

The Cyclist (Bicycleran)

Director, Writer: Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Cinematography: Ali Reza Zarrindast. Music: Majid Entezami. © 1987 Janbazan Foundation.

In 1997, as he was leaving a retrospective on the films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Canadian film critic Donato Totaro overheard one enthusiastic viewer remark: “ça, c’est cinéma d’auteur.”¹ As international admiration has grown for the achievements of the Iranian film industry during the past two decades,² so too has the stature and prestige of Makhmalbaf. While Abbas Kiarostami remains perhaps the most well known and respected of Iran’s filmmakers, the enormously talented, eclectic, and imaginative Makhmalbaf is clearly the leading figure among the new generation of Iranian directors.

As remarkable as his films are, Makhmalbaf’s background and path to filmmaking are perhaps even more so.³ Growing up in a deeply religious, lower-middle-class family, he became a dedicated and active Muslim revolutionary in his early teens. At seventeen, his failed attempt at killing a policeman landed him in jail, where he remained until 1978, when the Shah’s government crumbled. Upon his release, he served in the Islamic government, selecting people to fill various ministerial positions. Very quickly, however, his hopes for a new Iran were shaken, as he watched the various factions emerge in the struggle for power. “Fascism took hold. And I decided right then that even if we were to undergo thirty more revolutions . . . until our culture undergoes an essential change, nothing will be altered.”⁴

After six months, he left government service to work in radio as a writer. Here again, factionalism dominated, as three groups vied with one another to present their message to the public. It was during this period that Makhmalbaf disassociated himself from all political organizations. Despite the continued efforts by the various groups to win him over, he refused to join any of them.

However, regardless of his disillusionment with revolutionary politics, Makhmalbaf remained dedicated to the ideals of the revolution. When his position at the radio station ended, he decided that he could best aid the revolution through art. Condemning both pre-revolutionary and secular art as corrupt, he dedicated himself with the fervor of a committed ideologue to creating a true Islamic art. In 1982, with little formal education, having spent a month studying the technical aspects of filmmaking, and without ever having handled a camera before, he made *Nasuh’s Repentance*.

While this film and the two that followed supported the ideals of the revolution, Makhmalbaf’s increasing dedication to art seems to have shaken his ideological certainties. By about 1984, he was also becoming disillusioned with the new government, which, he felt, was committed more to rhetoric than to making necessary changes in Iran.

Questioning what he had previously accepted without question, the absolutes that had composed his world view gradually gave way to subjectivism where “there is no center of truth . . . I’ve moved toward life and humanity, away from deadly serious subjects.”⁵ No longer associated with any political or religious movement, Makhmalbaf today uses his stature to encourage others to thoughtfully make their own choices rather than uncritically following others, including himself.

As he surveys his life to this point, he presents it as a series of dramatic changes that directed and clarified his focus. “When I was a child, I started going to the mosque; I wanted to save humanity. After growing a little older, I wanted to save my country; now, I think, I make films in order to save myself.”⁶

What accompanies Makhmalbaf’s remarkable transformation from an Islamic revolutionary to a humanist artist is a striking openness, and a passion to discover as many points of view as possible on a given subject. In discussing how he educated himself about filmmaking, the former ideologue explains that: “I used the same method I had used in prison, something that I’d learned from the other prisoners. It was to collect everything I could on a certain topic, read it all comparatively, and come to some conclusion.”⁷ This approach helps to explain Makhmalbaf’s personal and extremely eclectic style. In contrast to his first films, which revealed the filmmaker’s inexperience and lack of formal training, those of his second period, which dates from about 1986, clearly benefited from his extensive reading about filmmaking techniques and from the availability of video archives that the revolutionary committees had established. Although he claims that literature was more important than films in his development and has a poor opinion of most of those he watched, he does think highly of Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963), De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), and Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (1987).⁸

Having lost confidence that the revolutionary government would improve peoples’ lives, Makhmalbaf made three films in this period which address social problems. One of these is *The Cyclist* (1987). It appeared at numerous film festivals and won the Best Film Award at the 1989 Rimini Festival and the 1991

Hawaii Festival. In many ways, this film is the work of a man who is beginning to hit his stride as a filmmaker.

