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Capturing Cultural Transformation on Film: Makhmalbaf's *A Moment of Innocence*

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Iranian cinema has emerged as a dominant form of cultural expression in the post-revolution period. Widely seen at international film festivals, new Iranian cinema has become a window on contemporary Iran. The themes, subject matters, and the representational techniques deployed in Iranian films bring forth cultural paradoxes and complexities frequently elided in the Western media's representations of post-revolution Iranian society. This is far from saying that contemporary Iranian cinema is simple representation of life. In fact, this recent cinema is quite often self-reflexive and thematizes issues of representation. The complexities to which I allude are to be found in this very self-reflexive mode of filmmaking and its accompanying exploration of new modes of seeing and perceiving. This introspection is not unique in Iranian cinema. A parallel process of collective and national self-examination is equally evident in other aspects of life in contemporary Iran, as evidenced in the radical changes sweeping the political scene in the recent rounds of elections. Some two decades after the revolution, Iran would seem to be going through a collective soul searching and a process, albeit uneasy, of transformation. What the new Iranian cinema captures is this spirit of cultural introspection and transmutation. No film has better encapsulated this ethos than Muhsin Makhmalbaf's *Nun-u guldun*, produced in 1996 and released outside Iran under the title *A Moment of Innocence*. The Persian title translates into "bread and flower pot." The Persian word *guldun* means both flower vase and pot, but the object to which the title of the film alludes and is represented on the screen is a flowerpot. Hamid Dabashi explains that the title by which Makhmalbaf's film has become known outside Iran was chosen by the film's French distributor who "decided, right before the film was premiered in Locarno that 'un instance d'innocence' sounds better and alliterates better in French" (p. 115).

My analysis of this film will highlight its self-reflexive and transformative approach that I will place within broader cultural parameters. My emphasis will be on the film rather than the filmmaker, Muhsin Makhmalbaf, whose own life is central to the plot and action of the film. But Makhmalbaf's use of autobiography should not be confused with documentary reality, rather be understood as a metaphor for the personal and collective self-examination focal to the film. To better ground the distinction between the real-life Makhmalbaf and the character depicted within *A Moment of Innocence*, I shall briefly outline the subject of the film and its relation to Makhmalbaf's life before turning my attention to the core of my argument about the transformative process encapsulated by the film.

The subject of *A Moment of Innocence* is the making of a film about a moment from Makhmalbaf's own past. The episode dates back to when at the age of seventeen, Makhmalbaf, acting on his revolutionary fervor, attempted to rob a bank. His intention was to use the money for guerrilla activities that would eventually topple the government. The young Makhmalbaf enlisted a female cousin whose part in the venture was to distract the police officer guarding the entrance to the bank so that the young Makhmalbaf could disarm him with his switchblade knife and brass knuckles. The robbery did not proceed as planned: Makhmalbaf struck the policeman with his knife, but the policeman shot his gun and injured his attacker. The young Makhmalbaf was arrested and jailed. He was released at the time of the revolution. The time Makhmalbaf spent in jail fortified his revolutionary zeal. His early career consisted of making propaganda films under the auspices of *Hawziyi Sazman-i Tablighat-i Islami*, a government-sponsored office for dissemination of Islam. In his revolutionary zeal, he denounced the work of prerevolutionary filmmakers. But there gradually appeared a change in Makhmalbaf's work and his views on the Islamic revolution. Few Iranians have forgotten the controversial Makhmalbaf of the early days of the revolution, but many more speak of his personal transformation from an unforgiving zealot to a self-reflective artist. In an issue of the magazine *Kiyan*, dedicated to Religion, Tolerance, and Violence, Hushang Gulmakani speaks candidly of his personal experience of Makhmalbaf, the self-proclaimed watchdog of the cultural values of the revolution, and recalls the terror Makhmalbaf's presence at screenings used to evoke. But Gulmakani concludes: "Makhmalbaf, who used to judge everyone, albeit in his imagination, and believed that individuals could be divided into the two groups of innocent or worthy of punishment has now stopped judging and sentencing others" (p. 193). Gulmakani testifies to a softening in Makhmalbaf's views and cites him as a unique cultural figure of the past two decades. The sources of his uniqueness Gulmakani finds in the kinds of transformations we see represented in films like *A Moment of Innocence*.

