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Performing History: Girlhood and *The Apple* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998)

Margherita Sprio

Contemporary Iranian Cinema and its specific use of children as non-professional actors in particular, asks important questions that raise a spectre from the past both in terms of cinematic history and in relation to the history of girlhood on screen. In an earlier essay, I looked at the way that re-enactment was being utilised in contemporary Iranian cinema.¹ I argued that this acting style was linked to the politics of performance known to us through Italian Neo Realism.² For Laura Mulvey, ‘there is a politics of representation at stake, but also a politics of cultural specificity at a time of encroaching cultural homogenization.’³

In this essay, I am specifically addressing the idea of performance and girlhood and the idea of cinematic realism in relation to the ‘true story’ of *Sib/The Apple* (Makhmalbaf, 1998) which is an 84-minute narrative film that compresses eleven days of ‘real life’. The narrative comprises a re-enactment of the lives of two sisters whose parents do not ever let them leave their locked caged existence within their home. Concerned neighbours expose their imprisonment and social services intervene and force their parents to allow them a childhood outside of this confinement. I want to consider this idea in relation to how young girls function in contemporary Iranian films, how this function links to earlier periods of film history, but also what it might help us to reconsider in terms of a transnational experience of seeing girls in film. Whilst thinking about Hamid Naficy’s idea of ‘accented cinema’, where he introduces this term as a means through which to theorise the films made by film makers whom he describes as diasporic and post-colonial, it is also useful to think about the experience of watching films that do not conform to and actively challenge established conventions of film making by mixing

genres such as fiction and documentary.⁴ Children are often central protagonists in Iranian cinema, so what is it that the child's performance brings that is of significance and that distinguishes it from what the adult performer brings? With this question, I wish to stress my specific interest here, which is in relation to the context of the girl who re-enacts events that she had previously experienced. This is a mode of 'acting', or the 'acting out' of girlhood (growing up on the screen) that I would like to think of as a performance that goes on to shape the child's lived experience. As well as Makhmalbaf, who is of a younger generation, other Iranian filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami, who has also used re-enactment in his films (for example, *Close-Up*, 1990) cite their work as being inspired by 'reality', indeed in an interview Kiarostami states that he has done nothing *but* depict reality in his work.⁵

The depiction of children in Iranian cinema has a long history and cannot be confined to this century's generation of filmmakers. As Hamid Reza Sadr explores, in part the current trend for utilising children comes out of the confines of the pre-revolutionary film industry which saw major actors and actresses stopped from working, and sex, singing, and dancing banned.⁶ One of Kiarostami's early experimental films, *Nān o Kūcheh/Bread and Alley* (1969) depicts an eleven-minute journey of a small boy who has to try to navigate a barking stray dog whilst walking through an alley. This film was made through the government organisation *The Centre for Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents* and this organisation was very instrumental in both the utilisation of children in cinema and for supporting early innovators such as Kiarostami. It went on to produce his film *Khane-ye dost kodjast/Where Is the Friends House* (1987) and other films all of which had children, and other non-professional actors, as central protagonists. This trend for using non-professional child actors was in part due to the success of these films outside of Iran but they were also often hugely successful within Iran. The

first Iranian film to be nominated for an Oscar, *Bacheha-ye Aseman/Children of Heaven* (Majidi, 1997) is about the poverty experienced by two siblings who have to share a pair of shoes in order to get to school. For Reza Sadr,

Non-professionals were themselves, they were subtle and genuine, their lives resembling their characters' lives. Their plain acting combining the authenticity of everyday unattractiveness...their faces had significance, the impressions of an intense inner life.⁷

Samira Makhmalbaf is part of an extraordinary Iranian 'new wave' of female filmmakers that are putting women and often 'girls' experiences at the centre of their films. This group would also include her younger sister, Hana Makhmalbaf who made the gripping film *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* in 2008 when she, herself was aged fourteen.⁸ This film deals with its central female protagonist Baktay trying to get herself to school despite the many impeding attempts of those that try to stand in her way. The number of other contemporary women film makers that I may wish to include here are too numerous to list but others such as Mania Akbari, Mahnaz Mohammadi⁹, Manijeh Hekmat¹⁰ and Niki Karimi are important to consider in this context as are the wider implications of the phenomenal success of films such as *Women Without Men* (Shirin Neshat, 2009). Slightly earlier and much applauded films by Jafar Panahi such as *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997) have both seen young girls as the central characters of the narratives, with the former seeing seven year old Razieh go to extra ordinary lengths in order to convince her mother to buy her a gold fish and the latter about six year old Mina who has one arm in a sling, making her own way home through the streets of Tehran after her mother has forgotten to pick her up from school. A fascinating aspect of *The Mirror* is the

way that mid way through the film the ‘actress’, Mina Mohammad-Khani suddenly removes her sling and announces that she is tired of acting and now wants to go home! Authenticity and the performative collide to create a different version of realism – as I go on to show, a realism that forces the spectator to reconsider performance, ‘truth telling’ and historical fact.

