

Necessary Fictions: From Cinéma vérité to Ciné, ma vérité(s)

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Abstract

*Despite critical reconceptualisations of reenactment in theory and practice beginning in the 1980s, such scholarship has confined reenactment to a process that rests solely on substitution, actors, and actor reenactment. This article examines reenactment in which actual persons reenact their own pasts and memories in the context of contemporary Iranian cinema to bring about an embodied historiography. This collaboration between social actors and filmmakers shifts the focus from questions of substitution to questions of presence and proximity in representations of the past and personal memory. This article explores these questions of presence, proximity, and reenactment as a distinct mode of audiovisual autobiography through a reading of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Bread and Flower* (1996) as a case study*

Keywords : Contemporary Iranian cinema, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Reenactment, Autobiography, Embodied historiography.



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I. Introduction

The critical reconceptualization of reenactment in theory and practice beginning in the 1980s has explored questions of substitution—where actors substitute for actual persons to reenact past experiences. Yet such redefinition runs the risk of confining reenactment to a process that rests solely on substitution and actors. What of cases where actual persons, or what I will call social actors, reenact their own pasts and memories? In what I call social actor reenactment, actual persons collaborate with filmmakers to reenact their past experiences and memories. This collaboration between social actors and filmmakers shifts the focus from questions of substitution to questions of presence and proximity in representations of the past and personal memory. As such, this collaboration engages with and challenges what documentary film scholar Michael Renov terms “post-verité” (Renov, 2004: xxiii) autobiographical documentary to characterise a type of documentary filmmaking that emerged in the 1970s through to the 1990s. In this article, I explore these questions of presence, proximity, and redefined autobiography through social actor reenactment, as presented in Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s film *Bread and Flower* (1996).

If reenactment’s conditions of access and representation are distance, absence, and body substitution, for social actor reenactment they are proximity, presence, and site-specificity. In social actor reenactment, persons perform their past experiences and memories, in intimate collaboration with the filmmaker’s perspective. Such collaboration results in a different form of “audiovisual autobiography” (Renov, 2004: xii) or, more appropriately, audiovisual performative autobiography. The result is also an altogether different negotiation of the line between documentary and fiction, in a way distinct from reenactment with actors and the use of non-professional actors in fiction films; hence my use of the term “social actor.” “Social actor” articulates the tension of documentary and fiction in this form of reenactment on several levels. At one level, they are actors because they reenact not only their past experiences and memories in front of the camera but also invented situations that nevertheless speak to these experiences. At another level, they are social actors because their reenactments take place in actual, sociocultural/political contexts and spaces. In some cases, reenactments directly impact their lives. I use the term social actor over that of non-professional actor to articulate the degree of agency exercised by these persons who represent their own experiences and memories. I use the term social actor also to move beyond an approach to reenactment that frames it exclusively in a context of either/or, truth or lie, documentary or fiction. Ultimately, the term social actor articulates two things: the role of performance to access and represent experiences and memories, and the body as the principal locus of expression and meaning in historical inquiry.

Through a close reading of *Bread and Flower*, I demonstrate how social actor reenactment is a form of embodied historiography. In the process, I elaborate how reenactment in contemporary Iranian cinema has been a significant way to make sense not only of the country’s recent tumultuous past and its resonance in the present, but also everyday contemporary experiences that nevertheless address larger questions of identity, gender roles, and the role of media in negotiating these questions. I also elaborate how contemporary Iranian cinema contributes to and engages with questions of the representability of the past, “the issues at stake in representation...and the various means of self- or social construction available” (de Groot, 2009: 2) through film. Furthermore, the period of Iranian filmmaking represented by *Bread and Flower* significantly overlaps with the “post-verité” era of

documentary filmmaking in the U.S that Renov examines. Bread and Flower's ambiguous status as both fiction and documentary, narrative and autobiography, also speaks to the preoccupations of autobiography, memory, experience, and (self-)representation found in "post-verité" documentary filmmaking, which takes the renewed interest in reenactment in documentary film discourse beyond the exclusive context of Anglo-American documentary filmmaking and at the same time invites comparative studies of filmmaking (documentary and narrative) across multiple geographies.

