Salaam Cinema: On Mohsen Makhmalbaf

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Salaam Cinema: On Mohsen Makhmalbaf

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In Jerusalem these days, reality seems to be breaking through reality. It's the cultural equivalent of a sonic boom: "I love you!" A hailstorm of applause showers the slight man in black, who has just bounded down the theater aisle and leapt onto the stage like a game show host or a mega-church preacher. "Let's have a hope for peace between Israel and Iran!" The clapping grows still louder. "I have a dream one day I invite all of you to Iran!" The whistling lifts to tea-kettle pitch as the crowd rises to its feet and he bows, palms pressed together, Namaste-style, then prostrates himself—possibly he's joking, but maybe he's not—and promptly springs back up to the microphone, declaring in his lilting, Persian-tinted English, "I don't know what to say after seeing your reaction, but I love you, I love you, I love you!"

The great Iranian film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf has come to Jerusalem. The former Islamic militant and death-row prisoner under the shah, current secular activist for a democratic Iran, and political exile from his homeland has come to Jewish West Jerusalem—that is, Israel. A guest of the thirtieth Jerusalem International Film Festival, which in July screened his newest movie, The Gardener, as well as a selection of his earlier work, Makhmalbaf was also in town to accept a special award from the festival, "In the Spirit of Freedom." He may be the first director from the Islamic Republic to have visited the Jewish state; he is certainly the first to have made a movie in this country. (Ostensibly a documentary meditation on Bahaism, The Gardener was shot in Israel with a few digital cameras by Makhmalbaf and his son Maysam.) There is no doubt that he is the first to stand before a large crowd of Israelis and grin beatifically as he professes his love for each and every one of them.

It's hard to believe that he has come, but the unreality of his arrival seems somehow fitting, since most of Makhmalbaf's movies are playfully serious (or seriously playful) meditations on actuality and illusion. Earlier in the day, he said that in being here, he was happy to have "land[ed] on [the] moon," and from my seat in a packed auditorium at the Jerusalem Cinematheque, surrounded

by a mostly Jewish audience, it feels as though we've all just taken a collective leap onto a mysterious but alluring extraterrestrial landscape—a tranquil, reflected image of the tense Middle East we actually live in. Lest we forget: the day after the festival ended, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared on CBS's Face the Nation, looking like the Grim Reaper in a businessman's blue tie and warning that he "won't wait until it's too late" to take military action against Iran because "all the problems that we have…will be dwarfed by this messianic, apocalyptic, extreme regime that would have atomic bombs."

For all the grandstanding of Makhmalbaf's Jerusalem charm offensive, he does have a way of cutting through the notorious "difficulty" of Middle Eastern diplomacy, to say nothing of the hatemongering and saber-rattling that attend it. "I love you!" he insists in the simplest, most unwavering terms. "I love you!"

Or is such simplicity itself—in this pathologically gnarled context—the most slyly sophisticated sort of complication? Like his movies, his presence here sends one wandering down a fascinating, disarming hall of mirrors.

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These are strange days in Jerusalem. On the eve of the month of Ramadan and at the height of summer vacation—as, nearby, Egypt seethes and Syria smolders—the city is both more bustling and more bewildering than ever, and Makhmalbaf's unlikely appearance only underscores the confusing nature of this Middle Eastern cultural moment.

In the upscale Jewish neighborhoods on the western side of town, things are looking surprisingly swank. Petunias have been planted en masse in the municipal parks. A hundred new street cleaners have been enlisted by city hall to sweep up after the hordes crowding the pedestrian malls. The Ottoman-era train station—derelict for decades—has been tastefully refurbished and has just opened its doors as an elegant entertainment compound featuring chic restaurants, an airy gallery, and a pretty, landscaped foot and bike path that runs, High Line–style, along the old tracks. Mahaneh Yehudah, the outdoor market, is booming. Alongside the well-established vegetable and spice stands, funky bars and trendy cafés have popped up; the place is teeming with locals and tourists, old ladies dragging shopping carts and young hipsters taking drags from their hand-rolled cigarettes.

