

The Collective Performance of Female Youth in *The Apple* (1998)

by Rowena Santos Aquino

In this essay, I examine Iranian filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf's debut feature film, *The Apple* (1998). I argue that Makhmalbaf's film, and its use of social actor reenactment, gestures towards the creation of an alternative sociopolitical/cultural space of expression and action for female youth and women that recalibrates the relationship between society, audiovisual media, and the female body. It provides an instance of reimagining a space for collective performance of female voices that understands filmmaking as dialogic, multivocal, creative, and collaborative. I argue that reenactment is what enables this space and collective performance to emerge. To elaborate my argument, I contextualize *The Apple* in representations of children in Iranian cinema on the one hand, and the use of reenactment in documentary film on the other. I draw out in particular the documentary/fiction divide that factors into each of these representational systems. Through the reenactment of actual experiences performed by the social actors to whom these experiences belong, *The Apple* negotiates a forum for discussion of the intimate, politicized relationship between private and public that is often played out on female bodies in the context of contemporary post-revolutionary Iran. In the process, it presents a different conception of a kind of social activist documentary-fiction hybrid filmmaking where authorship is no longer singular but collective.

I situate these discussions in the larger sociopolitical/cultural context of the twining of media, society, and the state in Iran. This larger context manifests itself most explicitly on the female body, which must inflect any understanding and/or discussion of both representations of children in Iranian films and, by extension, the blurring of documentary and fiction, which includes the practice of reenactment. I begin with a brief summary of the film, followed by discussions of the elements that constitute the formal and thematic framework of my argument: the multiple significations of the appearance of children in contemporary Iranian films and the discourses that surround the use and concept of reenactment as an audiovisual strategy. I then put into dialogue these discussions and my critical reading of *The Apple*.

I. *The Apple* and Children

The Apple presents the lives of twelve-year-old twins Massoumeh and Zahra Naderi. Massoumeh and Zahra spent the first eleven years of their lives confined in their house by their parents Ghorban Ali Naderi and Zahra Saraghsadeh, in Tehran. Ghorban Ali states in the film the reasons for their confinement: one, his blind wife could not take care of them while outside, and two, he himself did not want his daughters to be the subject of male gazes. In addition to their confinement, they were rarely given baths and fed irregularly (this latter detail reflecting, in part, the family's destitute status). As a result of their confinement, at twelve years of age they could hardly speak or walk and had no socialization skills. The Naderis' neighbors became cognizant of the twins' confinement and eventually contacted the local welfare center to intervene in 1997. The welfare center took the twins from their house to give them haircuts, bathe, feed and school them. The welfare center also gave their parents an ultimatum: either they cease to lock the girls in

the house and wash them regularly or they will keep them under their care. This series of events reached the Iranian press, television and population in July 1997. Moved by the twins' constricted life experiences, filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf set out to make a film of their lives. In its collaboration with children as actors and its blurring of documentary and fiction to represent the family Naderi's experiences through reenactment, *The Apple* speaks to, yet is also distinct from, these two prominent characteristics of Iranian cinema.

The Apple's child protagonists contribute to the significant history of the appearance of children in Iranian films that stretches back to the pre-revolutionary 1960s. Founded in 1969, the government agency Center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (CIDCYA), known informally as Kanun, commissioned films with and for children.¹ But the frequent appearance of child protagonists in post-revolution Iranian cinema from 1980s to 2000s stems from a variety of factors, alongside the financial and thematic impetus provided by Kanun. One factor for filmmakers to turn to children was the growing pull towards non-professional actors, in contrast to the use of established professional actors before and immediately after the 1979 revolution. Nandini Dhar writes, "Within official Iranian policies and ideologies, there is a deep anti-cinema feeling which can be traced back to pre-revolutionary Iran. In that context, bringing children into film texts can also be regarded as a strategic move which helps to deflect official attention." On this note is the other factor of state censorship, in the sense that through children one can broach a range of issues, often involving representations of women, and attain a degree of physical intimacy that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate by the clerical state. In the wake of the revolution, Iranian filmmakers have had to deal with censorship dictated by Islamic laws, across various stages of production. Within the Supreme Cultural Revolutionary Council (SCRC), responsible for implementing and regulating guidelines regarding content, its main organization the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) stipulates that films must not show physical contact between man and woman (especially if they are not related or officially married) or a woman without *hejab* (Islamic dress, including the veil, that covers her body/shape and hair, but also connoting modest behavior). Such restrictions "may explain why some of the greatest Iranian films focus on children's lives or portray life outside on the street rather than inside the home" (Luce).²