The vision conveyed by *A Moment of Innocence* draws on Makhmalbaf's personal experiences as a young revolutionary, but it goes beyond those experiences and invites Iranian viewers to engage with their personal and collective memory of the twenty-year-old revolution. Juxtaposing an idealistic young man impatient for change and unafraid to resort to violence with his older counterpart relying on creative means of bringing about change, *A Moment of Innocence* creates a space within which the social and political fabric of the revolution can be explored.

My analysis will focus on the transformative possibilities opened up in *A Moment of Innocence*. I shall argue that Makhmalbaf's camera does not merely give us a glimpse of the past, but rather it takes us into the very process of remembering, or to borrow from Janice Haaken, "transformative remembering," asking what the recreation of this moment in the life of a revolutionary and the revolution itself tells us about the Iranian social, political, and cultural scene. A secondary, but related, aspect of this question would be why cinematic expression has proven to be the most appropriate means of articulating the twists and turns of this intense period in Iranian history. My aim in attempting to arrive at answers to these questions is not to produce definitive pronouncements on post-revolution

Iranian cinema, but rather to explore broader cultural manifestations through cinematic expression.

Before turning to the subject of the film, I would like to explain the reasons for my use of Janice Haaken's concept of transformative remembering. Haaken, whose work is at the intersection of psychology, psychoanalysis and feminism, coins this term in her *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back*. As signaled in the title of her book, the questions she explores concern debates about the nature of recovered memories, particularly of abuses suffered by women, and the manner in which those memories become narratives of the self. Central to her investigation is "how social influences operate in the telling of an emotionally compelling story" (p. 197). Taking the debate beyond the preoccupation with the truth or falsehood of recovered memories, Haaken asks: "How do we understand the contemporary context that shapes the contours of the past that is recovered? Why, we may ask, does the patient try to remember and how might we understand what is involved in the search for episodes in that past that hold explanatory potential?" (p. 252). Haaken's attention to the broad range of social, political, and cultural aspects of remembering makes it possible to see self-construction as a dynamic process informed at once by inner psychic conflict, external events and their effect on the psyche, and the context in which memory is recalled.

It is this dynamic process, outlined by her in the concept of transformative remembering, that I find particularly productive for my analysis of Makhmalbaf's A *Moment of Innocence*. For an understanding of this concept, I turn to Haaken's own words:

> Transformative remembering refers to the recollection of an event that serves as a psychological marker from an early to a later form of self-knowledge. Since memory may be true or false, or somewhere in between as a representation corresponding to some referent event, the interest here is in mental activity that is judged to be memory, either by the subject or by some observer. Transformative remembering refers to event schemas that have superordinate explanatory power, serving as phenomenological anchors in autobiographical recall. With a privileging of the verb over the noun – remembering as opposed to *memory* – the motivational and active dimensions of mind are put in the foreground of the analysis (p. 14).

There is an interesting overlap between the active dimension of remembering highlighted by Haaken and remembering as depicted in *A Moment of Innocence*. I depart slightly from Haaken's formulations in turning my focus away from the individual apparently at the center of the narrative, i.e. Makhmalbaf, to the fictional representations of that individual for the purpose of activating a collective remembering that can lead to the type of transformation Haaken identifies: "The past is reactivated, and a new configuration arises out of previous recollections. While the elements of the story may be fact, fantasy, or (most likely) some combination of the two, what is key is the reorganization of the past from a newly acquired vantage point" (p. 15).

To explain the distinction I make between the "real" Makhmalbaf and the film's representations of him, I will first provide an overview of the plot of the film that makes every effort to appear an accurate reanimation of the process of making a film about the fateful encounter between the seventeen-year-old Makhmalbaf and the policeman guarding the bank. The director Makhmalbaf plays his own role as filmmaker, and we are led to believe that the man playing the policeman is in fact the person Makhmalbaf attacked and injured. This is how the story unrolls in the film. In the opening scenes, we see a man looking for Makhmalbaf's house. When he arrives there, the director's young daughter, returning from school, greets him. After questioning him, she agrees to pass on a message from the man, who turns out to be the policeman Makhmalbaf stabbed, to her father. During this exchange the viewers find out the connection between the former officer and the director.

In the next sequence, we see Makhmalbaf interviewing a group of young men about their goals in life. Among them he seeks a suitable actor to play his younger self. The person who answers his question with "I want to save humanity" is the one he selects for the role. The director and the young actor have their picture taken together.