II. Post-Verité Documentary Film and the Practice of Public History

I locate social actor reenactment within "post-verité" documentary filmmaking, but also as an extension of it. Renov's designation of "post-verité" refers to *cinéma vérité*'s role as the platform from which audiovisual autobiography evolved. *Cinéma vérité* emerged in the late 1950s in France and embraces the filmmaker's on-screen presence to shape the events, situations, and interviews being captured in real-time by the camera. In contrast to direct cinema documentary filmmaking that emerged around the same time as *cinéma vérité* in the U.S. and Canada, which tries as much as possible to suppress acknowledgement of the camera, *cinéma vérité* operates from the knowledge that in the presence of a camera, "people will act, will lie, will be uncomfortable" (Eaton, 1979: 51). *Cinéma vérité* finds important above all "the manifestation of this side of themselves" (Eaton, 1979: 51). The "autobiographical outbreak" (Renov, 2004: xxii) in post-verité documentary filmmaking explores different levels of "this side of themselves," but in which the filmmaker and subject are often one and the same.

A specific example of capturing "this side of themselves" in *cinéma vérité* is Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). This film contains a moment of "autobiographical outbreak" that anticipates Renov's periodisation of post-verité. More importantly, this film provokes questions from which I develop social actor reenactment as embodied historiography. While during most of the film Marceline, one of Rouch's collaborators on the film, interviews persons for the film, one sequence sees her give testimony rather than provoke it from others. In this sequence, she remembers and shares her experiences of surviving the Jewish genocide during World War II. She walks around the Place de la Concorde in Paris, a point of deportation to the concentration camps in Eastern Europe and from which she returned but not her father. As she walks, she speaks into a microphone and recounts her memories, while the camera follows her. Film scholar Joshua Hirsch writes, through Marceline's site-specific narration, "the past inheres in the relationship between the speaking body situated in a space of memory and the audible and visible signs of memory emanating from and written on the body" (Hirsch, 2003: 67; emphasis mine). Marceline's remembering of her past, in a space directly connected to that past, as Hirsch notes, presents a form of testimony different from the kind obtained through the talking head interviews in the rest of the film. Marceline walks around the Place de la Concorde and personalises the space by injecting its presentness with her past through her body and voice. In the process, she shares her memories with others.

The talking head interview is an intimate form of expression of one's experiences and memories through an emphasis on the face and voice. It also provides an intimate spectatorial experience because it gives the spectator the illusion of being in the same space as the person speaking, especially when used with direct address to the camera. But while the talking head interview holds expressive power in its concentration on the face and voice, it is often limited to a remembering removed from the space of initial experience. What of other, alternative documentary testimonial forms that go beyond the talking head and involve a body? Is there a form of testimony

that enfranchises the film subject in a different way as an active, performing body of his/her own experiences, in active collaboration with the filmmaker, where s/he obtains a different kind of role in the audiovisual authoring of his/her own experiences? Marceline's testimony arguably gestures towards such a body-based form of testimony. Marceline's expressive, walking body and its site-specific situatedness not only narrates her own experiences but also remembers and references those of her absent father and the history of the Place de la Concorde's role in deportations.

Social actor reenactment references and builds upon Rouch and Marceline's collaboration in *Chronicle of a Summer*, that is, of a body-based form of testimony, in a very explicit way. To elaborate this point, I draw from Bill Nichols' concept of virtual performance (Nichols, 1991: 121-122). Virtual performance describes the way film subjects speak of their experiences and knowledge through interviews, the interview being one of documentary film's ways to enter the subjectivity of its film subjects. At the core of virtual performance is the paradox that one seeks to present oneself not as a performance but as "a person's normal self-presentation" (Nichols, 1991: 121). Virtual performance exercises "the power and effect of actual performance without being one" (Nichols, 1991: 121). That is, it "presents the logic of actual performance without signs of conscious awareness that this presentation is an act" (Nichols, 1991: 122). Virtual performance is constituted by a repertoire of facial expressions, postures, and gestures mobilised by habit. Nichols contrasts this system of habitual, automatic representation of the self with the system of trained and consciously developed facial expressions, postures, and gestures necessary to create a character in acting. I find useful the concept of virtual performance to draw out the kind of embodied historiography that reenactment enables, especially in social actor reenactment.