This sociopolitical/cultural context must frame understanding and discussion of the appearance of children in Iranian films (though not to the point that it reductively overdetermines readings of films with children). Dhar writes, "Iranian filmmakers have transformed childhood into an aesthetic trope and the figure of the child into a site where the interrelationship between social power and identity categories can be discussed." As a result, children's presence in films is at once always actual and potentially allegorical, both documentary in that they are non-professional actors and fiction in that they are symbolic fictional figures/representatives. In *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997), both directed by Jafar Panahi, children pose as actual subjects in their own right but also as symbolic pathways towards more adult, sociopolitical themes. Each of these films has a female child protagonist whose trajectories across different social spaces can be read in an allegorical manner. In *The White Balloon*, a little girl traverses the alleyways and streets of her neighborhood in the hopes of buying a goldfish. Her mission

is constantly thwarted by everyday, potentially suspect encounters that detract from her main objective. In *The Mirror*, a young girl moves about the urban traffic around her school as she tries to find her way home. Neither of these films intensely provokes an allegorical reading. But the way in which the films create a narrative in terms of movement, mobility, and encounter speaks to the significance of the presence of children, especially female children, in Iranian films. For in a society such as Iran where understanding of gender roles/identities across all sectors of society and their maintenance rest on segregation, which circumscribes the spaces allotted to women in which to move and how to move in them, the idea and act of movement and mobility becomes politically charged. As Sarah Niazi so succinctly expresses, “The panoptic implementation of the cinematic hejab over films by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was dodged through cloaking philosophy and politics” in narratives that involve children as main protagonists. Deemed as non-sexual subjects, the brother and sister relationship in films such as *The White Balloon*, Majid Majidi’s *Children of Heaven* (2007), *Thief of Dolls* (Mohammad Reza Honarmand, 1989) and *Patal and Little Wishes* (Mas’ud Karamati, 1990) “behaved like a married couple, but were freer than any adult couple on screen. The girl, without veil or scarf, could easily accompany her brother/man in every situation, because they were children and were introduced as brother and sister” (Reza Sadr, 234-235). It is worth noting in this context CIDYA’s pivotal role in advancing representations of children in Iranian cinema that brings together the two factors of privileging non-professional actors and censorship involved in the appearance of children in film. CIDYA provided a source of funding for filmmakers that was not rigorously vetted by the state during the first decade of post-revolution Iran (Zeydabadi-Nejad).

II. Documentary and Fiction in Iranian Cinema

But it would be a mistake to assume that films with and about children are compromises in terms of more profound and complex issues, “only that such grown-up themes are often cloaked in the metaphorical raiment of children’s stories, which themselves frequently blur the line between documentary and fiction” (Bert Cardullo 649). The element of blurring the line between documentary and fiction that Cardullo attributes to Iranian films is one of the notable characteristics of contemporary Iranian cinema alongside the appearance of children. Indeed, the appearance of children and the play with the documentary/fiction divide arguably present two sides of the same coin. In addition to shooting on actual locations that confront actual situations that may lie outside the film’s production and story, the use of non-professional child actors conjures a tension between documentary and fiction insofar as their characters appear in a non-acting manner, which contributes to their affective immediacy and power. In this way, as Richard Tapper aptly describes, children “emerged both as surrogate adults and in remarkably realistic roles of their own” (16). *The Mirror* in particular expresses this connection between children and play with the documentary/fiction divide: forty minutes into the narrative of trying to find her way home from school, the non-professional child actor declares in the film that she no longer wants to act. At which point she leaves the film crew and tries to really go home; the camera continues to follow her and thus the tension between what is film and what is actual life escalates.

This tension between what is film and what is actual life, which operates tacitly within the appearance of children in Iranian films, also speaks to the thorny relationship between media, society, and gender in Iran. This tension dialogues with the aesthetic and ethic of absolutes on female bodies, which are expressed through laws that govern female behavior and bodies privately and publicly. Such laws enacted on female bodies prescribe the social space in which they can move and how they can move in them, so that the female body becomes the most forceful site of how the division of private and public and its maintenance functions. Indeed, “it is the portrayal and treatment of women that the tensions surrounding the Islamization of cinema crystallize” (Naficy 46). One of the earliest laws mandated by the new Islamic government in Iran in 1979 was the wearing of the veil. Dhar examines Marzieh Mehskini’s film *The Day I Became A Woman* (2003), whose first section tells of a girl’s entry into womanhood at the age of nine when she must now wear the veil, and her perspective of this rite of passage that literally inscribes the state on her body and movement. She writes, “The veil, to Hawa, is not just a formality, but an entity which has a dramatic material impact upon her life. Her introduction to the veil is followed by a series of behavioral strictures — Hawa cannot ask too many questions, Hawa should not stand on the terrace, Hawa should not play with boys anymore.” Dhar argues the importance of understanding the veil “as an important site of contestation in Iranian social and political history,” demonstrating the centrality with which “gender has been granted within the Iranian socio-political discourses,” namely, the “relationship between Islam, nationalism and national and religious control over women’s body and sexuality [sic].” Cinema makes explicit the centrality of gender in everyday discourses and the way in which such discourses play themselves out on female bodies by a contradiction that infuses the tension between documentary and fiction found in Iranian films. Women young and old must wear the veil in public spaces, but in film, all spaces become public. For even in narratively signified private spaces, women wear the veil by virtue of cinema being a public space.