Palestinians, too, mingle easily in this mix, in large part because of the municipal light rail, which has been running for two years now. For almost a decade, the construction of the rail line and its protracted delays threatened to destroy already depressed downtown West Jerusalem by rendering it a dusty, nearly impassible building site. Now, winding like some great electric eel down Jaffa Road, the rail line cuts a sleek, silvery figure that, in the gritty context of Jerusalem, appears almost fantastical. The gentle tolling of the train's bell adds to that enchanted feel—as does the utterly mixed population riding the train itself.

Twelve years ago, at the height of the second intifada, when suicide bombers were blowing themselves up with scary regularity in the middle of downtown and the very presence of a Palestinian on an Israeli bus was enough to make most of the Jewish riders squirm, it would have been next to impossible to imagine the scene on the light rail this summer: ultra-Orthodox women in wigs and Muslim women with their hijabs, miniskirted Jewish teenagers and young Palestinian men in jeans not only sitting and standing calmly side by side, but often packed together without panic as the train glides its way from stop to stop. They rarely exchange a word, but there they are, shoulder to shoulder, in the air-conditioned slither toward de facto "unification" of the city. Each station is announced in Hebrew, Arabic and English, which in any other town might seem an ordinary nod to the linguistic needs of the various people using the train. But in traumatized, sectarian Jerusalem, the co-existence of these languages, as of the riders themselves, is startling for its sheer normalcy.

If things seem better in the old-new city of Jerusalem, it's in part because they're worse. Israel technically annexed East Jerusalem after the 1967 war, but it has taken some four and a half decades to create the infrastructural facts on the ground that make the occupation such a concrete and humdrum state of affairs. The light rail is just one example, erasing as it does the border between the Jewish and Arab sides of town. In the last ten years or so, the notorious wall or "separation barrier" has, in addition, cut East Jerusalem off from the West Bank, rendering this once-thriving urban hub of Palestinian life little more than a demoralized and demoralizing backwater. This is no doubt one of the main reasons why so many Palestinians have decided this summer to go west to eat ice cream and shop in pop-music-blasting Jewish shoe stores. It's a chance to pass through the looking glass that this city often is and spend just a few day-tripping hours on the cleaner, more prosperous side of town.

Systematically neglected by the municipality and battered by the larger political and economic situation, East Jerusalem is home to 39 percent of the city's total population, though its people receive only a small fraction of the city's resources. West Jerusalem has forty-two post offices, East Jerusalem, nine; the West boasts seventy-seven municipal preschools, the East has ten; eighteen welfare offices function in West Jerusalem, while the whole of the East counts three. Since 1967, a third of Palestinian land in East Jerusalem has been expropriated. According to Israel's National Insurance Institute, the poverty rate among the city's Palestinians is 79.5 percent. Of East Jerusalem's children, 85 percent live below the poverty line. (The percentage of poor Jewish Jerusalemites is 29.5 percent.) The numbers are at once shameful, slightly numbing and somehow too banal to register with most of the world at large, though this is the way a viable Palestinian Jerusalem ends: not with a bang but a bureaucratic whimper.

Not one to be swayed by such sad statistics, Israel's public security minister must have felt it his duty to protect the people of Israel from the existential threat posed by a children's puppet festival that was scheduled to open at the Palestinian national theater in East Jerusalem on June 22. Claiming without

proof that the festival was being sponsored by the Palestinian Authority, in violation of the Oslo Accords, the minister banned it and ordered the theater shuttered for eight days and its director summoned for questioning by the Shin Bet. Protests by Palestinian and international organizations did no good, and a solidarity campaign by various Israeli puppeteers—including no less than Elmo from the local version of Sesame Street—proved useless. The theater remained closed, and the impoverished kids of East Jerusalem were left to entertain themselves in the heat.

