

## The Apple

Few films these days are simple in a nonpejorative sense, relying on a straightforward narrative structure presented with economy of means. Of all the selections at the 1998 New York Film Festival, *The Apple* was by those standards the simplest; yet only a little probing will reveal underlying issues of considerable complexity.

The narrative derives from a real-life incident: An elderly man and his blind younger wife have kept their 11-year-old twin daughters, Massoumeh and Zahra, shut up in their house since birth. (The wife, too, rarely goes out.) Neighbors complain to the Social Services authorities, who bring the girls in to be examined and then let them go home on the condition that they be allowed out. When a visiting social worker finds the girls still kept inside, she releases them, and on the second occasion also locks the father in for a time. At first the girls are afraid of their freedom; they also have no knowledge of outside life, assuming (for example) that a street vendor is simply giving away his ice cream. But they begin to learn from other children they meet: a boy at an upstairs window teasing them with an apple on a string and then taking them to a fruit store; two girls playing hopscotch in a park. At the end the father appears to accept his daughters' freedom as he joins them for a walk outside, and the mother goes out far enough to encounter the boy with the apple.

The most general issue raised here is cultural: To what extent can a viewer understand a film in an unfamiliar language from an unfamiliar society? The problem becomes acute with a country that differs from ours in politics and religion as sharply as does Iran. (My own knowledge is based precariously on some 30 Iranian films and miscellaneous reading.) And with a film as simple as *The Apple*, non-Iranian viewers may believe they understand elements that in fact they are misinterpreting.

That cultural difficulty extends into another issue: How much "reality" is there in a film based on a real-life incident? Whereas Iranian viewers were likely to know both the facts of the case (which was covered in their media) and the plausibility of certain incidents, most of us start from scratch. Some internal evidence (notably the writing credit) suggests that incidents were changed or added— but which? It struck me, for example, that the social worker's locking in of the father was astonishingly interventionist, but I could not judge its plausibility. Only by interviewing Samira Makhmalbaf did I learn that it was fictional.

Fidelity to the facts, however, is not the heart of the issue. 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?

*The Apple* takes an unusual approach to its reconstruction. All of the main characters—father, mother, twins, and social worker—are "played" by their real-life counterparts. The only recent film I know of that uses the same strategy also comes from Iran: Kiarostami's *Close-Up*, about a movie buff who posed as Mohsen Makhmalbaf (Samira's father). Yet in *The Apple* the strategy gains even more immediacy, partly because it enters deeply into a family's emotional life and partly because Samira Makhmalbaf began filming only four days after the twins were taken to the welfare center, at a time when the parents' resentment at the bad publicity was still burning and the twins had scarcely begun to taste their new freedom. The film was shot in sequence, Makhmalbaf told me, and as far as the twins were concerned, "This is documentary, not fiction. I didn't direct them to do anything they couldn't do. For example, people ask me, How could these girls play hopscotch so soon after coming out? Well, I shot for only eleven days, so it's a first time for nearly everything they do. Hopscotch was on the eighth day, and it was their first reaction to it."

The third issue concerns Makhmalbaf herself. Only 17 when she made the film, she lives in a society that generally considers youth and femaleness unsuitable for positions of responsibility and respect. True, she had already made two short films and served as an assistant on her father's full-length *The Silence*. On the other hand, not only did her father give her entree into the world of filmmaking but his credits on *The Apple* might suggest an even larger role in its making.

Ironically, it was Makhmalbaf's youth and gender that lay behind both the decision to make the film and the real-life family's willingness to take part in it. "When I saw the events on TV, I couldn't stop thinking about it," she said. "I could put myself in the girls' situation— I was a girl, and I was in that culture, it could have been me or my sister, and I wanted to help them. And another reason was I was interested in sociology, and I wanted to know what would happen to the two girls, how they would communicate with the outside world, what would be their reactions." As for persuading the family to take part, she knew that this meant persuading the father, whom she saw at the Social Services center after the twins were taken there. "I thought that it would be hard for him to communicate with a woman, a girl. So I just listened to him, I didn't judge him, I just wanted to know his reasons, instead of condemning him like everyone else. So I think he trusted me. And I never asked him, Let me come to your home, I want to make a film— he just took me there, and

started telling me about his life. It was very simple. And I was fond of him."