Ultimately, virtual performance draws out the performative aspect of the process of self-presentation and self-narration in documentary film. In doing so, virtual performance highlights the issue of whether or not one acts differently when one is in front of the camera. Jean Rouch once stated, "Not to film life as it is, but life as it is provoked," where *cinéma vérité* is "cinema-provocation" (Eaton, 1979: 51). The result is a "different kind of cinema..., conceived of as neither documentary truth, for the participants are always performing, taking on roles, nor theatrical fiction" (Eaton, 1979: 51-52). If virtual performance highlights the issue of one's behavior in front of the camera while giving an interview, then social actor reenactment takes this issue further. Social actor reenactment constitutes a different form of self-re/presentation, one that is body-based, where "participants are always performing, taking on roles," of themselves and their pasts and memories as well as those of others, and where accuracy is less an issue than the dynamic, challenging tension of past and present in experience and memory.

To further elaborate social actor reenactment as the legacy of Rouch and Marceline's collaboration in *Chronicle of a Summer*, I draw from public history studies. Public history investigates new, emerging ways of engaging with the past by actual persons at the level of the everyday, according to new and changing technologies. In this way, it aspires to a "populist historiography" (de Groot, 2009: 5). In turn, public history examines the impact of changing technologies on historical and personal memory. On this point, public history also constitutes a "dissident historiography" by "offer[ing] a series of versions of the past that suggest a variety of experiences" (de Groot, 2009: 6), some of which may contradict or challenge the historical record. That is, public history is a "dissident historiography" because it considers a range of popular forms through which non-academic historians

engage with the past—e.g. film, television, graphic novels, and video games. Public history challenges a “standardisation of history” and a singular, totalising practice and instead “reflect[s] the complexity of contemporary cultural and social interface” (de Groot, 2009: 6). In so doing, it posits, “epistemologically, [that] the historicised subject is multiple” (de Groot, 2009: 8). Moreover, it understands that the “historicist performer is both subject and object” (de Groot, 2009: 106) of experience and knowledge. Social actor reenactment explicitly explores the idea of the “historicised subject” or “historicist performer” as multiple, subject, and object.

Significantly, public history understands reenactment as a “body-based discourse, in which the past is reanimated through physical and psychological experience” (Agnew, 2004: 330), where history is “less in thrall to the visible facts than to embodied performing subjects” (de Groot, 2009: 106). Public history’s approach to reenactment highlights the experiential, the performative, and the everyday in remembering and historical analysis. But while public history’s conceptualisation of reenactment limits itself to actors performing others’ pasts and experiences, that is, actor reenactment, I propose social actor reenactment. This form of reenactment situates social actors as “historicist performer[s]” confronting their own pasts, the larger histories to which they may refer, and the multiple identities that they reveal or take on during the course of the reenactment performance. Here I introduce the concept of the composite body in social actor reenactment much in the same way public history employs the term “historicized subject as multiple.” The composite body signifies the way one’s body always already not only narrates one’s experiences and memories but also references others’ experiences and memories. In this way, social actor reenactment extends public history’s call for a more “participatory historical culture.” Reenactment obtains further distinct meanings as an expression of a more “participatory historical culture” and “dissident historiography” in the context of contemporary Iranian culture and society.

III. From Post-*verité* to Post-revolution: Contemporary Iranian Cinema

Beginning in the late 1980s, and overlapping with the post-*verité* era of documentary filmmaking in the United States, contemporary Iranian cinema has presented explorations of the boundaries between cinema and life, and fiction and documentary film forms. Such explorations address not only alternative narrative forms but also alternative notions of the role of audiovisual images vis-à-vis the past and historical memory. Films such as *Bashu*, the *Little Stranger* (1989, Bahram Beyzai), *The White Balloon* (1995, Jafar Panahi), *Children of Heaven* (1997, Majid Majidi), *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000, Bahman Ghobadi), and the filmographies of Abbas Kiarostami, Samira Makhmalbaf, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf (which I will discuss further below) present important examples of such explorations. These films followed the tumultuous first decade of post-revolution Iranian filmmaking and events, beginning with the Islamic Revolution in 1979: the Islamisation of all sectors of society and culture, including cinema, and what that process should entail; the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988); the production of “Sacred Defense” state-funded propaganda films urging young men to enlist in the military during the war; the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989; and the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and postwar reconstruction.