Daily survival in *The Apple* is made difficult for the two girls who form the central protagonists of this compelling film made by a seventeen year-old filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf. She became interested in the story when she saw the sisters in a welfare centre on television and went there and asked their father, other family members, and the social worker assigned to the family (Azizeh Mohamadi) if they would re-perform earlier aspects of their lives for a film that she wanted to make about them. The film begins with hand held video footage and then changes to 35mm film – this was because the director could not quickly get hold of a film camera but did initially have a video camera and hence the immediacy of reportage and documentary truth is encapsulated from the very beginning of the film.¹¹ The improvised film re-enacts the events of the previous days in the real life of a poor family in Tehran in the late 1990s. The eleven-year-old twins are not allowed to participate in modernity, they are seen as passive objects suffering a series of interlocking oppressions and are literally encaged inside the family home.¹² The metal-barred front door is kept locked at all times and the two girls (Zahra and Massoumeh Naderi) are not socialised and so cannot walk or speak properly. Although this is not to assume that they cannot communicate as they can and do with one another and with their parents. Thus their experience of girlhood has been shared between the twin sisters alone and always together. This film is also an original intervention into the childhood of female twins – the re-enactment of the

‘coming of age’ that the young women provide us with is one that is unique in cinematic history.¹³ This is not a film that mythologises childhood and neither does it offer a reparative formula. It never easily fits into the normative codes associated with American films that can sentimentalize the maturing of young girls on the screen.

The narrative is made all the more compelling by the fact that the mother, whilst often in the background of the drama, is blind and has her face and body covered in a chador throughout the entire film. The parents’ eleven year reluctance to allow their daughters out into the world is broken by complaints to the local social services by neighbours and their actions forces an external gaze onto the family. A social worker is assigned to encourage the parents to allow the girls to go outside of the home and the narrative of the film presents us with the ethical dimensions of her worthy attempts at bullying the family into modernity set against the parents’ desire to follow their own parental beliefs. The father explains that he fears his daughters will mix with boys and that he can foresee what the consequences of this would be. Indeed many young boys seem to inhabit the local neighborhood and the scenes in the film illustrate their fascination with the young girls where their ball falls into the same family courtyard that the girls are allowed to look into but are locked out of. Perhaps their ball falls accidentally as is common to many children who ‘play’ – and yet within this scenario, we have to constantly remind ourselves that both the girls and the boys are self conscious in their actions, since they are in fact re-enacting their ‘original’ lived experience.

There are many complex scenes in *The Apple* in relation to girlhood and modernity and there are some extraordinary moments when, for example, one of the girls sees her own reflection in a plastic mirror for the first time. This scene is made all the more extraordinary when we recognise the fact that she is also learning to see herself in front of the film camera.

However, this fascinating moment with the mirror (an object that she quickly disregards) is forever thwarted by the knowledge that we are in fact watching a knowing performance and not seeing ‘the captured’ moment as it ‘originally’ happened in front of the camera. But what is at stake here and does a fidelity to performance really matter? All performance is authentic and no single original experience lasts forever – in the film, the girls are able to bring resourcefulness to acting out their truth that one would often associate with adult maturity and Method Acting in particular.¹⁴ An ability to draw from past experience is often cited as the reason that an actor is able to create an ‘authentic’ performance – the children in *The Apple* are able to illustrate their original experience in a way that would be different from an actor learning to play a role.