Naficy thus writes, “To use women, a new grammar of film evolved, women actors being given static parts or filmed in such a way as to avoid showing their bodies” (46).³ Part of this “new grammar” must include the development of the appearance and representations of children, however deep-rooted a history of representations of children may have in Iranian cinema. Richard Tapper remarks a recent shift in representations of children in Iranian films that speaks to a need for, and expression of, such “new grammar”: “The central characters earlier were boys (*Bashu*, *The Little Stranger*, *The Runner*), but increasingly in the 1990s, they have been girls” (18). Female children’s bodies in Iranian films can be a way to avoid showing women’s bodies, while bringing together the tension between documentary and fiction and private and public. How then to negotiate a space where female bodies can express their voices and perform their identities even within the behavioral strictures constituted by wearing the veil and other Islamic laws? In this way, *The Apple* makes its distinct contribution. The twelve-year-old Naderi twins represent that significant liminal site of puberty and entry into the veil, behavioral strictures, and the private/public divide, issues involved in their being confined to their house. They also represent the tension of documentary and fiction within the context of representations of children, as they appear in the film as themselves.

The performative strategy of reenactment makes explicit these issues and enables the creation of an alternative dialogic, collaborative space of expression and degrees of agency.

II. The Discourses of Reenactment Performance and Representation

The Apple is not unique in the context of representations of children. Iranian films with and about children have become prevalent and familiar to the point of becoming a genre unto itself. Moreover, the blurring of documentary and fiction that stems from the film's use of reenactment has been explored in films such as Abbas Kiarostami's *Close Up* (1990) and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Bread and Flower* (1996). Indeed, these two films mobilize the social actors who experienced the reenacted events and present examples of what I term "social actor reenactment." But *The Apple* is singular within these contexts for its subject of girls who perform as themselves. To better situate the significance of *The Apple*'s representation of female children through social actor reenactment, I elaborate on the context of the discourses on reenactment as an audiovisual strategy.

Reenactment emerged as a practice alongside the emergence of cinema in the 1890s. Early filmmakers reenacted battle sequences of the Spanish-American War, social events of the past, and topical occurrences of the day. Reenactment existed alongside documentary and fiction, until fictional narrative filmmaking prevailed in the 1910s. Henceforth, filmmakers used it sporadically. A pivotal example of reenactment is Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). This documentary film traces an Inuit family in the Arctic and their traditional methods of hunting, trading, and living. The film invites a reading of the camera capturing in the raw these Inuit rituals. But the belated revelation of Flaherty's use of reenactment resulted in several positions on reenactment. At a general level, a categorical rejection prevailed because of its manipulative nature that distances and distorts truth, documentary authenticity, and spectator trust. This position towards reenactment became more entrenched with the advent of "direct cinema" in the United States and Canada, and *cinéma vérité* in France in the 1950s and 1960s. These two modes of filmmaking privileged "direct" access to people, events, experiences, and situations with the camera. The latter advocated for the suppression of the filmmaker in its observational, non-interventionist approach, while the latter put the filmmaker on-screen to interact with the camera and subjects. Despite this difference, both cultivated the aesthetic/ethic of the "direct." In this context, reenactment with actors and stylization betrays this aesthetic/ethic. It thus further fell out of favor among filmmakers, scholars, and critics alike, throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s.

Since the late 1980s, however, a renewed and more critically inflected understanding and use of reenactment has emerged and challenged concepts of documentary, authenticity, objectivity, and truth, all of which has been normalized to define "documentary." Within the last decade in particular, filmmakers are "reviv[ing] the forbidden practice of reenactment" (Paul Arthur 58) in diverse ways, including reenactment with social actors. In this context, *Nanook of the North* is arguably an early example of social actor reenactment, but without the critical impulse that this essay seeks to draw out. Though still few in number, social actor reenactment plays a crucial role in

investing reenactment with the critical potential and force that has heretofore been unacknowledged. For direct cinema, reenactment is the opposite of the “direct” access to truth of its fly-on-the-wall filmmaking, its rejection of rehearsal or fabrication, and privileging of archival footage. But social actor reenactment brings together direct cinema’s fetish of social actors and the direct on the one hand and the creative invention of reenactment performance on the other hand. This commingling of documentary discourses transforms the space of reenactment into an uncanny, past-present, documentary-fiction hybrid space of performance, expression, and critical analysis. It can become a powerful mode of interpretation and signification of histories and memories that occurred in the past and still resonate in the present, while transforming the tension between documentary and fiction into a critical framework. Social actor reenactment demonstrates how the act of filming (and filmmaking) “is in itself a way of comprehending the world” (Bruzzi 15).