Post-revolution Iranian cinema’s turn to non-professional actors and children in particular is perhaps better understood in this context. The use of non-professional actors contrasts with the star system in pre-revolution Iran and its brief continuation in the immediate post-revolution. The use of non-professional actors also references the establishment of a strict state censorship system, as part of the Islamisation of the film industry.

Scholars often discuss the use of non-professional child actors as a way for filmmakers to avoid censorship issues (Cardullo, 2000; Reza Sadr, 2002; Tapper, 2002: 17-19). Children's bodies in contemporary Iranian cinema have therefore come to stand for not only themselves as non-professional actors but also adult experiences and themes (e.g. suicide, divorce, prostitution) that would otherwise remain unrepresented due to clerical state censorship. Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror* (1995) is a significant example of this point. The film treats the banal subject of a little girl waiting for her mother to pick her up at school. The little girl becomes worried and impatient, and decides to make her way home alone through the urban traffic of vehicles and persons. At one level, the film creates a narrative of movement and mobility that speaks implicitly to the Iranian state's understanding of gender roles across all sectors of society. If in Iran, gender roles and their maintenance rest on segregation, and the state designates the spaces allotted to women in which to move and how to move in them, the little girl's movement and mobility becomes politically charged. At a formal level, forty minutes into the narrative of trying to find her way home from school, the non-professional child actor gets out of character and declares in the film that she no longer wants to act. At which point she leaves the film crew to go home. The camera continues to follow her through the urban traffic as it had been doing thus far, but now with the escalating tension between what is film and what is actual life, what the little girl wants and what the filmmaker has scripted, framing the images and their meaning. This tension between film and actual life, documentary and fiction, in *The Mirror* is a significant segue to discussing *Bread and Flower* and its own play between film and actual life at the level of form and content.

Postcolonial studies scholar Zohreh T. Sullivan writes of such a play with form and narrative in contemporary Iranian cinema, as found in *The Mirror*,

Modern cinema in Iran is rethinking the relation between image and social reality, between knowledge, representation, and reality, between reality as something

known and something unknown. [I]n its dialectical reading of the relation between cinematic art and reality, it transforms its audience's relation to reality, and

therefore compels an alternative way of seeing and thinking (Sullivan, 2008: 193-194).

Another film by Panahi, *Offside* (2006), is a prime example of a "dialectical reading of the relation between cinematic art and reality." *Offside* examines young women who disguise themselves as males to attend live sporting events, since they are forbidden to do so in Iran. Panahi worked with non-professional actors and shot at the very stadium in which an actual match between Iran and Bahrain was taking place. He had the young women re/act freely to the actual space of the match to shape their disguises and ruses to enter the stadium and watch the match. That is, Panahi collaborated with a group of young women, whose bodies and voices perform fictional scenarios in a site where they should not be in the first place according to actual law. The Iranian state censoring body promptly banned the film. The film critically plays with the idea of public history's multiple historicised subject: the young women who participate in the film play themselves, yet at the same time they reference other women who have been caught and detained for attending live sporting events. They also constitute potential social activists for participating in such a project. Furthermore, in addressing the ban on women to attend

live sporting events, these women, along with Panahi, confront the clerical state that issued the ban and the historical context that prompted such a ban in the first place.

The filmographies of the following filmmakers also constitute dialectical readings of the relation between cinematic art and reality and compelling expressions of alternative ways of seeing and thinking. Taken together, they present a diverse range of experiences and testimonies of not only post-revolution Iran but also aspects of a post-9/11 Middle East. Taken together, they also present a commitment to a collaborative approach to filmmaking that speaks to my understanding of reenactment as embodied historiography and serves as the critical entry point to examining *Bread and Flower*.