Some of the most poignant moments in the film’s narrative are in the sequences between the girls and other children - the other children in the film act as foils for the girls’ difference. Normative interactions become scrutinized; they encounter a boy selling ice-cream in the street, the neighbour’s boys that climb over the wall in order to regain their ball, a boy leads the girls into the centre of Tehran via a plastic jug tied to a string and finally, towards the end of the film, they learn to ‘play’ with other girls. (The latter performers were in fact the girls’ cousins in their ‘real’ lives but in the film they are acting as recently acquired affluent friends.) The girls’ ‘authentic’ entry into the modern world of the child is performed here as spectacle – the children are all ‘acting out their original experience’ for the camera or at least a remembered version of it. For Reza Sadh, ordinarily children liberate plots by introducing non-professional actions – generally loafing around on the street or in rural areas.¹⁵ They are unencumbered by the burden of acting techniques and un-lived emotions. However, in *The Apple*, the children are being asked to re-perform the exact events that had once already happened. Since many censorship regulations prevent the display of adult emotions, much of what is witnessed through the

simplicity of the girls' actions whilst out 'playing in the streets' of Tehran is understood by a mature spectator. The empathy expected from these scenes is perhaps consciously aimed at adults and yet it was a female teenage filmmaker who directed us towards these emotions. The fact that Makhmalbaf herself is a young woman does posit the notion of identification in such a way that is unusual when discussing any feature length film in film history.

In *The Apple*, the relationship to the girls is complicated by the fact that the children, their parents, and nearly everybody else in the film perform the entire version of events in front of the camera over a period of eleven days. Their lives are filmically condensed and with their approval. The filmmaker became interested in the story at the point that it got television media coverage and she immediately approached the father—hence the family's enforced entry into modernity was a mediated one right from the outset. The literal poverty experienced by the family in the film is matched by the emotional poverty performed throughout the film's narrative. For example, the opening frames make this apparent through the caged girl's hand attempting to pour water through the metal barred door onto a dying plant. It remains unclear whether the filmmaker offered the parents money in order to participate in the making of the film, and they do not appear to make any stipulations about the objectives of the film, although the father does say that he sees this opportunity as a way of being able to give his version of the 'truth' of his lived experience.

Like other 'reality based' systems of contemporary media, we might already be asking what happens to the girls and indeed their family once the cameras disappear and what are we to make of this system of actuality and performance? Filmmaking as a moral medium is an even more complex idea in the digital era given the range of possibilities now on offer in relation to making both still and moving images. The ethical implications are wide ranging and the director

has spoken about the role that she took as that of onlooker rather than the storyteller and she insists that the protagonists within the film ‘were all performing themselves.’¹⁶ She had to make little intervention because she could not have known their life story as well as they did. She felt that as a director, she could direct the performers and their actions, but that she could not have told them how to perform who they were in front of the camera because only they could do this in an authentic manner. To authentically be yourself in front of the camera is a very significant idea here particularly in relation to the girls and their performance. Their lack of access to any media platforms including seeing themselves in photographs is integral to how we begin to formulate a relationship to their on-camera ‘acting’. Together with this, it is important to consider how one knows oneself other than through an experience of the world? A ‘child like state’ acts as a contradiction in *The Apple* whereby the young girls are in a continuous state of emerging maturity both in front of and away from the camera.

How much does a particular incident, actually happening ‘live’ in front of the camera, aid in creating a modality of emotional intensity precisely because it is happening in front of the camera? The family’s only access to any form of media was at the point at which they entered into it as the main object of its gaze. Their ability to navigate the power of the camera must be considered in relation to this, even though the director insists that the film was a collaborative endeavour that was improvised, constructed, and directed together. Until their experience of the outside world, these girls had not yet participated in television viewing, and had no history of themselves as subjects outside of their parental control. Play-acting in front of the camera came to them through the film director since no other photographic records or family videos of them had previously existed. Although a particularly Western and prescriptive way of thinking about the construction of childhood, the photographic record is still a very strongly resonating way of

thinking through who we become and how the experience of growing up in front of the camera impacts on our later sense of selves. What impact did this live narrative have on the sisters and what might have become of them without the presence of Makhmalbaf's camera?

Continuing with the idea of 'play' and 'play-acting' in particular, when the sisters are let out 'to play' for the first time by the social worker, they immediately retreat back into their home and it takes them some time to understand the potential of play. Their return and the social worker's insistent that they stay away from their home and 'play' like other children happens on three separate occasions (one cannot help wondering on how many other occasions it actually happened in 'real life'). The spectator is asked to reconsider their own place in the world and the film forces an identification with the assumptions about other girls (regardless of location) of a similar age who might be engaging with play time. How much does a normative code of how childhood is understood through the gaze of the camera impact on the spectatorial experience of watching *The Apple*? After all we were all once children and we all once played. Childish treats are culturally inscribed - significantly the sisters have to be persuaded that eating ice cream is an act of pleasure – its taste is something culturally determined and they are not used to its texture and are not aware that it will melt. The girl's ill-fitting shoes, with holed socks give this performance of authenticity a unique and haunting power. As spectators we know that these 'events' actually happened and that the director picked out lived moments from the sisters' lives that she felt would aid an understanding of who they were and how their girlhood had been shaped.