The auditioning process is repeated, this time the former policeman stepping into the shoes of the director. To select a person who will play his role, unlike Makhmalbaf, he focuses on his perception of the similarities between his own features and that of the potential actor. The person he chooses does not meet with Makhmalbaf's approval. Makhmalbaf himself is not seen disagreeing with the policeman, but his assistant is appointed to carry the message back. The former policeman walks away, threatening to abandon the entire project. When he returns, he accepts to direct the young man recommended by the director. He is also told that his role is to coach the young actor to play the crucial scene of the encounter between Makhmalbaf and himself.

Both the former policeman and Makhmalbaf embark on telling the actors the nature of the roles they are to play. The former policeman describes how he became aware of a young woman who used to pass by his post and ask him for directions or the time. After the first few times, the policeman began to think that the young woman had become enamored of him. Gradually he falls in love with her and hopes to talk to her about his feelings. He buys a small flowering plant (*guldun*), which he carries with him to work, hoping to find the right moment to reveal his feelings to her. But before the policeman can act on his desire, the young Makhmalbaf carries out his plan. The policeman never finds out that the girl of his dreams was linked to the young revolutionary's plot. He seeks out Makhmalbaf in order to reanimate the past so that he can at long last deliver his gift to the woman. As he reveals to the actor he coaches, he has spent twenty years searching for this woman of his dreams.

The director takes his own charge on a journey of finding a young woman to play the role of his cousin. The person he has in mind is the daughter of his cousin, a young woman very much interested in playing the part in the film. But Makhmalbaf's cousin does not allow her daughter to play in the film. In fact, she explicitly mentions that she does not want to revisit the past. Makhmalbaf asks the young actor whether he has a sweetheart and finds out that he is in love with one of his own cousins. It is the young actor's cousin whom they approach next. She accepts and the two directors begin to rehearse the scene.

As part of preparations for the re-enactment of the past, the director gives the young man a fake switchblade knife. The young actor registers his discomfort with the weapon, but agrees to use it. Following the original trajectory, the young actors are instructed to stop at a bakery and buy a loaf of flat bread (*nun*) under which the young Makhmalbaf is to hide his weapon. When they rehearse this scene, the young man playing Makhmalbaf breaks down and cries because he does not wish to use a weapon to attain his goal of saving humanity. He argues with the director that there are other means of saving humanity. Eventually he agrees to resume the rehearsal according to the original script.

When the three young players are finally brought face to face, the former policeman discovers that the woman he had assumed to be eyeing him was in fact Makhmalbaf's sweetheart and co-conspirator. This brings the filming to a halt until the young actor playing the policeman coaxes him to resume the process. The former policeman returns to his role as director only to instruct his younger counterpart to shoot the young woman when she approaches him. The next and the final sequence of the movie consists of the final take in which the stage is set for the eventful encounter. When the young girl asks the policeman the time, he does not answer. She repeats her question, while the camera shows the young man reaching for his gun. But instead of the gun and the knife, the two young actors simultaneously offer the flowerpot and the bread. The camera captures this symbolic offering across the body of the woman.

The scenes, especially the earlier ones, are punctuated by the appearance of the clapperboard and a voice-over announcing for instance that the person for the role of the director's youth or the policeman's have been chosen. The camera itself is foregrounded, creating the illusion that we are seeing raw footage and spontaneous action. But we are also aware that there is another camera filming the director, the former policeman, and the young actors playing their roles. In other words, the film purports to draw on authentic players, eager to arrive at an accurate representation of their own past, and at the same time it undercuts the illusion of authenticity. The attempts at exact recreations, the film points out, are foiled on many levels, increasingly shifting the emphasis from memory to remembering as a collective and transformative exercise.

The deliberate blurring of the real and the fictional is laid out in the published scenario for the film, bearing the title of *Nun-u Guldun*, accompanied by a second scenario, entitled *Khuda-hafiz Sinama* (Goodbye Cinema). The prefatory note to the second scenario indicates that the two scenarios are two different kinds of scenarios on the same subject and both are continuations of *Salaam Sinama* (Salaam Cinema). *Goodbye Cinema* focuses on the same plot as *A Moment of Innocence*, with the exception that it carries through with the scene of the attack. It also further foregrounds the play between illusion and reality. Even the actors and the directors are sometimes duped into accepting the illusion for the real. More importantly this scenario ends with the revelation that the person playing the policeman is a hired actor. Interestingly, the policeman is referred to by the name of Nasrullah in *Goodbye Cinema*, while he remains nameless in *A Moment of Innocence*.