Abbas Kiarostami's entire filmography operates within the documentary/fiction divide and pushes the boundaries between them with each succeeding work. Non-professional actors have always populated his works, since the time he began making films with children, before and after the revolution. *Close-up* (1990) is a pivotal work in this regard. It shifts the focus from children to adults as main characters in presenting the actual story of unemployed Turkish Iranian Hossein Sabzian, who impersonated Mohsen Makhmalbaf, was arrested, and put on trial. It also initiates the systematic use of reenactment in subsequent films to explore the relationships between cinema and actuality, documentary and fiction. In *And Life Goes On* (1992), non-professional actors reenact Kiarostami and his son's trek through Koker in Northern Iran after a massive earthquake, in search of the children with whom he had worked and who live in that region. *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) takes two of the non-professional actors used in *And Life Goes On* and reenacts the filming of their portion alongside their actual off-screen romance. Kiarostami often purports to be non-political in his films, but his ongoing exploration of the documentary/fiction divide and his commitment to a collaborative approach to filmmaking has social actors' lives constantly puncture, if not prop, the film's fictional scaffolding to arrive at startling testimonies. A more recent example can be found in *Ten* (2002), which takes place entirely in a car and consists of actual conversations between a woman driving and her passengers. The film ultimately addresses the delicate issues of the role of women in Iran and the physical and psychological constraints on their actions and bodies.

That Samira Makhmalbaf's first feature film *The Apple* (1997), about twin eleven-year-old girls who had been confined in their house since they were born, involves reenactment reflects the Iranian filmmaking environment in which she was schooled. This point, however, should not eclipse Makmalbaf's own voice and distinct mode of hands-on directing and collaboration with non-professional actors. Her subsequent work continues to mobilise non-professional actors and the tension between documentary and fiction to access and represent marginalised lives and testimonies in Iran and the Middle East. *Blackboards* (2000), her second film, is about nomadic teachers looking for students near the Iran-Iraq border during the Iran-Iraq War. *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003) tells of a young Afghan woman who lives in a post-Taliban but still repressive Afghanistan and aspires to go to school. Her most recent film, *Two Legged Horse* (2008), explores the dynamics of power and exploitation through the story of a one-legged boy whose father hires a mentally challenged but physically able boy to carry his son. Perhaps above all, her filmography presents the distinct perspective of a young Iranian woman filmmaker, whose father and film teacher is Mohsen Makhmalbaf.

Mohsen Makmalbaf's film prior to *Bread and Flower*, *Salaam Cinema* (1995), attests to his penchant for casting non-professional actors. Though *Salaam Cinema* departs from the social realism of his earlier works, such

as *The Cyclist* (1987) and *The Peddler* (1989), it develops a more collaborative approach to filmmaking. The film is about one of Makhmalbaf's actual open casting calls, the overwhelming response to it by everyday people in Iran, and the encounters between Makhmalbaf, his camera, and the people who audition for potential film roles. In 2000, he made *Kandahar*, in response to Afghan Canadian journalist Nelofer Pazira's search for her friend still living under the Taliban. Pazira plays Nafas, an Afghan Canadian woman returning to Afghanistan in search of her sister. The result is less a narrative than a collaborative effort between Makhmalbaf and Pazira to capture vocal and muted testimonies of living in Afghanistan in a post-9/11 world. *Bread and Flower* significantly bridges *Salaam Cinema* and *Kandahar* in terms of form and content.

The "productive link between art and life" (Sullivan, 2008: 198) finds expression in the aforementioned films, but finds an altogether different order of expression through social actor reenactment. *Bread and Flower's* playful use of reenactment to remember and stage an instance of the past provides the most explicit example of a post-verité legacy of Jean Rouch and Marceline's collaboration in *Chronicle of a Summer*. Reenactment here constructs a space of critical analysis and collaborative filmmaking that provokes questions of the representation and representability of memory and the past. While very specific and localised since the film treats an actual specific instance in Makhmalbaf's life, reenactment transforms the actual social spaces in which the reenactment and film production take place into sites for discussion of larger issues of Iranian culture and politics; the guarded gender roles that they dictate; representations of Iranian women; memories and experiences in pre-revolution Iran; and media's role in negotiating these issues.