This film, like so many other post-revolutionary Iranian films, is very much in the Italian neorealist tradition. This style focuses on ordinary, usually working-class, people struggling with a single large problem. Most, if not all, of the action occurs on location and usually outdoors. The environment in which the action occurs can best be described as secular and humanistic. Even though Iran is a thoroughly Islamic country with a very visible and influential clergy, religion has little place in these films. The main characters must resolve their problems using their own natural abilities. They do not look for divine or ecclesiastical aid, nor do they receive it. Moreover, these films emphasize individualism. While the main characters are part of a highly structured society, they receive little if any help from other people or from social institutions. They struggle with a problem that is of enormous importance to them, but is of little concern to society. And finally, these films tend to be open-ended. Although Iranian films usually end with a sense of optimism while Italian neorealist films tend to be pessimistic or tragic, neither offers clear closure. For better or worse, life goes on, and the audience is left to speculate about what follows.

The film was inspired by an experience from Makhmalbaf's youth.⁹ When he was ten, a Pakistani cyclist—"A tall thin man with a black top coat and a tired face"¹⁰—came to Tehran and proposed to ride for ten consecutive days to raise money for flood victims. Viewers paid a small fee to enter the coliseum. Within a few days, a bazaar appeared with merchants hawking their wares. Many in the crowd were skeptical of the entire enterprise, believing that the cyclist slept when people went home for the night. Deciding to discover the truth for themselves, late one night Makhmalbaf and some of his friends managed to sneak out of their houses and into the silent and darkened coliseum where "the cyclist was cycling all alone as if he is doing it for god's [sic] eyes."¹¹ By the seventh day the cyclist collapsed and rumors spread that he had died. The bazaar remained, however, continuing to do a thriving business.

In making *The Cyclist*, Makhmalbaf transformed his main character into an impoverished Afghan immigrant, Nasim (Moharram Zaynalzadeh). With his wife Aya (Samira Makhmalbaf) suddenly hospitalized and needing an operation, he desperately seeks a way to pay for her medical care. Accompanied by his young son Jomeh (Mohammed-Reza Malecki), Nasim wanders the streets looking for an opportunity to raise money.

At one point he even fakes a suicide attempt in order to gain sympathy and money, but to no avail. Eventually he comes to the attention of a disreputable entrepreneur who has learned that in Afghanistan, Nasim was an endurance bicycling champion, having ridden for three consecutive days without stopping. Sensing an opportunity to make money, the man proposes that if Nasim can ride for seven straight days, he will give him the money for Aya's operation. With no alternative, Nasim accepts the offer and the entrepreneur immediately makes plans to enclose a vacant lot in order to charge an admission fee, as well as encourage betting on the outcome of Nasim's ordeal.

In many respects, *The Cyclist* has much in common with the greatest of Italian neorealist films, *The Bicycle Thief*. Each film concerns the plight of good but impoverished men, Nasim and Antonio Ricci, and bicycles are the means of solving their problems. For Nasim, completing a seven-day marathon will provide the money for his wife's operation. For Antonio, the bicycle will provide employment putting up posters in Rome. After years of being unemployed, he finally has the opportunity to support his family and regain his self-respect. Accompanying each man is a devoted young son, Jomeh and Bruno. Furthermore, these men live in societies with widespread poverty where people are so absorbed with their own welfare that they have little awareness of or interest in the concerns of others. Although institutions such as the police, the church, and government are prominent in these societies, they are of no help to either Nasim or Antonio.

For Antonio, the problem begins with the theft of his bike on his very first day at work. In desperation, he first reports the incident to the police, but quickly realizes that for them the theft of a bike is a very minor matter. When asked by a reporter what the issue was, the officer taking down Antonio's information responds: "No, nothing, just a bicycle." Although labor unionists do offer to help, their well-intentioned but almost comical search for bicycle parts in an open-air market has no chance of success. And when Antonio follows an elderly colleague of the thief into a church, the officials there show no interest in what Antonio has to say, and inadvertently help the old man to escape.