Obviously the viewers of *A Moment of Innocence* are not privy to the existence of this second scenario. I draw attention to it to emphasize my earlier proposition that the focus of Makhmalbaf's film is the activation of a process of remembering that leads to a reconfiguration of both the past and the present. In *A Moment of Innocence*, this process of remembering is itself complicated by the contradictory perspectives of the two main players, Makhmalbaf and the former policeman. The juxtaposition of these two points of view is central to the film's emphasis on the dynamic nature of remembering and the possibilities of change it offers.

I will analyze the characters of the director and the former policeman as the two individuals most motivated to revisit a crucial moment from their past. Although I will examine them separately, I will also demonstrate how the characters of Makhmalbaf, the former policeman, and the young actors intersect in the transformative remembering depicted by the camera. In order to maintain the distinction between the "real" and the fictional, I will refer to the two main characters as the director and the former policeman.

The film opens with the policeman, emphasizing his eagerness to recreate his past. In an exchange between the former policeman and the young actor playing him, the older one speaks of his obsession with finding the woman he had fallen in love with twenty years earlier. He wonders why the woman, clearly taken with him, did not put as much effort into finding him as he did in his search for her. By way of example he speaks of a woman he once saw in a bazaar in his hometown of Orumiyih who struck him to be the woman from his past:

> I approached her and saw she was not the one, but she looked a lot like her, only her eyebrows were a little different. I went to ask for her hand. She asked me: "Are you an actor?" I told her no. Then I realized she really wanted me to be an actor. I told her: "Yes, I am an actor." She asked: "Why do you lie at the beginning

of our life?" I said: "No, I'm not lying. I am an actor. I'll prove it to you. That's how I ended up looking up Muhsin Makhmalbaf, because I didn't know anyone else in the movie business." (pp. 45–46)

There is yet another allusion to the filming having been motivated by the former policeman in the sequence regarding the choice of the actors to play him in his youth. When he leaves the studio disgruntled by the director and his assistant's rejection of his choice of actor, the assistant is eager to follow him and bring him back. The director tells his assistant: "Don't rush, Zinal, he will come back. Do you see that bent tree? He will turn back before he reaches it. Didn't he say, this was more important to him than his nightly bread?" The former policeman does indeed return, confirming the director's assertion. That the former officer has much more at stake in the realization of the film is also brought out in the exchange between him and the young actor, attempting to dissuade him from abandoning the project. When the young actor says: "At least don't leave for my sake. If I don't play in this film, I will lose face when I go back to Shahr-i Babak," the former officer replies: "I couldn't care less. I have been wandering around for twenty years and lost my life. Who worried about me?" This assertion gains even more force when juxtaposed with an earlier statement he makes. In response to his younger counterpart's speculation about an unfavorable outcome, he states: "I will not forgive him [the director], because he took my life away once, he took away my love, he ruined me. Now for the sake of marrying a woman, I am trying so hard, I have gone pleading to Makhmalbaf to find this girl."

Although these exchanges suggest that the initial motivation for the film came from the former policeman, once the two original players are assembled and the stage is set for the filming to begin, the director becomes equally involved in recreating his part in the past. The overall effect of the emphasis placed on the former policeman's desire to re-enact the past is to represent him as being more closely bound to the factual. But, as we shall see, the director's seeming aloofness is repeatedly undermined. That is to say, in the process of re-enactment represented in the film, the director, like all the other actors, is seen in the tug-of-war between the factual, the fictional, and the possible.

The seemingly separate tracks traveled by the two main characters do eventually converge, but the camera resists representing the director and the former policeman in the same frame. There is only one sequence in which there is an implicit acknowledgment of the presence of the two and that is the arrival of the former policeman at the studio as the director wraps up his audition session. The camera shows the former policeman bowing toward the space that is presumably occupied by the director. But it stops short of cutting from one to the other. Furthermore, the character of the assistant director mediates all the exchanges between the two. The avoidance of face-to-face encounters between the director and the former policeman is integral to the vision of the film. Two individuals might remember the same event differently. By allowing the two main characters to follow distinct paths on their pursuit of the past, the film highlights the multiple meanings they can discover along those paths.

The centrality of movement and quest are already disclosed in the opening sequence of the film. The first images we see are shots of the former policeman walking toward the camera along railroad tracks. His movement forward is juxtaposed with train cars moving in the opposite direction. This double movement, the train fading into the background with the character moving into the foreground to the point of having a full shot of his body gradually changed into close-up shots of his face has symbolic resonance. Like the policeman's movements, the film is informed by a double movement and intertwining of the past and the present.

