



The Apple (Sib)

Director: Samira Makhmalbaf

Production Companies: Makhmalbaf Productions, MK2 Productions

Production Company: Cinema Workshop *

Assistant Directors: Marzieh Meshkini, Akbar Meshkini

Screenplay: Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Director of Photography: Ebrahim Ghafouri

Assistant Photography: Mohammad Ahmadi

Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Sound: Behrouz Shahamat

Subtitles: J. Miller, S. Farsi

Subtitles Processed by: C.M.C. (Paris)

Cast:

Massoumeh Naderi

Zahra Naderi

Ghorban Ali-Naderi

Azizeh Mohamadi

Zahra Sagharisaz

Amir Hossein Khosrojerdi

Iran/France 1997

85 mins

Woman with a Movie Camera is generously supported by Jane Stanton

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WOMAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA

The Apple (Sib)

Introduced by programmer Jelena Milosavljevic

Samira Makhmalbaf on 'The Apple'

How did you first come across the story of The Apple?

I saw a report about the family on television on Wednesday night and the following Sunday I was shooting. A very short part of my film's opening is taken from that television programme and after that there's a brief section shot by us on video, because the camera wasn't ready. The rest is on 35mm.

I couldn't wait to start because I was sure the girls would change very quickly. And over the 11 days of shooting they did develop a lot – you can see it on the screen. They go to school now: you wouldn't believe they're the same people. They weren't mentally retarded – they're so clever – just socially retarded because of having no communication with the outside world.

Was it difficult to persuade the parents to participate in the film?

The mother is from Azerbaijan and doesn't speak Persian, only Turkish. She's blind and so pessimistic she doesn't want to talk to anybody. The person whose permission I had to get was the father, so I went to the welfare centre on the first day to see him. I didn't ask him anything, I just listened to him. Maybe I was the only person to do that – everyone else was condemning him. Soon he started to trust me and took me to his house. I lived there while we were shooting.

How much of the film is scripted?

We shot in chronological order, with everyone – social workers, the family, the neighbour – playing themselves except for the two little girls who befriend the twins, who are my cousins, and the man selling watches, who is my grandfather. I didn't have a script: I didn't want to write one before I got to know the family. Every night I talked to my father and he wrote down notes for the following day, without dialogue and without details. He edited the footage day by day, as we were shooting. I tried not to dictate to anybody what to say, but I was fairly sure that, for instance, if I showed the father a newspaper article attacking him, he would become upset.

These are very simple people – were you concerned at any point that you might be exploiting them?

You sense the father's anger, but he is not angry about making the film. I think one reason is that he has the chance to express his motives. I couldn't just go there and say, 'OK, the father is guilty, let's take the children away from him and the problem will be solved.' I wanted to know what ideas made him – despite loving his daughters – do such a thing. I don't judge, I just show things as they are. Let people look at themselves and see what is wrong and what is right; if they want to change, they can.

Certain images recur, for instance the apple with which a little boy tempts the girls and their mother. Does this have the same mythical significance in Iran as it does for a Judeo-Christian audience?

The apple in Iranian poetry is the symbol of life and knowledge, as in the biblical story of Adam and Eve – we have a similar story in the Koran. But I found this element in the children's own world, I didn't just invent it. Everyone was so worried about their future, but when I looked at them they were just eating apples and enjoying life. So I decided to keep the apples in the narrative to the end.

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And the mirror the social worker gives the children, so they can see themselves for the first time?

Everybody uses mirrors, but women more than men. Women look in the mirror and find themselves. Even the mother, who is blind, looks at herself in the last scene. That's something I didn't expect. I asked her to go out, though I wasn't sure if she would – she prefers to stay inside, lock the door and make a prison for herself in order to be safe. Then she did go out, but first she stood in front of the mirror. And the only time she laughed in the film – maybe in her entire life – was in that scene, which may be a sign of hope. But all this happened in reality; I could never have thought it up myself.

So the film is a mix of documentary and fable.

It is documentary in the sense that everybody is playing themselves and I didn't tell them what to do or say. And also because everything that happens relates to an element in their own lives. But it is fiction in that it has a storyline and some of it comes from our imagination, like the idea of having the social worker lock the father up.

Are there many female directors in Iran, and what kind of pressures and prejudices did you encounter when you made the film?

There are five others apart from me. It's not easy, but it's not impossible either. There are laws that are written and laws that are unwritten, but which people really believe in: our problem more than anything is one of cultural tradition. No one says a woman can't be a director, but the way they treat you in school, you grow up as a second-class citizen. And how, as a second-class citizen, can you have a first-class job?

When I went to the poor neighbourhood where the family lives, at first it was hard to direct all these men who were older than me. But you can always manage. After the first five minutes, I didn't care what they thought of me. The story was so powerful I was totally involved in it. And once I'd finished *The Apple* I travelled with it all over the world, and I found that everywhere women's prospects are worse than men's.

What made you want to become a film director?

There are many reasons. Of course one of them is that my father is a filmmaker. And my mother loved movies too. When I was growing up we couldn't see films from other countries, only Iranian films. But I could watch my parents at work on location and I was curious about cinema. Even so, that doesn't explain why some filmmakers have children who don't become filmmakers themselves.

*Did you like working with your father on *The Apple* or did you find it inhibiting?*

(Laughs) I think it's always hard for two directors to work with each other. It would have been difficult for me if my father had come to the location, but he didn't. And a week after shooting *The Apple* we went off and started making *The Silence*. I would like to write my next script myself, but I'll have to wait and see what happens.

Perhaps you had a personal stake in the theme of daughters attempting to assert their independence of their father?

I think I was drawn to the story because it's about the relationship between father and daughters. And we are trying to resolve that relationship too, because we are father and daughter as well.

Interview by Sheila Johnston, *Sight and Sound*, January 1999