Within the context of reenactment and representations of children, *The Apple* presents an interesting and significant example of female collaborative filmmaking and performance as a “way of comprehending the world,” in this case Iran, specifically through the experiences of female youth and women. It mobilizes the twin girls Massoumeh and Zahra, their parents, the female social worker who had actually worked with the family, and the family’s neighbors, to reenact the girls’ confinement and their discovery of the outside world, alongside discussions of the hows and whys of their imprisonment in the home. This social actor reenactment constitutes the film’s affective immediacy and power and its departure from representations of children in previous Iranian films. For Massoumeh and Zahra’s story speaks to the larger issues of Iranian culture, politics, and family, the guarded gender roles that they dictate, representations of Iranian women across a range of ages, and media. I turn now more closely to the film.

III. Reenactment as Performance

The reenactment of Massoumeh and Zahra’s experiences of confinement and making contact with the outside world would suggest that the film is simple and straightforward. The opening shot of the film encapsulates such seeming simplicity: a hand and arm extend from the upper right side of the frame to water a potted plant located on the lower left side of the frame. But one soon discovers the deception of the opening shot. The act of watering a plant is a summation of Massoumeh and Zahra’s situation prior to the making of the film. Upon the family’s return from the welfare center, where the film begins, Massoumeh performs the gesture of watering the plant: she extends her hand and arm from inside the house and through the barred gate to water the plant that is actually located outside of the house. Through this gesture, she betrays her confinement and a mode of resistance against it. Such a gesture becomes all the more poignant when the father, Ghorban Ali, locks up Massoumeh and Zahra in the house, despite his promise to the welfare center and social worker that he will no longer confine them. What follows, however, will be a reversal of situation, so that the girls make contact with the outside world while their parents become confined in the house.

Filmmaker Makhmalbaf transforms the transparent, uncomplicated surface that filmmakers and scholars alike have long attributed to the strategy of reenactment into a perceptive representation about female youth embodiment, empowerment, presence, and collaboration at an individual and collective level. A different space for the expression of female youth and women will emerge, enabled by social actor reenactment and the way it plays with the tensions between documentary and fiction and private and public. Firstly, she mobilizes the participation of the actual people involved in the events reenacted. Moreover, the reenactment performance and film take place in the very sites in which the events initially occurred: in the Naderi house, their neighborhood, and the welfare center. Secondly, she embeds within the reenactment invented sequences that did not occur in actuality but still speak to that actuality. The social actors express and creatively perform their experiences and feelings even as they relive them. The result is both a creative mirroring and critical analysis of the events and people involved, and the relationship between the two that characterizes the way reenactment plays with the documentary/fiction divide. Makhmalbaf also deploys objects as narrative signposts and symbols for more complex ideas that speak to the social actors' lives while also going beyond them. Lastly, Makhmalbaf made the film only four days after the welfare center took Massoumeh and Zahra out of their house; the shoot lasted eleven days. The proximity between the events and their reenactment conspire to position the film more as social intervention that becomes part of the further unfolding of events than a representation of them. As a result of these factors, reenactment becomes a space of critical analysis and performance on the part of Makhmalbaf as filmmaker and Massoumeh, Zahra, the social worker, and neighbors as subjects. It goes beyond simple repetition of past occurrences and becomes a creative and collaborative mode of filmmaking, performance, and a kind of social activism.

The Apple challenges the idea of reenactment dealing only with a completed past removed from the present. The film begins at the welfare center, where the parents reunite with Massoumeh and Zahra and take them back home. One returns with the Naderi family to their actual house. Makhmalbaf's camera devotes a substantial amount of time showing the space of the small house where they had spent their lives exclusively until four days ago. Inside, Ghorban Ali cooks food while the girls do chores. (Zahra the mother is a spectral absence throughout the film.) When the social worker arrives at their house, she releases the girls to explore the neighborhood on their own, and locks up the parents. The film follows the girls across the alleyways that connect the town where they encounter boys, to a park where they befriend two girls, through to a busier, more urban locale. In between sequences with the girls, the film devotes attention to conversations between Ghorban Ali, the social worker, and mothers of the neighborhood on what had occurred to the girls. Such use of actual spaces provides the general environment in which the family lives, while the mobilization of social actors to represent the lives, experiences, and feelings within that environment dynamizes it. In this way, *The Apple's* use of reenactment looks towards the past in recounting Massoumeh and Zahra's experiences, but also explicitly forward in concentrating on their interactions with the outside world.