Was this film an important political reportage and well-intended object of performance for a filmmaker who, by her own admission was an onlooker into a story that fascinated her as well as many other middle class Iranians in the late 1990s? The family had limited resources in

every sense and in the film the father (Ghorban Ali-Naderi) says that he had only ever been educated for four winters. Nonetheless, the anguish and anger that he performs, the dishonour that he felt that he had received through the original news of their story being exposed through the media offers up all kinds of additional questions about the performance of girlhood.

The parental consent given on behalf of the girls was presumably given with the assumption that the children would be able to perform themselves—to literally act out their girlhood. The ability to act oneself in front of the camera comes from the desire, matured or otherwise, to recognise oneself.¹⁷ The normative understanding of the importance of photographic archives, on family histories and identities, forces us to think through an ethical dimension to the film – what is at stake for the girls, now women, whose childhood is being documented for it to be subsequently scrutinised by the world? Whilst agreeing with Azadeh Farahmand that the representations of children in recent Iranian cinema are ‘informed by sentimentality and an obsessive romance with children’s supposed innocence, purity and beauty’, this idea is made even more complex by the girls in *The Apple*.¹⁸ With reference to Farahmand, Gow frames Iranian cinema within the context of pandering to a ‘humanist framework’ and he argues that this framework is promoted by the impact of international film festivals.¹⁹ I would agree with Farahmand’s assertion that due to the international success of earlier films such as *Where Is the Friend’s House*, (Kiarostami, 1987) subsequent representations of children have greatly differed from earlier representations of the 1970s and early 1980s where the films tended to be much grittier (films such as *Yek ettefāq-e sādā/A Simple Event* (Saless, 1973) or *Davandeh/The Runner* (Naderi, 1985) in their portrayals. Children as symbols of humanism can be traced back to iconic art films such as *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (de Sica, 1948), and the ‘*Apu*’ trilogy (Ray, 1955-1959).²⁰ What children brought to these films, although often

historicised as helping to define a new reality, in fact implied the existence of other realities beyond the diegetic world of the film. *The Apple* also functions in this way and Hamid Dabashi's claim that the director is part of a post-ideological generation of film makers should be seen within the context of Makhmalbaf being part of a generational shift that enables a vision of reality with no claim to a monopoly on truth, an insistence on the particular, and no patience for the universal.²¹

The Apple is a film that critiques the politics of the past for the present generation, although Makhmalbaf claims that nobody is to blame and 'that it is the story of a nation that buries its women alive.'²² The inter-generational conflict exhibited here highlights an example of over protective parents versus the assumed powerlessness of girlhood. As spectators we are witnesses to a narrative that shows us the 'liberation' of the girls from parental control and we see them instructed into modernity.²³ For Dabashi, *The Apple* becomes a devastating condemnation of the mind-numbing oppression of women, not just in Iran, but everywhere.²⁴ The father in the film makes the distinction between the boys whose ball falls into their court yard and what could happen if those same boys got close to his daughters, hence his justification for locking the girls up. He would be personally dishonoured as would the name of his daughters – for whose sake are the girls being kept away from the outside world? Importantly how might this very form of parental control be understood when it is the parents who grant permission for the children to re-enact their original experience through making *The Apple*? In the same way that the girls are retracing an original experience, so are their parents. Are the girls reacting to their parents request to perform to order or are they actually remembering an original experience as they attempt to re-perform it? This brings to mind Cesare Casarino's essay about Pasolini's documentary *Comizi d'Amore/Love Meetings* (1965) where the film director asks children about

sex. For Casarino, the children let their bodies show that they are reciting, that they are on stage, and that their words are encased by quotation marks in the first place....they know that the questioning adult knows that they know the truth.²⁵

In *The Apple*, life does not mirror art but art is created in order to speak about girlhood to a globalised audience. This is an audience who is familiar with the popularity of the representation of childhood via film festivals through the previously mentioned works of the Apu trilogy and the traditions of Italian neo-realism. In *The Apple*, the performative endeavour is both within its narrative and outside of it. One can only imagine the consequences of having one's childhood made into a film and one that caused such international interest. The film carefully frames the sisters' entry into modernity as a form of release, it is a rite of passage for them and we the audience have been witnesses to an 'authentic' portrayal of this journey. Their performances cannot be scrutinised along comparable parameters given to other child 'actors' and yet neither can we discount the controlling power of the camera. The work of art here performs the very act of modernity that the parents seem so against and Samira Makhmalbaf's film enables a local story to become globalised. However, what are the girls being released from is an easier question to answer than what are they being released into.

