinema* to the Lumière films and the documentary tradition.<sup>3</sup> The complication of the relationship between representation and referent is also common. In fact, both examples mobilise the perception that at the moment of the documentation of the events occurring before the camera the filmmaker's

intervention cannot avoid contributing to their shaping and, to varied degrees, even becoming their main motivation. Indeed, while Makhmalbaf is overtly self-reflexive and deconstructive in *Salaam Cinema*, little attention has been given to the fact that the Lumière's allegedly unmediated images of the real were in fact densely designed visual texts (in terms of framing, composition, structure, and timing), which responded to long-lasting traditions of visualisation in painting and, more recently, photography.<sup>4</sup> Thus, to reformulate the former assertion: at the moment of its inception cinema does not only arise as documentary but its very desire for actuality is from the onset complicated by the needs of narrative and fiction. This oscillation of the cinematic text expresses an inherent ambiguity between the inclination to record and the tendency to imagine reality. This is what defines the cinema in its most intimate aspects, before and beyond the potential complexities and excesses of narrativisation and visual spectacle. This double-bound photographic quality of the cinematic (and by "photographic" we don't mean mimetic but the convergence of the recorded and the imagined), truly inscribes the journey, or better "journeys", of the documentary film form through its multiple and heterogenous histories of critical practice and theorisation.

Such an open conception of cinema is what Makhmalbaf seems to investigate in *Salaam Cinema*, a film that due to all its meta-textual and self-reflexive play demands to be critically revisited almost a decade after it premiered for Western audiences. In particular, our specific reconsideration of this film, points towards the need for a wider critical revision of the myriad trajectories of the documentary genre and of the theoretical discussions these have motivated. This revision, we believe, should in the first place problematise the Euro-American bias and teleological character of these histories, narratives and theorisations.<sup>5</sup> Such an encompassing reflection is obviously too broad an aim for a short paper. Therefore, we will limit ourselves here merely to the discreet analysis of only two of many meaningful aspects to be discerned in *Salaam Cinema*: these are its thematisation of power and its strategies of self-reflexivity.

The first aspect we would like to address is that of the film's overt meditation on power. *Salaam Cinema* interrogates the pre-conceptions that sustain the distinction between documentary and fiction by putting across the notion that cinema is about power positioning in the first instance and at every level: from production and distribution to consumption and analysis. The film leads the viewer away from the comfort zone of "passive entertainment" and into a space of "critical enjoyment". In fact, the film's structure itself is designed to make the viewer continuously question both its premise and its messages. For example, the opening sequence depicting the crowd gathered outside the film studio seems to portray an Iran of sheep-like followers in their search of something new. However, as one follows the scenes of masses of people fighting over handfuls of application forms and then chaotically and hazardously pushing their way through the recently opened gates, it is easy to be reminded of television news scenes in which refugees fight over food packs or desperately try to leave their war torn homelands. Since the spontaneous, violent events depicted on screen are the direct result of Makhmalbaf's public call, the film calls the viewer's attention back to the director's own ethics.

Furthermore, *Salaam Cinema* is a good example of how cinema's power signifiers (for example, the director, the production process, the institution and language of

cinema, and the star system) reflect society's power relations. Similarly, in Iran religion, masculinity, patriarchy and the state offer comparable power positions to those of the cinema. In particular, the narrative function of religion in *Salaam Cinema* is intricately enmeshed with that of the Iranian social order: religion motivates characters, expresses identity and defines lifestyles. Likewise, the manifestation of spirituality in most Iranian films, and Arab cinema more generally, contributes to the understanding of characters and themes: in these films social relations are almost always directly linked to religion. Makhmalbaf seems conscious of the danger implicit in this as he tries valiantly to distance religion from the state without much success. Many times even just the language of people reveals the muddle that Islam and state power have become. In *Salaam Cinema* Makhmalbaf shows that this is also symptomatic of the power of the filmmaker, who is both the bearer and creator of a world that was believed to be merely (and truthfully) recorded by the film.

Nevertheless, all too often applications of Western theoretical and discursive paradigms deny the role of spirituality in Arab cultures, thus undermining the function of symbolic representations in film with expressions such as "religious fundamentalism" that pigeonhole Islam within confined and contrived cultural contexts. On the other hand, for Middle Eastern cinemas the expression of spirituality as a means of asserting cultural specificity can easily become an exotic object of consumption for Western audiences, as Ferid Boughedir has warned.

One final and very important element of power relations foregrounded in *Salaam Cinema* is the position of women both in society and cinema. The image that Western audiences have of Muslim women is generally the image of their faces covered by the veil: thus, they are imagined as quiet, subservient, and oppressed. What *Salaam Cinema* does is to show the agency of Iranian women, demonstrating that whenever they are able to speak they will do so loudly. In the film we also witness how intricately interwoven the status of women is in Iranian culture: the veil here has its own avenues of vision. Incidentally, the position of women in Iran is not unlike that of cinema: like women's emancipation, Iranian cinema is a revolution of sorts.