As with any film that employs social actor reenactment, *The Apple* also challenges the tendency to think of reenactment with actors to stand in for social actors, their life experiences, and histories. In this scenario, the reenactment poses a one-to-one equation between what occurred and what the actors perform; it does not address the constructedness of the reenactment, how it shapes interpretation of the event(s), the issue of accessing this past and the limits to such access. In social actor reenactment, however, the tension between being and performance is a crucial factor as a mode of representation and to its creation of a space of performative expression. On the one hand, the social actors who perform the reenactment do not stand in for anyone else and speak from his/her experiences. Massoumeh and Zahra do not perform so much as simply *be* in front of the camera. Makhmalbaf shares, “I didn't direct them to do anything they couldn't do.” She explained to them, as well as to the other social actors, the situation and “let them find their own words” (Makhmalbaf). Having Massoumeh and Zahra “find their own words” attains an added dimension since they could not yet speak in full sentences at the time of filming. Both their being and performance in the film thus involve a journey of finding their own words and literally developing a voice. With regards to the girls’ parents and social worker, Makhmalbaf details, “I was waiting for the dialogue I wanted [Ghorban Ali] to say but I didn't dictate it. Because I can't, even the best writer can't know what this real mother and father are going to say” (Johnson 47). Rather than frame Massoumeh, Zahra, and their parents in a narrative that is different from their lives or in an exposé format, *The Apple* has them simply be and discover themselves as they discover a different way of living and thinking. Furthermore, Makhmalbaf represents through reenactment Massoumeh and Zahra and their parents in an intimate, everyday way that does not exoticize them or their situation. Makhmalbaf’s approach to her subjects and stories engages with and explores rather than exploits the situation and its concomitant sociocultural issues.

Another element of performance in *The Apple*’s approach to social actor reenactment emerges when the social actors perform invented sequences within the context of reenactment, per the filmmaker’s vision. Makhmalbaf does not constrain herself to follow by numbers the series of events to represent them; at the same time, she does not compromise the materiality of the events or the specificity of the social actors’ experiences. When Ghorban Ali locks up his daughters in the house and runs errands following their return from the welfare center, she has the social worker arrive at the house. Through the help of a neighbor with a ladder, she enters the house’s inner courtyard and sees the girls. Upon Ghorban Ali’s return, she releases Massoumeh and Zahra, pushes them to leave the house to explore the neighborhood, and promptly locks up Ghorban Ali and Zahra in the house, to “see how you like being shut in.” Makhmalbaf allows the documentary to interact with fiction through certain sequences that did not necessarily occur in actuality but nevertheless speak to this actuality. To represent the welfare center’s ultimatum to Ghorban Ali and Zahra to cease to lock up their daughters, Makhmalbaf has the social worker give them a skewed version of that ultimatum: If they can see through the locked barred gate they can keep the girls; otherwise, the welfare center will take them. Through this narrative gesture, Makhmalbaf injects a degree of humor in an otherwise sad, oppressive situation.

Massoumeh and Zahra's situation expresses and comments upon the place (and placing) of female bodies within Iranian culture and society as well as their own. Though the social actors do not stand in for anyone else but themselves in the reenactment, they can nevertheless become allegorical figures and "characters" despite themselves, given the context of the events and the filmmaker's vision/interpretation of said events. As allegorical figures or characters, they can represent and "perform" certain ideas and others that go beyond the scope of their own lives. The mother's constant anger and scolding of her children whenever she finds that they do not have their veil, and her wearing of the veil that covers practically her entire face, play into this larger context of society, gender roles, and identity that is predicated on seeing and being seen. But Makhmalbaf does not go so far in tapping into the fictional/allegorical to oppose the "villain" father and mother against the "honorable" social worker. Ultimately, Makhmalbaf represents Ghorban Ali as a sympathetic old man and problematizes the issue of the father as a symbol of oppressive Islamic patriarchy that framed his act of locking up his daughters. In dialogue with the creative parameters that Makhmalbaf provides him in which to perform and express himself, Ghorban Ali presents himself plainly, speaking the only language and meaning that he knows: his act of locking up his girls with the aid of a manual that states how girls, like flowers, must not be exposed to the male gaze, like the burning heat of the sun; despair and suffering in the face of press coverage of his family; and offense by details of the coverage on himself. As Cardullo writes,

In spite of his role as his daughters' jailer, despite his whining defense of his behavior toward them, and despite his sudden sheepishness in the face of the social worker's easy imperiousness, Ghorbanali appears to the camera-eye as a kindly, well-meaning if injudicious man (653).