The impossibility of disentangling the present from the past is thematized in the exchange between the former policeman and the director's daughter. The girl has difficulty coming to terms with the identity of the stranger who has arrived at her doorstep. She asks him if he wants to become an actor to which he responds with surprise that she has read his mind. At this point, the young girl's questioning takes an interesting turn: "If you are a policeman, why do you want to become an actor?" The man responds: "I am not a policeman now. I am now working in the private sector. It was during the Shah's time that I was a policeman. I resigned after I was stabbed." As if she has not heard him, she clings to the image she has already created of him as a policeman: "If you are a policeman, where is your gun?" What we see in this segment of the film is the difficulty of managing identity into discrete units firmly situated in either the past or the present. The former policeman does wish to return to the twenty-year-old scene of confrontation during this particular encounter, but the first steps he takes along the journey into the past are complicated by mis-perceptions and mis-identifications. The director's daughter seems to be demanding clarity: for her, he is either a policeman, or a man wanting to become an actor. The latter's repeated replies that his identity as a policeman is a part of his past, not the present, is an act of self-identification that confuses the young girl. Her confusion might well stem from the fact that she does not pick up on the references to the time of the Shah and her own father's past as a revolutionary activist. What is important in her struggle to understand the identity of the stranger is the absence of shared memories between the two generations. This is a theme that will become central to the denouement of the film, but it already hinted at in the opening sequence.

In the young girl's perception can be discerned a refusal to see the former policeman as occupying an in-between space – a space in which he can modify the past in terms of the present. At this stage, the former policeman is depicted as equally unaware of the potential of this space between the past and the present. In this early sequence, especially, he is not concerned with the circumstances that changed his life. Instead, he is preoccupied with encountering the woman he has sought for twenty years. His focus on his primary goal is re-established in the sequence concerning his selection of the actor who is to play him in his youth.

He would be happiest to play himself, but the assistant urges him to proceed with the selection of one of the auditioners. Faced with a lineup of young men, the former policeman focuses on their physical features. He asks the young man he chooses initially to show him his profile and say a few words casually. The former policeman's choice is based on what he judges to be the cinematic appeal of the young man. Using a photograph of himself in his youth as his frame of reference, he tries to gain the consent of the assistant director who is not convinced of the similarity between the two faces – a reservation seconded by the director. The fact that we never see the photograph that forms the basis of the former policeman's perception as well as that of the director and the assistant director is noteworthy. The camera deliberately undermines the photograph's value as bearing documentary status. Evidently the former policeman's internal image of his younger self has little to do with the photograph the director and the assistant director see. This is paralleled in his exchanges with the young man he chooses. When the former policeman asks him to say something casually, the young man states: "I don't like you." The policeman misses the purport of the young actor's utterance, once again refusing to deal with realities that find no resonance within his internalized self-image. His repeated assertions that he would like to play himself and his choice of a young man who has little resemblance to him bear witness to his responding to an internal image and his inability to envision that the actors chosen might play roles diverging from this inner reality. For him, the past is an inalterable script, and any representation of it in a film must conform to that script.

The former policeman's inflexible attitude is highlighted in his exchange with the tailor to whom he takes the young actor to be outfitted with a pre-revolution policeman's uniform. The tailor balks at the mention of the Shah's name, but when he realizes the uniform is to be used in a film, he agrees to help and launches into his own reminiscences of films: "Once upon a time, Lalihzar was under our feet. We would go to one theater from this end to the other. Do you remember Kirk Douglas?" He follows with further questions about specific films and lines from movies. While the tailor loses himself in the cinematic past, the former policeman remains anchored in the here and now. The answer he provides to one of the tailor's questions delineates his resistance to confusing actors with their cinematic presence and roles. After asking the former policeman whether he remembers Anthony Quinn, the tailor says: "By the way, I have heard he has had plastic surgery on his face and wants to marry Sophia Loren." The former officer interjects: "No, come on. He is a good person. He has a wife and kids. People gossip about anyone who becomes famous. That's cinema for you." This assertion of the righteousness of actors is central to his vision. He has become an actor to realize his dreams, and he is not willing to be drawn into speculations about actors. Lost on him is the point that this kind of gossip is about the effectiveness of cinema as a medium. Viewers of films create fictional lives for the actors they see on the screen. But the former policeman has no patience for the playful and the speculative. Paradoxically, however, while defending the honor of famous actors, he is willing to engage in a little role-playing of his own. He does not disabuse the tailor of the notion that he himself is an actor. Conveniently forgetting that a young actor has been chosen to play him, he tells the tailor that he hopes to be cast in a positive role. His world is marked by binaries of past/present, positive/negative, and reality/fiction.