Having done everything possible to recover the bike but with no success, Antonio gives in to desperation and visits the apartment of an elderly neighborhood woman believed to possess supernatural powers. Early in the film, when his wife had turned to the same woman for help, he disdainfully asked: "How can a mother of two children and a head on her shoulders



Nasim receives a warning to end his marathon

think about such nonsense, such stupidity?" Now, it is he who offers the woman money only to be told: "Either you find it now, or you won't find it."

In *The Cyclist*, Makhmalbaf presents a society that is perhaps even more uncaring and materialistic than that of *The Bicycle Thief*. To emphasize this point and add a touch of reflexivity to the film, he shows some of his characters watching a television showing of Sidney Pollack's 1969 depression-era film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* It, like *The Cyclist*, presents a world where the weak and vulnerable have only themselves to rely upon, and at every turn people find ways to benefit from the misery of others.

From the very beginning, Nasim encounters only coldness and formality. Even those one might expect to be sympathetic to his plight are abrupt and dismissive. The doctor who informs him of his wife's condition insists on payment before performing the operation. "If she dies," he says, "it's not my fault." And when Nasim holds out what little money he has, a hospital official curtly rejects it because it is Afghan money.

Once Nasim begins the bicycle marathon, a circus atmosphere develops as both rich and poor flock to the tiny arena to be entertained, inspired, and to look for opportunities to make money. Almost immediately a fortune-teller and barber set up shop, while a hawker of nuts and crackers makes her way among the spectators. A blind accordionist, who it turns out is not blind, performs for small tips. And a motivational speaker brings his impoverished followers to be inspired by Nasim's ordeal.

While the activities of the humble contribute to creating a rather colorful and festive atmosphere, those of the rich and influential introduce a dark and perilous element to the spectacle. These men wager large sums on the outcome and are not prepared to lose graciously

(even though initially both sides took steps to ensure that the competition was fair).

They install a referee to keep a round-the-clock watch and a physician to periodically check Nasim's urine for stimulants. As Nasim perseveres, and it seems increasingly likely that he might actually complete the seven-day marathon, those who have bet against him attempt to sabotage the outcome. One has a truck drive into the arena and dump a load of bricks in Nasim's path. (Rather than end the competition, the entire audience, with the cyclist at its head, parades to another venue.) Another bribes the physician to drug Nasim's tea. As it turns out however, his nurse switches drinks and the doctor falls asleep instead. Still another stops young Jomeh in the street and offers to pay Aya's bills if he convinces his father to end his ride. And towards the end, in desperation, another has tacks thrown on the track, flattening the bike's tires. However, those who have wagered on the other side quickly produce another bike, and Nasim pedals on.

Dishonesty is certainly not confined to one side. Nasim's backers are equally prepared to fix the outcome. Late one night, when the arena is largely empty, and the referee has dozed off, Nasim himself collapses from exhaustion. The promoter of the spectacle rushes over, drags the barely conscious cyclist to his underground dwelling, and has one of his own men cover his face with Nasim's scarf and ride in his place. Then, with a knife in hand, he walks over to the "blind" accordionist, who has silently observed the entire incident, and says: "You betray me and I'm gonna cut your throat. No one knows you're not blind, but me." Calmly the accordionist reassures him: "I've bet on his winning myself." Although the referee awakes shortly afterwards, he never notices the switch. Later, the rejuvenated Nasim somehow returns undetected to his bicycle to continue the marathon.

As those in the audience each pursue their own goals, Nasim amazingly perseveres. Exhausted by his ordeal, he endures cold, rain, sleep deprivation, and sabotage attempts without complaint. Towards the end he even resorts to using toothpicks to prop his eyelids open. Only Jomeh cares for him, bringing him meager nourishment. The only time he shows animation and pleasure is when he hears the crowd, led by the shady businessman, call out his praises. "Nasim does wonders. Nasim does wonders." During these brief moments, the cyclist smiles and waves in acknowledgment and gratitude. The conclusion of the film is especially striking. With someone throwing water on Nasim, and his son slapping his face to keep him awake, the exhausted

cyclist somehow completes the final lap of his ordeal. As word spreads that victory is at hand, the crowd swells and becomes more animated, shouting his praises. Members of the media arrive to broadcast the details of this remarkable achievement to the nation. At the very same time, the entrepreneur who had arranged the entire event absconds with the money, leaving Nasim victorious but unable to pay for his wife's operation.