Indeed, Ghorban Ali accepted to participate in the film because Makhmalbaf approached him and the situation without judgment, which he duly recognized.⁴ Ghorban Ali came to trust Makhmalbaf and "put himself to [sic] the disposal of the film as an actor" (Makhmalbaf). Ghorban Ali, the female neighbors, and the social worker straddle the division between social actor and actor, or being and performance, as they followed Makhmalbaf's dialogue or action cues while doing so in their own words and through their own bodies. Tempering the fictional sequences with the hue of character and way of thinking of the social actors thus constitutes another element in the way Makhmalbaf transforms reenactment's play with documentary and fiction, being and performance, into part of the film's critical power. As Makhmalbaf states about her idea of having the social worker lock up the parents, "It was something that suited her character, something she would like to do" (Johnson 49).

For their part, Massoumeh and Zahra's participation in the film, however restricted in their self-awareness given their limited cognitive development, expresses a powerful statement from them about their growth over the eleven days of shooting. The narrative pivot of locking up the parents allows the film to comment on both Massoumeh and Zahra's interaction with the outside world by exploring their neighborhood and provide discussion on their confinement.

IV. Collective Perspective, Socialization, and Identity (Trans)Formation

Makhmalbaf intersperses sequences with Ghorban Ali, the social worker and female neighbors discussing the social context of the girls' confinement with the girls' exploration of the neighborhood. In this way, Makhmalbaf provides a range of mostly female perspectives on the case. The social worker is the most vocal and adamant about her opinions and actions, to both Ghorban Ali and the girls. Her act of locking up the parents can be read as a flaw but also perhaps as an expression of critical distance through humor. Her act of going door-to-door in the neighborhood to look for a saw allows for other women to express their opinions about the situation. Some of the female neighbors also go to Ghorban Ali's house and speak to him directly about what he did. Ghorban Ali accuses one neighbor of slander for saying that he chained up his daughters. She replies, "There's no difference between [being] chained up and not seeing the sun for eleven years." Such a statement certainly carries weight beyond the specific situation at hand, but the majority of the film's attention to the girls' condition demonstrates all too clearly the consequences.

Makhmalbaf stages the simplest of encounters for Massoumeh and Zahra with other children and objects in the world; in doing so, they betray their arrested development. Perhaps their first most important encounter is the actual one with the social worker. Makhmalbaf stresses this importance by having the social worker give each of the girls a mirror and a comb when she arrives at their house. Once outside, for several moments the twins contemplate their images in the mirror as they play with water. Shots of their faces in the mirror are brief but moving. The act of looking at oneself and seeing oneself, however passive it can be read, still affirms an identity insofar as one sees and is seen at the same time. The twins' adventures across the neighborhood can be read as an extension of finally being able to see themselves and be seen. The mirror will reverberate for others in the film and will thus become more than a decorative object to wave around.

Outside the house, the stages series of encounters for the twins involve a boy selling ice cream, another boy who dangles an apple from a window and takes them to a local market to get apples, and two girls playing hopscotch. Significantly, the film does not idealize such encounters. When the boy discovers that the girls cannot pay for the ice cream, he takes Massoumeh by the collar as if to strangle her while he demands payment. A female neighbor intervenes eventually, but this encounter demonstrates the rough edges alongside the smooth ones in this representation of the girls' experiences outside. But rather than envelop this exchange in pedagogical instrumentality and transform it into an abstract tool of didacticism, Makhmalbaf allows the exchange to arise and ebb as if organically, leaving the spectator to reflect upon it in however an allegorical manner s/he may wish. Once the boy receives payment for the ice cream from the neighbor, he lets go of Massoumeh. In return, Massoumeh gives him her mirror. Makhmalbaf, then, decides to include a shot of the boy looking at himself in the mirror, as if implying the chain of discovery of oneself and one's freely burgeoning identity set off by the twins' release from their captive situation. This implication deepens when the girls return to the house to ask their father for money to buy apples. Zahra leaves her mirror with her father while

he remains locked in the house. The sequence ends with a shot of considerable length of Ghorban Ali looking intently at himself in the mirror.