What we see in the second sequence, the rehearsal and preparation of the young actor for playing the role of the policeman, visualizes the former officer's failure to conceptualize a space between the polarity of past and present. Frustrated with the young actor's inability to imagine the seriousness of his acting the role of a general, he offers to step into the role and quickly loses himself in the reality of the past. He snaps at the laughing young actor: "It's no laughing matter. Who do you think Reza Shah was? At first he was just a Cossack, then he became a king. If you do well at your job, some day you will become a general." For the young actor, figures like Reza Shah are as unreal as the scene he is asked to imagine. The hope offered to him that some day he too will rise through the ranks, a reality once lived by the policeman, is both unreal and unrealizable. But the former policeman becomes deeply immersed in the past and speaks from the position of a low-ranking officer with higher aspirations. This intrusion of the past and its need to be taken seriously hints at the policeman's categorical equation of his own perceptions and reality, albeit of the past. At this stage, he has not yet learned that he has pinned his hopes on a reality of his own making.

The third sequence I will turn to is initiated by the former policeman's realization that the woman he had assumed to be in love with him is accompanying the young revolutionary. When faced with this recognition, his sense of betrayal brings everything to a halt. The policeman turned director steps in front of the camera and says, "Cut, cut, cut." On the surface, he recognizes that he is intervening as part director of the film, but on another level, his demands for interrupting the process of filming is an admission that he wants the reality of the past he has just recognized to be undercut. This translates into his immediate refusal to play along. He walks away, and soon thereafter we see him packing to leave for his hometown. He is too disappointed by the real to imagine the potential for a different ending. In the argument that ensues between him and the young actor trying to convince to return to his role as director, the younger man offers him an alternative vision. He reminds the former policeman of the woman in Orumiyih, to which the latter replies: "The real turned out to be fake, what is the copy going to do for me?"

When the former policeman does return to the shooting, he seems to have regained the control he had lost earlier. He suggests a different and violent ending: "I didn't know she was not in love with me. She is my killer, so shoot." The betrayal is now squarely focused on the figure of the beloved, and the punishment he metes out is to be visited upon her. So important is the realization of this ending to the former officer that he is willing to rehearse the scene, himself playing the young girl. Interestingly, the young actor in a parallel to the young actor playing Makhmalbaf cannot resort to violence: "This is not for me to do. I can't do it." and "You are my friend, I can't." The policeman's answer is interesting for its insistence on the separation between playing and reality: "What an idiot you are, boy. I say, I am not me. I am that girl. So, shoot." The scene they ultimately rehearse, however, places the weapon back in the former policeman's hands: "Give me the gun. Now you go away and come up to me. You are that girl, and I am that policeman. Come and ask me."

It is not insignificant that in this rehearsal the former policeman at last attains his wish to play himself. When he does draw his weapon on the young actor, he is afforded a chance to end the haunting scene from his past differently. This putting to rest of the past happens in the realm of representation and in a narrative of his own making. He restores himself to the position of the director of his own past and, even more importantly, his present and future. He taps into the imaginative possibilities that allow him to liberate himself from the shattered dreams of his youth. Instead of acting on memory, he chooses to transform it. In turn, this new ending makes it possible for him to stand by and watch the final take, ironically directed neither by him nor the director.

The transformative path treaded by the director follows a similar double play of the conditions of the past and the possibilities of the present. As I mentioned earlier, it is implied that he has agreed to this re-enactment of the past at the behest of the former policeman. But the director is no less serious about an authentic recreation of the past.

In the audition scene, we see the director is lighthearted and mocking in his questioning of the young men gathered in the studio. The young actor whom he ultimately chooses is very serious about his goal of saving humanity. In contrast, the director engages in deliberate literal-mindedness and asks whether he knows how many individuals compose humanity. When the young man produces the wrong answer, the director asks others for the right figure, humiliating the young idealist.