The second aspect we want to discuss in this analysis of *Salaam Cinema*, one which actively contributes to problematise the distinction between fiction and documentary, is the film's highly self-reflexive and deconstructive style. While *Salaam Cinema* can be viewed as a rhetorical narrative Makhmalbaf also achieves deeper constructions of meaning through purely cinematic means. The following are examples of his cinematic strategies into meaning production:

Firstly, the "auditions" section of the film begins with the presentation of a young man who pretends to be blind. After asking him some questions and instructing him to act, Makhmalbaf exposes the man's simulation. The young man cries and explains that since his task was to act he had decided to do it all the way through. Makhmalbaf opens this part of the film conceding a metaphorical value to the figure of the blind actor: like him, Iranian people are blind (or choose to be) and can only see through cinema as they are prompted by the director's instructions. As the blind man says, if the film's director wants him to see then he would play a seeing character. Interestingly, even after his charade has been exposed and is now part of the film (that is, *Salaam Cinema*) the actor does not seem satisfied as his own perceptions and the reality of cinema have not yet merged. The interplay between the actor's love for

cinema and the “game” that the director now puts into motion suggests a growing fissure between the self-confidence and skills that an actor brings to the text and the power that the director wields. There is here an inter-textual defining of justice where power is constantly relocated on the director’s side.

While in many ways the history and praxis of global cinema conveys this reflexivity, this is particularly the case in Iranian cinema.<sup>6</sup> Chaudhuri and Finn have called this reflexive merging of the cinematic and the social a “fusion of reality and its poetic remake [which] do not just slot neatly inside each other—they open onto each other overlapping.”<sup>7</sup> This intersection clearly occurs in *Salaam Cinema* in a scene in which two young female actors-to-be criticise Makhmalbaf for subjecting them to the abuse of his power. As a response they are asked to take up his role as director and significantly they reproduce the same abusive behaviour they had to endure themselves. The “image-time” of this film reflects the experience of post-colonial relations in Iran, where consecutive regimes have continue to yield oppressive power in the manner of their predecessors.<sup>8</sup>

A second cinematic strategy of meaning production sees Makhmalbaf sub-textually arguing for the imminent falsity of documentary production while at an overt textual level maintaining that what the camera has recorded is the truth. This paradox is what drives the film forward. The premise of the whole film is that of the contradiction between its perceived truth and reality and the necessary fictionalising and performative ingredients required in the making of documentaries. As Makhmalbaf intervenes with the complicity of his crew the traditional uses of cinematic conventions, not only does the film become a self-reflexive narrative but also implicitly deconstructs the history of documentary theory.<sup>9</sup> For example, the multiple mirror reflections in *Salaam Cinema* are “image-movements,” used to suggest its overt reflexivity.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, huge mirrors are used in the studio shoots, through which sometimes it is possible simultaneously to see the director’s, crew’s and actors in action. Thus, *Salaam Cinema* itself becomes a reflection of cinema.

Finally, the director further demonstrates how documentary is essentially a complicity of style. *Auteurs* are stylists who leave strong imprints on their works. They do this through voice-overs, on-camera presence, sign-posting of meanings, and structure. In the case of *Salaam Cinema* what began as an attempt to create a fiction film ended up as a problematic and problematising documentary that not even the director recognises as such! This is the strength that Makhmalbaf brings to *Salaam Cinema* and that it is also possible to find in most of the films of the New Iranian Cinema. Indeed, one of the film’s most crucial moments of negotiation between the real and the imagined/performative is the closing sequence, in which the women hold the slate and Makhmalbaf asks them whether they should write, “To Be Continued” or “The End”. The fact that this method of continuing endings is often used in Iranian films suggests that their endings are inscribed as partial and arbitrary because, in actual fact, there is no ending to the reality of the stories in Iran. Through such scenes Makhmalbaf signals the constructedness of documentary, suggests a dialogue between filmmaker, subject, crew and audience, and frees the expressive elements from subordination to convention. *Salaam Cinema* recognises and reveals its subjectivity, bias, intrusion, and artificiality, and, most importantly, it does not attempt to reduce or simplify the intrinsic complexity of “captured life”. We would like to argue, then, that narrative in *Salaam Cinema*, not unlike fiction film, is driven not by what the

documentary “actors” do in real life but by what they are asked to do in the reality of the making of the documentary. Documentary, in this sense, becomes a metaphor for both the social and subjective orders as it simultaneously reflects and constitutes life.