Massoumeh and Zahra also meet two girls of similar age. Compared with these girls equipped with the physical, linguistic and social skills that Massoumeh and Zahra lack, one realizes the gravity of the twins' situation more deeply; when asked for her name, Massoumeh can hardly pronounce it. As a result, the two girls initially betray a sentiment of suspicion of Massoumeh and Zahra. But the allure of collective play overcomes them and they decide to teach the twins how to play hopscotch. As with the boy with ice cream, however, Makhmalbaf shows both the rough and smooth sides of this encounter. Several times, Massoumeh hits one of the girls with her apple, at one point making her cry. Massoumeh senses that she has upset the girl and offers her apple as a peace offering. The girl eventually accepts Massoumeh's apple and play resumes. As the film's end approaches, the four girls extend their play and growing camaraderie in a playground, across a park, railroad tracks and towards a busier, more urban milieu; they end up at a stall where an elderly man sells watches. Like the boy with ice cream and another boy who accompanies Massoumeh and Zahra to their home to ask for money to buy apples, the two girls lead them towards greater degrees of social interaction and space. Also like the two boys (along with the social worker) they introduce to the lives and minds of Massoumeh and Zahra deceptively simple objects that factor into their learning experience. Apples, mirrors, combs, watches, and a key serve as entry points to more abstract ideas like desire, one's image and identity, sense/understanding of time, and freedom. When the four girls arrive at the Naderi house, they ask Ghorban Ali to buy watches for the twins. In the face of the girls' request, the social worker revises her plan: she gives Massoumeh and Zahra the key to the barred gate: if they can open the gate by themselves, he can go out. They struggle for a while, but they finally succeed and push their father outside to buy them watches at the stall. The social worker also leaves the house. Through such encounters with people and objects, Makhmalbaf engages with the social actors and provokes performances at the same time, melding her vision and interpretation of the events with those of the people who had experienced them.

But the film does not end with the girls on a note of spirited initiative on their part. Rather, it ends more ambiguously with Zahra the mother left alone at home and prompted to engage with the world. Makhmalbaf deploys once again the object-symbols the apple and mirror. As Zahra emerges from the house wearing her veil over her face, for a substantial amount of time the camera captures her (non)image in the mirror that hangs on the gate left by her husband. Outside the house, she walks unsteadily and with trepidation, seemingly due more to being outside and being seen than from her actual blindness. Inadvertently, she encounters the boy who dangles an apple from a second-story window. After some initial confusion, she manages to grab the apple by her hand. With this shot of a faceless woman holding an apple, the frame freezes and the film concludes. Though the freeze frame to mark the end of a film appears frequently in Iranian films, the choice of which shot to freeze makes each film distinct. With *The Apple's* freeze frame concentrated on Zahra the mother, along with her (non)image in the mirror, Makhmalbaf renders ambivalent and problematizes the issues of the place and

placing of female bodies in Iranian society, culture, and media, and the impact on identity (trans)formation across generations of girls, including Zahra's own.

Looking in the mirror to see oneself and be seen (or, inversely, to not see oneself or be unseen), to discover oneself and initiate the process of establishing one's identity, is one way to read *The Apple* in its entirety. Bert Cardullo finds in the presence and use of the mirror in the film a sign of the girls' first steps towards mental and emotional growth, as well as of the nature of filmmaking in general:

Literally as well as figuratively, the girls are seeing or identifying themselves for the very first time, which naturally is a prerequisite for their cognitive development. But the mirror is also a sly reminder here of the nature of filmic illusion, a clever reference to the (distortive?) mirror held up to nature—especially in a film whose performers reenact events from their own lives, or, as it were, mirror their private images and existences for all to see (650-651).

I grant Cardullo's reading of the mirror in the narrative. But in one of her statements about the impetus to make a film about Massoumeh and Zahra, Makhmalbaf provides another way to read the mirror within the overall narrative texture of the film. Upon discovering the case of Massoumeh and Zahra, Makhmalbaf states, "It was so sad for me, and I felt sympathy, maybe because I was a girl, I was Iranian, I was from that culture. So I was thinking, 'it could be me'" (Said 165). That this documentary/narrative of girls who had been locked in their house and then, once released, discover a different world, is made through the eyes of a young Iranian woman is an important detail. It is important when considering the film in the double contexts of representations of children and use of reenactment (mainly directed by men), and within the larger context of negotiating a creative, collaborative space for female youth and women in Iran. On this particular note, Massoumeh and Zahra's experience of being kept in the house speaks to Makhmalbaf's own experiences growing up in Iran – in terms of alterity.

Makhmalbaf is the daughter of one of Iran's most well-known and politicized filmmakers, Mohsen Makhmalbaf. At the age of fifteen, Makhmalbaf decided to stop her schooling and become a filmmaker.⁵ Along with her step-mother Marziyeh Meshkini, her brother Maysam, and younger sister Hana, Makhmalbaf learned the craft of filmmaking at home with her father as teacher, mentor and collaborator. At the tender age of seventeen, not so distant from twelve-year-olds Massoumeh and Zahra, Makhmalbaf made *The Apple*.⁶ The encounter between Makhmalbaf, Massoumeh, and Zahra represents a significant set of disparate experiences in Iran of the home and the outside, private space and public space, which social actor reenactment also draws out. Through *The Apple*, Makhmalbaf holds up a mirror that reflects anamorphically her own set of experiences of growing up and her status as a young Iranian woman. She holds up a mirror that not only takes in the image of the person looking but also gives and looks back, as expressed in the shots with Massoumeh, Zahra, the boy who sells ice cream, and Ghorban Ali looking at themselves in the mirror. The irony is all the more significant regarding the mother since she is blind. Doubling her blindness is her habit of wearing her headscarf not over her head but her face, so that she becomes faceless as well and therefore unable to receive or give back an image, an identity, if ever faced with a mirror.