The director's ironic distance from the idealism of his own past persists through the scenes in which he tells the young actor about the story line. For instance when he is driving the young man to his house, the latter asks him to go faster because he is eager to return home to avoid worrying his sick mother. The director retorts: "If you are such a mummy's boy, how do you want to save humanity?" He calls the young man's courage into question again when he presents him with a fake switchblade knife. The director mistakes the young man's disinclination to resort to violence as his fear of the knife. After the young man tries out the fake knife, the director says: "Did you see that the knife didn't hurt your hand?" But the young man persists by asking, "Yes, but can't one save humanity in other ways?" The director's response inaugurates his immersion in his own past: "Yes, but that's the kind of talk used by seventeen-year-olds of today. . . . In the old days, twenty years ago." Not coincidentally, at this very moment they arrive at the house of the young man's cousin. In their conversation the two youngsters ignore the director's valorization of the past by asserting their own reality. The youngsters choose for a slogan they would shout in case a crowd assembles in the course of the confrontation with the policeman: "As long as there are trees, life must go on." In the script the line is: "If I pull up a blade of grass, I know I will die," from the poem *Rushani, Man, Gul, Ab* (Light, I, Flower, Water) by Suhrab Sipihri (p. 335). This same line is chosen by Makhmalbaf as the epigraph of his script. The slogan chosen in the film also echoes a line from Sipihri's poem *Dar Gulistanih* (In the Garden): "As long as there are poppies, life must go on" (p. 350). These lines of poetry resonate with awe and respect for all forms of life and the possibility of existing in a world dominated by harmony. That the young actors choose a line from poetry to replace the political slogans of yesteryear is a powerful reminder of a transformation separating the two generations represented in the film. Missing the purport of the slogan proposed by the young actors, the director continues to stress the sequence of the events that must be enacted.

The primacy of the past for the director is forcefully brought out when they begin rehearsing the famous scene in the bazaar. When he steps into the role of directing his own past, his lightheartedness and ironic distance give way to impatience. He prompts the young actors to adopt the right position vis-à-vis the camera and speak the right lines. When a beggar woman gives thanks for the alms given to her with the French loan word *merci*, his voice is heard: "Lady, what do you mean *merci*? Beggars don't say *merci*." Underlying the director's interventions is his desire for creating the impression of verisimilitude. The script to which he adheres is one that is informed by his own memories and perception of how the events of that day unfolded twenty years earlier. Like his counterpart, the former policeman, he wishes to ensure that the script is followed closely.

The director's preoccupation with accurate representations is again highlighted when the young actor breaks down and throws the knife away, refusing to stab the policeman. The director asks: "Don't you want to save humanity? Don't you want to plant flowers in Africa?" The young man's protestation falls on deaf ears, and the scene ends with the director saying, "Let's go back and repeat the scene." On an immediate level, the word *repeat* here is meant as retake, but because in Persian *tikrar* also means "to repeat," Makhmalbaf's insistence could also be interpreted as indicative of his inflexibility vis-à-vis the script of his past. He is surprised to find a young man who shares ideals that were once his own, but he is not eager to step into the reality of the younger generation. He resists the young man's requests for changes to the script, believing that acting in the film is more important to the actor than the outcome of the scene.

In contrast to the director's need for repetition stands the shooting of the last scene involving all three players. In this instance, he reminds the young actors that they must concentrate and play their parts well because there will be one take only. His actual words are: "It won't be repeated." The other director, the former policeman, echoes these same words and tells his young counterpart that the scene will not be repeated. The two directors' desire to have one take of the crucial scene is a reflection of a need on their part to have an uncontaminated and authentic representation of the eventful moment. That the scene has to be retaken is, as we have seen, a necessary part of the former policeman's coming to terms with the shocking realization of his mistaken assumptions and his becoming the director of a revised script of his past.

For his part the director continues to ignore the subtle changes that have already been made to his script by the young man and woman. It is what happens between the two young lovers when the director leaves them alone that prepares the groundwork for the unexpected representation of the scene of the conflict.

When the young couple walks through passageways in the bazaar, the young man tests his cousin's willingness to save humanity. The way in which he formulates the question to her and the manner in which their discussions ensue point to departures from the director's past. The young man asks whether his cousin would be interested in becoming the "mother of humanity," positing himself as the "father of humanity." Implicit in this proposition is the young man's dream of saving humanity through the creation of a family unit. The young woman protests that she could not possibly become a mother to the billions of children she would be agreeing to look after, underlining the unrealizable dimensions of the young man's ideals. These ideals might be as unrealistic as those of the young revolutionary, but striking about them is their emphasis on harmony rather than violence. The young actor's rejection of the use of violence to attain noble ideals stands in stark contrast to the director's earlier beliefs and his preoccupation with repeating a past that is marked by violence.