IV. Making the Reenactment and Remaking the Past

If public history can be described as a form of "attempted enfranchisement" (de Groot, 2009: 104) of everyday persons in engagements with and representations of past events, then social actor reenactment pushes this enfranchisement to a literal form. Different forms of reenactment serve not only to actively remember and re-experience one's past, but also to reflect and even effect change in one's present. Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Bread and Flower* is a particularly interesting case study for several reasons. One, its use of reenactment is a mixture of actor reenactment and social actor reenactment in that it presents the making of a reenactment. Two, it explores and renegotiates what autobiography can mean, since its point of departure is a personal experience of Makhmalbaf's, and the way media impacts historical and personal memory.

The memory and history in question is of Makhmalbaf as a teenager in Iran during Shah rule. In 1974, during Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's dictatorial rule (1941-1979), seventeen-year-old Makhmalbaf was a member of a militant anti-Shah organization. The group planned to steal a gun from a policeman, rob a bank, and with the stolen money fund its anti-Shah activities. The actual event unfolded differently: Makhmalbaf stabbed the policeman, Mirhadi Tayebi, who fired back at Makhmalbaf. Makhmalbaf was arrested and sentenced to five years in jail; he escaped the death penalty because he was under eighteen. During the Islamic Revolution in 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini was instated as the nation's supreme leader, political prisoners were released, including Makhmalbaf. The violent encounter between Makhmalbaf and Tayebi is the subject of the film's reenactment and the film overall. The idea to revisit a shared past via film was triggered by a second encounter between Makhmalbaf and Tayebi, in 1990s post-revolution Iran. During the production of Makhmalbaf's previous film, *Salaam Cinema* (1995), Tayebi approached Makhmalbaf for a film role, and admitted that he was the policeman

whom Makhmalbaf had stabbed. Makhmalbaf did not give Tayebi a role, but he proposed that they revisit and reenact together their violent encounter for another film, which became *Bread and Flower*. The film follows Makhmalbaf and Tayebi in their respective preparations to stage the reenactment of that violent encounter. But the film is less about Makhmalbaf “recaptur[ing] my youth with a camera,” as he states in the film, than exploring the differences between Makhmalbaf and Tayebi’s generation and that of contemporary Iranian youth, that is, between pre-revolution and post-revolution Iran. As a result, the film also comes to address the differences in perspective of that past by each generation, and its resonance in the present. By making the film about the staging of a reenactment, the film is ultimately a meditation on the variability of memory; the fine and dynamic line between documentary and fiction; and the role of performance in historical inquiry. As the film consists of a series of reenactments, I limit my analysis to the sequences that highlight most explicitly embodied and performative aspects involved in reenactment.

One such sequence is the opening one. The opening sequence shows the process of Makhmalbaf and Tayebi selecting the young non-professional actors who will perform the reenactment of their violent encounter. The rest of the film follows Makhmalbaf and Tayebi as they guide and rehearse these young actors. Makhmalbaf selects a young man who professes his desire to save the world, reminding him of himself, while Tayebi initially selects one who is fairly good-looking and looks nothing like him (Makhmalbaf eventually selects another actor for Tayebi). The rest of the film follows the dual plotlines of Makhmalbaf and Tayebi preparing their respective actors to be like them as much as possible for the reenactment, in and around the corridors of a bazaar where the violent encounter had taken place. In the process, Makhmalbaf and Tayebi experience unanticipated tensions and surprises of actual life that prey on the process of staging this reenactment, provoked in large part by the coming together of different generations. Such tensions and surprises end up shaping the reenactment of the violent encounter and, by extension, the resulting representation and interpretation of the particular past in question. The narrative has the young actors slowly break through the roles and pasts imposed on them by Makhmalbaf and Tayebi to bring about a different kind of interpretation of that past as well as the contemporary period. Most importantly, these young actors bring about dialogues that speaks more from the present than the past in question. Such a narrative choice ultimately upends the film’s promise of reenactment. But by upending the reenactment, the film paradoxically articulates reenactment’s significance as an alternative model of accessing and representing memory, past experiences, and their ongoing resonance in the present.