Back in West Jerusalem, hawkish high-tech entrepreneur Mayor Nir Barkat decided that what the people of his city really needed this summer was a $4.5 million Formula One race car exhibition. Blocking off traffic on the city's main thoroughfares for several days, the mayor, a self-declared "motor sports fan and racer," arranged for a flashy parade of Ferraris, Audis and Grand Prix motorcycles to vroom past the old city walls in the rather mind-bogglingly named Peace Road Show. It is, declared the mayor in his American-sounding English, "great branding, great marketing," and "great for promoting peace and co-existence."

And about that peace and co-existence: Barkat also found time this summer to bestow honorary Jerusalem citizenship on billionaire casino tycoon and ideological sugar daddy Sheldon Adelson and his Israeli-born wife. Adelson took the occasion of the Jerusalem ceremony held in his honor to dismiss the Palestinians as "southern Syrians" and to claim that Yasir Arafat "came along with a pitcher of Kool-Aid and gave it to everybody to drink and sold them the idea of Palestinians." At this festive gathering, complete with the reading of a fancy parchment scroll and the crooning of "That's Amore" by singers wearing Paul Revere–style tricorne hats, Barkat declared the Adelsons "Zionist heroes of the city." At the same time, native-born Palestinians from the neighborhood of Silwan are not considered citizens at all, honorary or otherwise. They are, instead, "permanent residents," many of them threatened with eviction by the municipality, which is working closely with Jewish settler groups and various government agencies to demolish their homes and put in their place a pseudo-biblical park and tourist attraction called the King's Garden. The city has also recently approved plans to construct apartments for Jewish settlers in the heart of another Palestinian neighborhood, Sheikh Jarrah, where families are literally being thrown out into the street. That's amore.

The mayor is a busy man. In late May, he squeezed in a trip to Los Angeles, where he attended a reception hosted in his honor by the evangelical birther Pat Boone, who long ago did his bit for Israel by writing and singing the lyrics to the theme for the movie Exodus. ("This land is mine, God gave this land to me /This brave, this golden land to me.") While in LA, Barkat met with Hollywood producers, to whom he offered special tax breaks and subsidies to shoot their movies in the Holy City, where a special department has already been established to handle film permits and logistical matters. It's "not only good business. It's good Zionism," he enthused to The Hollywood Reporter. "It's the right thing to do."

Which brings us back to Mohsen Makhmalbaf.

* * *

I first heard his name when I was working as a film critic for a daily newspaper in Jerusalem during the 1990s. It was in 1997, at an earlier Jerusalem Film Festival, that I encountered his movies, and I was immediately captivated. Reckoning with Makhmalbaf's work was compelling then, and the pleasure it affords persists to this day. In fact, thinking back across all the thousands of hours of sitting in the dark and at my desk that being a film critic entailed, I can say that seeing his movies—and, to a lesser though still important degree, those of his countryman Abbas Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf's gifted oldest daughter, Samira—did more to rearrange in a lasting way my sense of what film could do than any others I took in during nearly a decade at the job.

Here was a director—and writer, producer, editor, performer and sometimes cameraman—working with the most minimal of technical means, and often with nonactors and half-improvised dialogue, in the freshest and most surprising fashion. His movies seemed to strip the cinema back to its vital essence: no pyrotechnic special effects, no outsized crew, no corn-starchy, plot-thickening additives or amped-up soundtracks. Instead, they spilled with a remarkably sophisticated sense of dramatic freedom, social consciousness, visual depth, humor, moral resonance and human possibility. His films have something of the spare, true-to-life quality and political urgency of those by the Italian Neorealists, but the cultural wellsprings that flow into Makhmalbaf's movies are completely different, blending as they do elements of Sufi poetry, Persian and Arabic storytelling techniques, and the symmetries and vibrancies of Persian miniature painting.