The mirror's function in relation to the mother and her constant scolding of her daughters resonates deeply with Makhmalbaf's statement: "As a woman in an Eastern country, there are particular problems associated with filmmaking that is [sic] not because of the censorship that politicians have always imposed and the issue of women. But [rather] because of self-censorship, which is imposed on women by the culture and traditions of our society, and even by women themselves" (Makhmalbaf).

V. Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that *The Apple* presents a challenge to the local, national and/or international contextualization of Iranian girls and women as silenced and self-censoring. It poses a challenge in its subject and its treatment of that subject through the creation of an alternative space for female expression and performance enabled by social actor reenactment. I situated the film and my argument in the contexts of representations of children in Iranian cinema and the use of reenactment in film. I also drew out the play with documentary and fiction in these contexts to locate a crucial aspect of *The Apple*'s significance. On the one hand, the film is based on an actual case where an aged father had locked his twin girls in the home. On the other hand, the film is acted and reenacted by the actual family on whose experiences the story is based, accompanied by a critical perspective on Makhmalbaf's part. But "fidelity to the facts [...] is not the heart of the issue." Rather, the more productive and critical question is "Can a fictional film based on a real situation ever offer more than a false promise of being "true to life," or can it retain some extrafictional value?" (William Johnson 47). *The Apple*'s critical creative engagement and collaboration with Massoumeh and Zahra, along with their parents and neighbors, as social actors provides a strong affirmative response to such a question, so that "there is no fracture [...] between documentary and fiction" (Johnson 49). From the reenactment performance, what emerges is a different kind of agency of expression, for both filmmaker and social actors, and an alternative sociocultural/political space within the space and society of Iran for female youth and women to exercise this expression.

It bears repeating that what makes *The Apple* unique among the handful of films with children and among those that use reenactment in order to address and represent a particular history, situation or event is its subject of young girls, tempered with Makhmalbaf's own specific female experiences and perspective. For Makhmalbaf was very clear about her reasons to make the film:

All it takes to imprison many, many women is one man. [...] What I noticed about those two girls is that the more they came into contact with society, the more complete they became as human beings. For me, that became a metaphor for all women. Women in Iran are like springs. If they want to be free, and if they try, they burst out with a lot of energy (Wright 142).

Makhmalbaf's statement highlights the sociocultural specificity of the film. It also highlights the component of rendering this subject and history with the very social actors to whom it refers. But the film also goes beyond its sociocultural specificity. *The Apple* is a work that comments on filmmaking and cinema and how they enable renegotiations of

images of women, children, and ideas about their positions in culture and society, in both Iran and elsewhere around the world.

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¹ Also sometimes called the Center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents (CIDCA)

² For more on the processes and structure of state censorship of film, see Hamid Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update," in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper; Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*; and Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic*.

³ With regards to laws and suggestions on representations of women, Naficy adds, "A post-Revolution film director underlined these practices by saying that women in Islamic performing arts should be shown seated at all times so as to avoid drawing attention to their 'provocative walk', thereby allowing the audience to concentrate on the 'ideologies' inherent in the work. In addition, eye contact, especially when expressing 'desire', and touching between men and women were discouraged. All this meant that until recently, women were often filmed in long-shot, with few close-ups or facial expression" (46). There is also the suggestion of "temporary marriage" for the male and female actors who play husband and wife "for the duration of the filming in order to stay within Islamic interpretations" (47).

⁴ The mother, Zahra Saraghsadeh, did not necessarily give permission to Makhmalbaf to film her, and Makhmalbaf did not ask for it (Sullivan 1998).

⁵ Makhmalbaf recounts to Said, "I would say I was a good student, and I really believed in studies, because I thought it's the only way to learn something, to change. But there were some years I was thinking that I'm not learning so much. I was thinking that the way they teach us, they make you not think more, not have questions. As soon as I lost my faith in that school, I just left it" (Said 168).

⁶ With *The Apple*, Makhmalbaf became the youngest filmmaker to screen at the Cannes Film Festival. With her subsequent 2000 film, *Blackboards*, she became the youngest filmmaker to receive the Cannes Jury Prize.