The sway of the young actors gains momentum through preparations and rehearsals for the reenactment, especially when halfway into the film Makhmalbaf brings in a young woman to play the young version of his female cousin alongside the two young actors who play Makhmalbaf and Tayebi. This young woman plays Makhmalbaf’s cousin and Tayebi’s lost love. However, she is an invented character. Makhmalbaf’s female cousin (if he has one) was not an accomplice to his plan to shoot and rob Tayebi in 1974. By extension, Tayebi’s lost love that turned out to be Makhmalbaf’s cousin is also an invented plot point. Why resort to such invention? At a basic level, Makhmalbaf’s invention of a female cousin expresses his preoccupation with weaving together actual and fictional narratives and characters and accessing the distinct paradoxical truths that can emerge from the space between documentary and fiction. At another level, the female cousin also expresses Makhmalbaf’s awareness of his and Tayebi’s self-centered and narrow perspectives of their past experiences and imposition of their past on the young actors. In one early scene, Tayebi tells his young actor, “Look what I do and you do the same.” The young actors, including the young woman, forcibly challenge such self-centeredness. Most significantly, this invented young female cousin serves as a composite body that references synecdochically the absence of women in this remembering of pre-revolution era Iran, during the revolution, and post-revolution. As a composite body (she

remains nameless in the film), she also references the numerous women who were culturally and politically active before, during, and after the revolution, and who also experienced such massive changes in the wake of such sociopolitical and socioeconomic changes in the country.

The sway of the young actors over Makhmalbaf and Tayebi's self-centered and narrow perspectives of the past culminate at the end of the film. During the course of the film, the young actors chosen to portray Makhmalbaf, Tayebi, and Makhmalbaf's cousin increasingly deviate from the mute, anonymous actors frequently associated with actor reenactment. These actors talk back instead of simply repeat other people's words/experiences. Their increasing resistance to reenacting Makhmalbaf and Tayebi's shared past in the course of the film gradually gains the form of a critique, as they become more deeply embedded in the physical space and performance of the violent encounter. Towards the end, the film shows Makhmalbaf filming his young actor Ali Bakhshi, accompanied by the female cousin, walking towards the designated spot of the encounter with a knife in his possession. The film intercuts with Makhmalbaf's assistant director and Tayebi filming Tayebi's young actor Ammar Tafti doing the same, with a gun in his hand. Each young actor is prompted to wield his weapon once they see each other to fulfill the reenactment. But Makhmalbaf's young actor Bakhshi stops in his tracks; he refuses to commit a violent act and bursts into tears. Makhmalbaf forces him to go through with it. As the film's last sequence, the young woman asks the young policeman for the time, the signal to strike. In response, the young actor Tafti wields a potted flower instead of the gun, while the young actor Bakhshi wields flatbread instead of the knife. The film's final shot, turned into a freeze frame, is of the potted flower and the flatbread flanking the young woman's face in medium close-up. The young actors' actions reject the knife and gun and ultimately betray Tayebi's earlier direction of "Look what I do and you do the same."

Makhmalbaf's decision to not go through with the reenactment in the narrative expresses several things, whose significance beyond a narrative one Makhmalbaf leaves open for the spectator. One, it differentiates the attitudes of these contemporary Iranian youths of the 1990s from the Makhmalbafs and Tayebis of the 1970s, with regards to violence and social change. On this note, one cannot help but recall the recent non-violent protests by young Iranians in Tehran (and Los Angeles), for instance, following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidential election win in 2009. In the face of military surveillance and censorship, massive numbers of young people took to the streets through non-violence as well as through Twitter, Facebook, and mobile audiovisual media. Two, at a most personal level, Makhmalbaf's decision to not go through with the reenactment is a critical reflection of that particular point in his life and represents his move from a militant pro-Islamic revolution position in the early 1980s to a critique of the revolution's failings and a more intense commitment to representations of minorities, including women and women's rights beginning in the late 1980s. The invention of the female cousin surely articulates this post-revolution reflection of a pre-revolution past.