Makhmalbaf was in sole charge of the filming. As for her father's script: "I didn't want to have a script before meeting the family, I wanted to keep my eyes and ears open before using my imagination about it. After the shooting started, every night, my father and I had some kind of conversation together, and had an idea. Then my father threw out some kind of note about it, not the details, not the dialogue; so the whole script wasn't finished until after the shooting. For example, on the first day of shooting I went to the Social Services and found the father and mother and the social worker all worrying about the girls' future, but the girls were enjoying their life there, they had some apples and were tasting them. So I talked with my father about it and he found this metaphor about Adam and Eve and the apple, so in the film the apple means the knowledge and enjoyment of life."

While that metaphor recurs openly with the boy dangling the apple, first over the twins and at the end over the mother, who finally grasps it, the idea that knowledge and freedom go together is absorbed into the film's entire fabric. The Apple consists of a progression (reinforced by shooting in sequence) from enclosure to open space, from restriction to tolerance, not just for the twins but also-as at the end the father walks out with them and the mother emerges more tentatively-with the implicit hope it will come for everyone.

Makhmalbaf sets that theme in the opening shot, a medium close-up of a potted plant against a sunlit wall. A hand holding a pot enters the frame above right and begins to tip water onto the plant. A pan and upward tilt reveals that the hand belongs to Massoumeh, who stands behind a locked metal gate with her arm stretched out and down between the bars. The plant lives in sunlight and open air; the girl does not.

The twins go through more than one stage toward freedom. The gated house door opens onto a small garden surrounded by high walls, and a locked door in the facing wall leads to an alley. Only beyond the alley does the wider world begin. When the social worker first opens the gate and the garden door, the twins stay in the garden. Then she ushers them out, but they stay close by in the alley. It is the boy with the apple who leads them farther away. Then they discover the park- their first truly open space-and two girls who play with them and teach them hopscotch (which reflects their progressive "leaps" toward freedom).

When the social worker locks the father inside the house, she gives him a hacksaw and tells him he has to cut his way out. But the point is not just to make

him experience what it's like to be locked in. Before he has gotten very far with his sawing, she returns with the twins and gives them the key. If they can unlock the door, she says, he will be free. After several attempts, Massoumeh turns the key. Her knowledge is his freedom. Near the end of the film, the twins are fascinated by a street vendor's wares. They go home and ask their father to come back with them and buy them a watch. To their new knowledge of space they want to add knowledge of time.

The fictional elements in the film (notably the boy with the apple and the social worker's actions) intensify the implicit theme of progressive freedom and knowledge. By highlighting the symbolism, however, I have probably made it seem obtrusive, which in context it is not. In viewing the film, it is almost impossible to doubt that the twins are genuinely naive and barely able to speak. When they try to grab the dangled apple, they are clearly enjoying a game; when Massoumeh annoys one of the friends by suddenly tapping her on the forehead with an apple, and then makes up by giving it to her, the incident looks as unscripted as it actually was. With the adults, Makhmalbaf simply explained the situation and let them find their own words. "For example," she told me, "I'd listened to the father and I knew what would be his reaction to certain questions. I was waiting for the dialogue I wanted him 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." Even the fictional elements had to reflect the temperaments and attitudes of the real-life participants. As Makhmalbaf said of the social worker's fictional locking up of the father, "It was something that suited her character, something she would like to do."

There is no fracture in *The Apple* between documentary and fiction. In one sense it is all fiction (except for the few scenes at the welfare center), since even the unscripted incidents were embedded in performances done for the camera. Yet in another and stronger sense it is all documentary, since the filmmaking itself was an integral part of the family's response to the twins' temporary removal. With Makhmalbaf's prompt start on the film, everything in it, scripted or not, records the family's real-life experience. But *The Apple* does not flaunt these complexities; it remains a simple film: touching, sometimes amusing, always engrossing.

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Johnson, W. 'Review: *The Apple*' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Winter, 1999-2000), pp. 47-49.