¹ M. Sprio, 'Filmic Performance, Authenticity and *The Apple*', *Widescreen* 1: 1 (2009).

² I would wish to link it more to the Italian movement in terms of its politics rather than French New Wave as discussed elsewhere, for example in Christopher Gow, *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places in-Between, Reframing Post Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (London, I.B.Tauris, 2011).

³ Laura Mulvey, 'Afterword', in *The New Iranian Cinema – Politics, Representation and Identity* ed by Richard Tapper (London, I.B. Tauris, 2002), p. 261. This is an extended essay originally given as concluding remarks at a conference held at UCLA in 1999.

⁴ For a further development of this, see Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵ Farah Nayeri, 'Iranian Cinema: What Happened in Between', *Sight and Sound*, 3: 12 (1993), 28.

⁶ Hamid Reza Sadr, 'Children in Contemporary Iranian Cinema: When We Were Children', in *The New Iranian Cinema – Politics, Representation and Identity* ed by Richard Tapper, (London, I.B.Tauris, 2002) pp. 227-237.

⁷ Hamid Reza Sadr, 'Children in Contemporary Iranian Cinema', p. 237.

⁸ Hana Makhmalbaf also starred as the child in *A Moment of Innocence* directed by her father Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1988

⁹ At the time of writing, Mahnaz Mohammadi a women's rights activist as well as film maker, had been imprisoned for five years (June 2014) for creating 'propaganda against the Iranian regime'.

¹⁰ Manijeh Hekmat was also the producer of *The Girl in the Sneakers* (1999), which is another important film to consider here.

¹¹ See Shohini Chaudhuri, *Iranian Cinema in Contemporary World Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 89.

¹² For more on the concept of ‘interlocking oppressions’, see Jackie Kirk, Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, *Towards Political Agency for Girls – Mapping the Discourses of Girlhood Globally* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), p. 21.

¹³ The ‘coming of age’ term is more commonly used in relation to American films see Sarah Hentges (2006) *Pictures of Girlhood – Modern Female Adolescence in Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), p. 3.

¹⁴ Inspired by theatre director and actor Constantin Stanislavski, Method Acting involves a set of techniques that actors use in order to ‘become’ the person that they are acting. In his quest for ‘theatrical truth’ Stanislavski’s teaching method involved asking students to make personal identifications with the characters that they are playing. This ‘method’ went on to inspire the actor and acting teacher Lee Strasberg in America and it has gone on to have a lasting impact on American acting.

¹⁵ Hamid Reza Sadr, ‘Children in Contemporary Iranian Cinema’, p. 233.

¹⁶ Samira Makhmalbaf spoke about this during the Q & A session of the premiere of *The Apple* at The London Film Festival in London, Leicester Square, UK, October 1998.

¹⁷ See for example Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980) or Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso Books, 1982).

¹⁸ Azadeh Farahmand, ‘Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim For) Iranian Cinema’ in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics Representation and Identity* ed by Richard Tapper (ed) (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 86-108.

¹⁹ Christopher Gow, *From Iran to Hollywood*, p. 49.

²⁰ The Apu Trilogy is a trilogy consisting of three Bengali films directed by Satyajit Ray: *Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road)*, *Aparajito (The Unvanquished)* and *Apur Sansar (The World of Apu)*. The films, completed between 1955-1959, were based on two Bengali novels written by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay: *Pather Panchali* (1929) and *Aparajito* (1932). Using very limited funds and an ‘unprofessional’ cast and crew, the trilogy was a milestone in Indian cinema and remains one of the finest examples of Parallel Cinema, part of the Indian New Wave Realist movement. The three films went on to win seven awards from the Cannes, Berlin, and Venice Film Festivals.

²¹ See Hamid Dabashi, ‘The Perils and Promises of Globalisation’ in *H. Dabashi Close Up – Iranian Cinema Past, Present and Future*, (London: Verso Books, 2001), p. 267.

²² Hamid Dabashi, ‘The Perils and Promises of Globalisation’.

²³ The proceeds of the film were used to pay for the girls’ subsequent education.

²⁴ Hamid Dabashi, ‘The Perils and Promises of Globalisation’.

²⁵ Cesare Casarino, ‘Can The Subaltern Confess?’ in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* ed by Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith (Stanford, CA:Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 138.