What begins as a look back on two people's related pasts and memories and a reenactment of these pasts and memories thus becomes more of an interactive dialogue between older and younger generations of Iranians of the past and present, and pre- and post-revolution Iran. The sequence of Makhmalbaf and Tayebi on-screen choosing actors to substitute for them results in composite bodies that bring together, like the film overall, different generations in dynamic dialogue. Not to reconcile the older and younger generations, the past and present, and pre- and post-revolution Iran, based on the logic of "Look what I do and you do the same," but rather

to access and represent diverse experiences to understand the complexity and changes that characterise post-revolution Iran, the personal and public remembering of pre-revolution Iran, and the role of film to negotiate such memories and experiences.

Makhmalbaf's presentation of "a variety of conflicting voices" (Egan, 2005: 152) through a narrative that upends the making of a reenactment paradoxically redefines reenactment as a more dynamic model of remembering. I say "paradox" because the film's narrative of not going through with the reenactment rejects a definition of reenactment as simply about "Look what I do and you do the same." Instead, the film proposes reenactment as a different form of audiovisual performative autobiography, or embodied historiography, where the personal and the historical interact in challenging, not benign, ways. The decision to upend the reenactment paradoxically creates a "space for public discourse, one that introduces certain problematic Iranian cultural traits, like individualism and the belief in absolute truths (Egan, 2005: 152), in its representation of the past. In this way, the film "intervene[s] in the localized social arena of the personal in an attempt to reconstruct history and recast reality" (Egan, 2005: 152). That the reenactment does not happen, or repeat the past verbatim, also "de-narrates" a static past and being condemned to repeat it. In so doing, the film presents a "new angle on reality [past and present], a re-narration that forces reality to yield to alternative modes of being, perception, signification" (Dabashi, 2008: 120) of an event of pre- and post-revolution Iran.

V. Conclusion

English and public history scholar Jerome de Groot describes reenactment as a process that "offers enfranchisement, a complexity of historical interaction which is missing in much academic or 'official' history" (de Groot, 2009: 106). In my discussion of social actor reenactment, the sociohistorical/cultural context of contemporary Iranian cinema, and close examination of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Bread and Flower*, I have sought to demonstrate how reenactment enables this "enfranchisement" of everyday persons to engage with their past experiences and memories. *Bread and Flower* presents a "complexity" and criticality precisely in the way it accesses and represents distinct experiences, personal and shared, in pre- and post-revolution Iran through reenactment and its collaborative approach to representation. Here, Makhmalbaf presents a narrative that makes possible actual persons or non-professional actors transforming into social actors, persons who exercise a degree of agency in accessing and representing their experiences, along with those of other social actors and the filmmaker. Through his distinct use of reenactment, Makhmalbaf also accesses and represents marginalised bodies and experiences of contemporary Iranian society and culture that expand what "contemporary Iranian experience" can mean, such as a pre-revolutionary state functionary and a former militant anti-Shah member.

Contrary to the criticism that the "privileging of experience [in reenactment] tends to sacrifice broader interpretative questions, investigating the self in place of the political" (Agnew, 2004: 334) or the historical, *Bread and Flower* begins with the self and memory in order to take on larger sociopolitical/cultural questions and historical contexts. In other words, "[r]ather than history being the overarching and tacit narrative in which autobiography takes place, autobiography serves as the overarching framework within which history is explicitly narrated, situated, and embodied" (McHugh, 2005: 158). Reenactment enables this inversion of autobiography-in-history into history-in-autobiography precisely through its embodied and performative aspects. My concept of the composite body in reenactment articulates this point most forcefully. Above all, the social actors who reenact their own past experiences not only represent themselves but also reference others like them or others who are now absent. Reenactment in the context of contemporary Iranian cinema via *Bread and Flower* can be a transformative act, if only at the level of expression, representation, and collaboration. For reenactment here resonates in the actual, social world, if not at the level of action than at least at the level of perception and interpretation, no matter how "minor" the past events or memories may be.

VI. References

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