The young woman playing Makhmalbaf's cousin offers an even bolder vision by introducing an element of play into the serious matter of saving humanity and the re-enactment of the past. She insists that the young man present his request to her in a Yazdi accent, the accent he had used in playing in a theatrical piece at school. This is not merely an invitation to a world of make-believe. The playfulness could also be seen as an entry into a liminal space in which new configurations of meaning can be articulated. Here I draw on Victor Turner's concept of the liminal and its generative potential: "'Meaning' in culture tends to be *generated* at the interfaces between established cultural subsystems, though meanings are then institutionalized and consolidated at the centers of such systems. Liminality is a temporal interface whose properties invert those of the already consolidated order that constitutes any specific cultural 'cosmos'" (p. 41). The cultural "cosmos" inverted in the film is the one determined by inscriptions of the past, specifically the director and the former policeman's. The young actors chosen are reminded over and over again, through both directors, of the need to act according to the scripts they have been given. Yet, throughout the process of filming they transgress the script. Ultimately they subvert the most crucial moment, the scene of the confrontation between the young revolutionary and the policeman, replacing the violent conflict with gestures of peace. The bread and the flowerpot take the place of the knife and the gun in the last shot.

Affected in this process is the vision of personal history. Recalling the past, the film suggests, is to enter into negotiation with seemingly self-contained personal histories and to encounter hitherto unimagined admixtures. *A Moment of Innocence* also implies that "[t]here is no part of [a] personal record that is not at the same time the record of a community, a society, a nation, an age" (Hillman, p. 45). What we see especially in the ending of the film is a laying claim to these broader dimensions of individual histories. It privileges the young actors and shows them controlling the outcome, pointing out that the past must enter into dialogue with the present. The episode from Makhmalbaf's own revolutionary past can also be seen as a metaphor for the history of the Iranian revolution, implicitly inviting viewers to engage in an examination and interrogation of that history.

The camera and the medium employed by Makhmalbaf are not secondary to this message. Moving images have the potential to free Iran from the revolutionary images with which it has been saddled since the first days of the revolution and the hostage crisis. The images by which Iranian revolution represented itself to the world were underwritten by anger and violence. As Edward Said points out in his *Covering Islam*, the Iranian hostage takers believed that they were manipulating the tools of the aggressors:

> Throughout the period, it became evident that the Iranians were using the media to what they considered their advantage .... Frequently the students in the embassy would schedule "events" to meet satellite deadlines and nightly news broadcasts in the United States. From time to time Iranian officials indicated that it was their plan thus to turn the American people against the policy of their government. This was a bad miscalculation at the outset. (p. 76)

Said goes on to say that the medium the Iranian hostage takers believed to be controlling led to internal problems whose effects continue to be played out in Iran: "No one can doubt... that the hostage crisis played a still insufficiently analyzed role in the complex dynamics of Iran's continuing revolution, although it has seemed that the cause of retrogressive elements in Iranian society was helped by the protracted embassy holding" (p. 100).

It could also be said that the Iranian revolution had a powerful visual dimension in the form of posters and icons. Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi analyze the multiple layers of meaning deployed in revolutionary posters and argue that "[t]hey demonstrate... a confluence of local Iranian and global world-historical traditions and processes, and provide material for speculatively exploring the aesthetic means of different revolutions for representing changes in consciousness" (p. 353). Yet, revolutionary posters, like other icons of the revolution, are not intended to evoke imaginative responses. They are primarily tools of propaganda, positing cohesion and unison. Like Makhmalbaf's own early propagandist work, they become means of enforcing the revolutionary ideals. Such posters continue to adorn Iranian streets and demand consolidated images of the revolution, but twenty years later post-revolution Iranian culture draws on other modes of self-representation.

It is perhaps not by chance that cinema, or moving images, has become one of the most productive sites for expressions of the ever-evolving meanings of the revolution for Iranian society. Rather than capturing a single and singular image of Iran, the new Iranian cinema emphasizes the potential, the need for, and the reality of change. Makhmalbaf's *A Moment of Innocence* epitomizes this movement. It mobilizes the past, but places it within constantly changing frames, activating a process of transformative remembering that "involves the capacity to recognize new patterns or relationships in previously available information. Events that never were forgotten may assume emergent meaning and emotional vividness in light of the nascent awareness or newly found possibilities for framing and interpreting the past" (Haaken, pp. 14–15). Making an episode from his own youth the subject of a film about changed ideals and realities, Makhmalbaf offers his own life as an emblem of the transition from a generation consumed with revolution, war, destruction and violence to a generation determined to open a new vista on the future. Like Makhmalbaf's revolutionary past, Iran's revolutionary history, the film suggests, might be best used in artistic recreations rather than obsessive and confining repetitions.

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