It is really at this point that Makhmalbaf parts company with De Sica by choosing not to end his film on a tragic note even though he easily could have done so. After all, despite fulfilling his part of the agreement, Nasim does not receive the money for Aya's operation. In *The Bicycle Thief*, despite all his efforts, Antonio fails to recover his bicycle and in desperation attempts to steal one. However, passersby chase him down and refrain from handing him over to the police only because they feel pity for the weeping Bruno, who has witnessed the entire event and rushed to be with his father. As the film ends, father and son walk silently home, hand-in-hand. The experience has left Antonio even worse off than he was at the beginning. He is not only unemployed again, but he has violated his own values and has humiliated himself in front of his son.

Makhmalbaf does not choose a tragic ending, but he avoids a conventionally happy one as well. Nasim does not triumphantly end his cycling, embrace his admiring son, and go to Aya's hospital bed. Instead, quite remarkably, he continues to circle the arena, oblivious to his son's cries that he has won and can finally rest. No longer hunched over the bike, expressionless, with barely enough energy to move the pedals, he now sits erect, looking refreshed, and riding with ease, animated by the shouts of praise from the admiring crowd: "Nasim is a hero . . . He is a legend." A television camera follows his movements, and a newsman reverently asks him: "What is your opinion about prosperity?" Having achieved what seemed unachievable, the man who, only a week before, was an insignificant and pathetic figure, has suddenly become a hero and a wise man.

In the wake of this newfound attention and adulation, it seems that Nasim has taken on a new persona. No longer the impoverished and desperate husband and father, he has become "Nasim the Marathon Cyclist," and "Nasim the Wise" whom people turn to for answers. His priorities now lie with his remarkable natural talents that have won the praises and admiration of

his audience, and perhaps, with the help of the media, the entire country.

Certainly *The Cyclist* and *The Bicycle Thief* end with their major problems still unresolved. Nasim must still try to raise the money for Aya's operation just as Antonio Ricci must continue to seek employment to support his family. While it is certainly unclear how or whether either man will achieve his goals, what is clear is that Nasim has already triumphed spiritually. More animated and self-confident, he is emotionally better prepared now to address his problems. For Antonio, the opposite is the case. Having suffered defeat and humiliation, one wonders whether he will ever generate the energy to secure employment in postwar Italy.

NOTES

1. D. Totaro, Mohsen Makhmalbaf: Retrospective, September 18, 1997, http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/9709/offscreen_reviews/makhmalbaf.html.
2. For good discussions of the achievements of the Iranian film industry, see the articles in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).
3. See Makhmalbaf's extended interview with Hamid Dabashi. H. Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 156–212. Also, H. Dabashi, "Dead Certainties: The Early Makhmalbaf," in *Iranian Cinema*, ed. Tapper, 117–53.
4. Dabashi, *Close Up*, 179.
5. Ibid., 188–9.
6. Ibid., 211.
7. Ibid., 185.
8. Interestingly, he has little regard for *Citizen Kane* (1941), and "people who say it is a great film are idiots who are afraid of being found out." Ibid., 186, 195.
9. For Makhmalbaf's full discussion of this incident, see Makhmalbaf Film House: Movie Section, <http://www.makhmalbaf.com/movies.php?m=22>.
10. Dabashi, *Close Up*, 5.
11. Ibid., 6.

STEPHEN WEINBERGER is Professor of History and Film Studies, and chairman of the History Department at Dickinson College. His primary interest is censorship and film. "Joe Breen's Oscar" was recently published in *Film History*.

ABSTRACT Mohsen Makhmalbaf, onetime Iranian revolutionary and self-taught filmmaker and humanist, has made a series of highly acclaimed and deeply personal films. *The Cyclist* has much in common with the style and content of Vittorio De Sica's neorealist classic, *The Bicycle Thief*. However, despite the similarities, Makhmalbaf, like his fellow filmmakers, has made neorealism distinctively Iranian.