They're defined as well by their constantly self-questioning nature. Makhmalbaf's movies seem to anticipate their own critique, or to suggest various theses and antitheses to which viewers are welcome to bring their own syntheses. As a critic, I found this highly refreshing, as though he'd started a conversation and expected the audience to continue it: his films are essentially dialogic, even Socratic. Salaam Cinema, for instance, is a wise, wry examination of the power dynamics at work in a casting call for one of Makhmalbaf's own films—and, by unspoken extension, in a repressive society at large. Perhaps his best movie, A Moment of Innocence, features another character named Makhmalbaf, played by Makhmalbaf, who decides to make a film about a seminal event in his youth. It takes up memory, the movies and the subject of regret better, and more poignantly, than almost any other film I know. It's also a masterpiece of scale—a tiny picture that somehow opens up onto whole galaxies of feeling.

For someone sitting in Jerusalem and watching his movies, there was an almost electric jolt of recognition, something like déjà vu: Tehran could be Jerusalem. Israel and Iran may be each other's sworn enemies, but their back alleys look like our back alleys. And it wasn't just that the stony passageways

were physically similar to the ones I walk through every day, but that Makhmalbaf had an uncanny ability to observe and convey his psychic surroundings—and in doing so, reveal to us our own. He has said that he used to view the camera as a weapon, while now he sees it as a mirror "to show people themselves."

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"The first thing that shocked me" about Israel, says Makhmalbaf, now dressed in a white shirt and looking slightly subdued the morning after the first Jerusalem screening of The Gardener, is that "it was like Iran. I felt I was in Iran." And "especially in Haifa, many alleys and streets—the same as Iran." Even in Jerusalem, he says, the markets were just like those in his hometown. It is extremely odd to be sitting just upstairs from the theater where, some sixteen years ago, I first saw one of his movies, and hearing Makhmalbaf say the exact same thing—or the mirror image of the exact same thing—I'd thought back then: Jerusalem could be Tehran.

His new movie is designed, as he puts it, to shed "light on religion's power"—though, as always, his approach is tantalizingly ambiguous: religion's power to do good? Its power to harm? Set in the peculiarly pristine Bahai gardens that cascade like a bright green cataract down the terraced northern face of Mount Carmel in Haifa, the movie also features several scenes that take place at the relic-cluttered holy sites of Jerusalem's Old City. It's hard not to see the two towns as somehow representing the opposing points of view that make up the movie's dialectical structure and are outlined in an early scene by Makhmalbaf's pop-star-handsome son Maysam, who explains in voiceover that the film will alternate between "two angles": the younger man's camera will be directed at religion's negative aspects, while the elder Makhmalbaf will, well, accentuate the positive. The movie unfolds as a conversation between these apparently dueling perspectives.

While that may sound reductive, even simple-minded, remember who's in charge here. Makhmalbaf began his life as an extremely devout Muslim and, after attempting to steal a gun from one of the shah's policemen, spent five years in prison, during which time he was tortured and just escaped the firing squad. After the 1979 revolution and his release, he became a hugely popular filmmaker and self-declared agnostic as well as an outspoken supporter of a secular, democratic Iran. He left the country when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005 but remains an underground culture hero back home, and he is still considered enough of a threat to the regime that the Supreme Leader has, he says, sent teams of secret police, armed with bombs and grenades, to try to harm or intimidate the filmmaker, who has been forced to flee with his family from Afghanistan to Tajikistan to Paris and now to London. He is at present persona absolutely non grata in Iran, where his films and writing are banned—though they circulate widely in pirated form and on the Internet.

All of which may explain why the prospect of shooting a movie in Israel and then attending its gala opening in Jerusalem seems not to have fazed him.