In this short discussion paper we have considered the open conception of cinema that Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf articulates in the film *Salaam Cinema* (1995). We have stated that Makhmalbaf’s tribute to the centenary of cinema in this film manifests the early desire of cinema to engage with the real. Thus, a genealogical link to the Lumière’s 1895 films has been suggested, a link that reveals the minoritarian story of the documentary as the cinematic *par excellence*. This inclination towards the document that connects *Salaam Cinema* to the earliest films and the documentary tradition is also characterised by the complication of the relationship between representation and referent. Cinema’s very desire for actuality is from the onset complicated by the needs of narrative and fiction. This convergence of the recorded and the imagined truly inscribes the journeys of the documentary film form through multiple and heterogenous histories of critical praxis and reflection. In our analysis we have argued that because of its complex meta-textual, self-reflexive, and deconstructive strategies, *Salaam Cinema* deserves serious critical reconsideration in the context of on-going theoretical discussions concerning documentary film. The brief analysis of specific aspects of *Salaam Cinema* undertaken in this paper, namely, its thematisation of power and its self-reflexive strategies, illustrates the need for a wider critical revision of the myriad trajectories of the documentary genre and of the theoretical discussions these have motivated. As already stated, a critical revision of such magnitude should begin from the problematisation of the Euro-American bias and teleological character of the histories, narratives and theorisations in documentary, opening up the critical reflection to the multiple expressions of the world’s cinemas. Indeed, non-Western filmmakers such as Makhmalbaf use cinematic languages that invite Western audiences and critics to acknowledge the fact that the canonisation of Western cinema was in the first place effected upon preconceptions, misconceptions, and unawareness concerning other cinemas.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though to current film and television audiences the distinction between fiction and documentary may appear obvious, this was in fact not conceptualised until the 1930s by Grierson. More broadly, Ruthrof has argued that there is no fiction or non-fiction as we commonly understand this distinction: all there is is narrative; see Horst Ruthrof and John Fiske, eds., *Literature and Popular Culture*, *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, special issue, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> According to Deutelbaum, “there is little reason to continue to regard [the Lumière’s films] as naïve photographic renderings of natural events which happened to occur before the camera” (310); Marshall Deutelbaum, *Structural patterning in the Lumière films*, in John L. Fell, ed., *Film Before Griffith*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, pp. 299-310.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Gunning has discussed the links between early films and the avant-garde in two consecutive articles; see *An unseen energy swallows space: The space in early film and its relation to American avant-garde film*, in John L. Fell, ed., *Film Before Griffith*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, pp. 355-366, and *The cinema of attractions: Early film, its spectator and the avant-garde*, in Thomas Elsaesser & Adam Barker, eds., *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, London: BFI, 1990, pp. 56-62.

<sup>4</sup> It is rarely observed, with exceptions such as the relevant essays in Fell’s and Elsaesser & Barker’s collections cited above, that in some cases the depicted events were clearly directed for the purpose of its visual recording, such as *Le Déjeuner de bébé* (1895) and the comical *L’Arroseur arrosé* (1895).

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<sup>5</sup> In order to achieve such an overarching critical revision it would be necessary to return to the genealogy of documentary modes famously devised by Bill Nichols and more recently criticised by Stella Bruzzi. The rationale behind this exercise would imply testing the five models suggested in Nichols's taxonomy against the textures of non-Western films such as *Salaam Cinema* and subsequently assess the extent to which some or all of these are at play in the films. The assessment of the relative usefulness of Nichols's system outside the field of Western documentary should inevitably lead to an appraisal of both its limitations and strengths, opening up the theorisation of documentary outside the teleological and Euro-American parameters allegedly operating in his model (hence, the importance of *Salaam Cinema* as a documentary that is both off-centre and "revolutionary"). In this context, Bruzzi's critique of Nichols and her own contribution to contemporary documentary theory should prove pivotal in the development of a new, open vision. Indeed, Bruzzi's critique of Nichols' taxonomy focuses on two main points: the hegemonic status this theory has reached within theorisations of documentary and the historical necessity of its chronology. Needless to say Bruzzi's affirmation of the performative in documentary further underlines the multiplicity of form that this mode of imagistic communication embeds; see Bill Nichols, The voice of documentary, in Allan Rosenthal, ed., *New Challenges for Documentary*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 48-63; Bill Nichols, Performing documentary, in *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 92-106; and Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Just to name a few examples: Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* and *A Moment of Innocence*, Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, and Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Circle*.

<sup>7</sup> S. Chaudhuri and H. Finn, *Screen*, vol. 44:1, Spring 2003, pp. 38-57.

<sup>8</sup> Chaudhuri and Finn define "image-time" as the cinematic moment when a film uses associative rhetoric to make a political context possible; op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Makhmalbaf's strategies here clearly resemble those of Goddard in films such as *Letter From Vietnam*.

<sup>10</sup> "Image-movement" is defined by Chaudhuri and Finn as *mise-en-scène* that concedes direct meaning to what is happening on screen; op. cit.