Though the penalty in Iran for visiting the so-called Zionist entity is a five-year prison term, a man with a death sentence hanging over his head may feel such a threat a kind of furlough. His visit to Israel did elicit various predictable denunciations: the director of Iran's cinematic organizations condemned his "embrace of the usurpers of Jerusalem and…criminal Zionism," and a group of Iranian writers, artists and scholars criticized him harshly for not boycotting the festival and its Israeli sponsors: "We are deeply dismayed at Mr. Makhmalbaf's disregard for the global movement for Palestinian human rights and the implicit support for Israel's apartheid policies." In response, Makhmalbaf told the Persian service of the BBC that "boycotting and writing statements does not solve anything. Why don't the intellectuals try to solve the problems by traveling and having dialogue? Why is there no effort to remove religious hatred?"

In this charged context, the choice to make Bahaism the "star" of The Gardener is pointed. It's also clever, since the subject of the fate and faith of this relatively minor religious group allows him to sidle up to bigger questions that haunt the Middle East in general—without addressing them head-on. Established in Iran around 170 years ago, Bahaism has been under siege there since its inception: its founder was sent into exile and suffered various persecutions as he wandered. Even today, the religion's Iranian adherents are severely oppressed—harassed, jailed and sometimes executed.

Although Makhmalbaf says that he set out to make a movie about the human rights abuses suffered by the Bahai in Iran, in the end his film evolved into a far more philosophical affair—an attempt to understand not just this particular religion but the impulse toward religion in general. As presented in The Gardener, Bahaism is the ultimate peace-loving potpourri, blending turn-the-other-cheek Christian acceptance of one's enemies with a Buddhist desire for self-knowledge, a Sufi sense of the unity of all creation, and a Hindu belief in a kind of karma, together with total Gandhi-esque devotion to the spirit of nonviolence. "Sometimes people are mean to us," a beaming, American-born blond Bahai explains to a group of small children in the film. "But we," she adds, surrounded by immaculate banks of flowers, "just show them kindness."

As the lights come up in the theater, a friend wrinkles her nose and pronounces the film "a marshmallow." On the one hand, I know what she means. It's not just the treacly tone of the Makhmalbafs' various interlocutors that makes a somewhat cranky Jewish viewer shift in her seat. The film's particular brand of petal-strewn prettiness—its saturated palette and occasionally precious camera angles, reminiscent of Makhmalbaf's more deliberately "decorative" movies, Gabbeh, Kandahar and The Silence—does at times suggest the sugary filling of a cinematic s'more.

On the other hand, this is the restless, relentless Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and my own sense is that The Gardener isn't a pious prescription so much as the next chapter in the director's ongoing exchange with his audience about the nature of reality and illusion, truth and consequences. His "characters" may offer up

various high-minded devotional maxims, but that doesn't mean he himself subscribes to them wholesale. His son's onscreen persona repeatedly articulates his impatience with such righteous rhetoric, and after my conversation with Makhmalbaf (who gently points out that he was the author of his son's lines in the script), it seems clear that he is more skeptical than not about the nature of organized religion and aware of the possibly cataclysmic dangers of too fervent faith, especially in this part of the world. In the end neither "for" nor "against," the movie offers an unusually subtle fusion of the two purportedly oppositional points of view.

If anything, Makhmalbaf's own religion seems to have more to do with filmmaking itself, which, he says in The Gardener, is the extension of his eye, a kind of meditation. "I want," he says in an early scene, "to learn to see better." Though when I ask him if the movies are his religion, he corrects me: "Morality," he says, "is my religion." By which he means, he says, human dignity: "We've lost that, everywhere."

"So for you, the camera is a way to get closer to that morality?"

"Absolutely." Makhmalbaf then launches into a wistful disquisition on the need for mutual respect and the loss of that throughout the world—in the politicians' offices, in the clerics' chambers, in Israel, in Iran. "Where," the director wonders, "are we going?"

Where are we going, indeed? It's a question I continue to ask as I wander out into the strong July light and hear the tram bell chime sweetly. Lavish race cars and locked-up puppets, petunia-filled parks and expropriated land, Sheldon Adelson and Mohsen Makhmalbaf—Jerusalem has something for everyone this summer. I, too, would like to see better.

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