



Sandra Schäfer

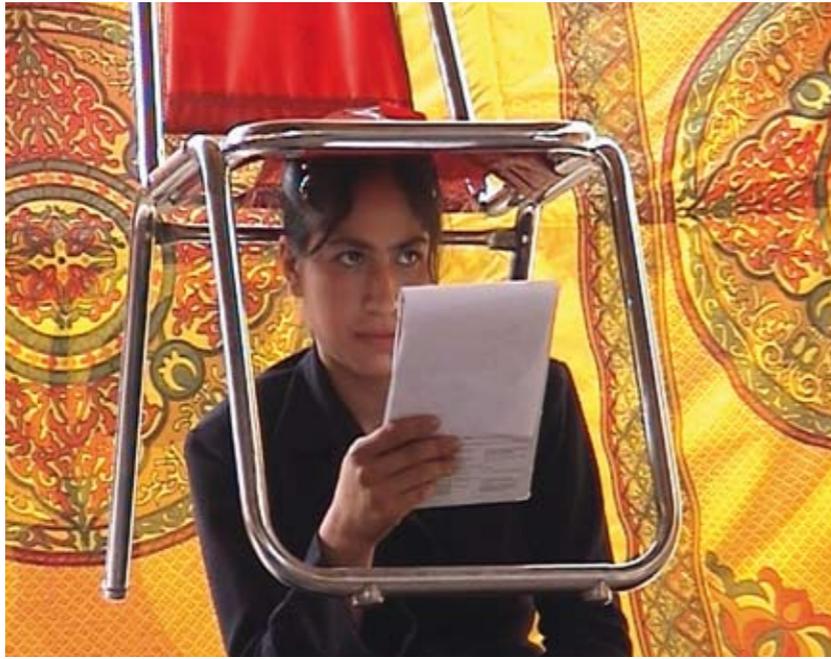
# stagings

*Kabul, Film & Production of Representation*

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## Contested Documentary Values

Shifted Expectations,  
Shared Visibilities  
in *Passing the Rainbow*



“Documentary”: Even the history of the term is contested. Conventional histories of documentary cinema claim that it was the documentary film publicist and filmmaker John Grierson who mentioned the “documentary” for the first time in 1926, in a review of Robert Flaherty’s South Seas melodrama *MOANA*. Grierson pointed out the “documentary value” of the fiction scenes. However, a film catalogue from 1914 already described the sepia-colored pictures of Native Americans taken by the photographer and filmmaker E. S. Curtis as “documentary”. In both cases, an ethnographic attitude is at work.<sup>1</sup> The filmmaker and postcolonial feminist thinker Trinh T. Minh-ha, in turn, opens her insightful text, *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning*, with the assertion: “There is no such thing as documentary”<sup>2</sup> and – in addition to her critique of the ethnographic – puts the power constellations inherent to the concept of “real” up for debate.

“Times of crises are hotbeds for documentary films.”<sup>3</sup> During the unrest in June 2009, following the questionable election results in Iran, a communiqué on the image war that was being waged appeared on youtube – signed by 112 Iranian documentary filmmakers: “We are documentary filmmakers. Our work is to discover and tell the truth. In the course of recent events in our country our national media, by deliberately hiding the reality of the situation is making it impossible for the public to access the truth. We are documentary filmmakers.”<sup>4</sup> The three-minute manifesto calls for not antagonizing society by a type of journalism “using degrading and abusive vocabulary and thus provok[ing] people into confrontation and upheaval.”<sup>5</sup> The filmmakers oppose a manipulative and propagandistic utilization of the medium of film. What simultaneously becomes clear is that the notion of truth cannot be separated from its use.<sup>6</sup>

The manifesto is recited with great insistence by the Iranian filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, who in the 1980s “began with a staccato of social documentaries and culminated in a succession of feature films.”<sup>7</sup> “I believe that the beauty of the declaration made by these filmmakers also lies in the fact that, despite all well-balanced formulations and the stringency of the recitation, anger can still be sensed; perhaps a similar kind of anger that made the images [the demonstrations of women on March 8, 1979] in the film [*Le Mouvement de Libération des Femmes Iraniennes, Année Zero*] from 1979 so powerful.”<sup>8</sup> In 1979 women demonstrated

against the decree demanding mandatory veiling that had been issued on the evening of March 7. These were the first mass protests against the newly installed regime.

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad made documentary films dealing with themes such as rapid urbanization, the destruction of agricultural economy, labor migration, bureaucratic centralization and drug addiction before turning to feature films, in which she impressively worked on femininity and sexuality – of course, within the frame of censorship constraints. “What is at stake in her project is the constitution of femininity as the weakest and most vulnerable point of a much wider pathology of power, culturally constituted, socially institutionalized, economically based and metaphysically theorized. Bani-Etemad’s cinema is a visual theorization against that violent metaphysics.”<sup>9</sup> In the past years, she has established herself as a documentary filmmaker again.

Late April, 2008: After the screening of her film *Ruz-e gar-e Ma* (Our Times) (1999) about the Iranian single mother and presidential candidate Arezoo, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad stated in a talk with the audience<sup>10</sup> in Kabul: “In my documentaries, the people in front of the camera are never merely roles or figures, they don’t serve the purpose of realizing my ideas. Never. By peering through the lens, a documentary filmmaker is permitted to take a deep look in people’s personal lives. And precisely this involves enormous responsibility. [...] not all situations are suitable for filming.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Bani-Etemad points out a principle dilemma of the documentary and appeals to the responsibility of filmmakers to ask themselves what the meaning of publicity and publication precisely is. She thus arrives in the middle of the ethical/political space that unfolds itself in documentary.<sup>12</sup>

The directors Sandra Schäfer and Elfe Brandenburger approached their film project, *Passing the Rainbow*, with this awareness and with the aim “to create a shift in regard to the theme of women in Afghanistan, which is repeatedly instrumentalized by national and international players.”<sup>13</sup> They had to find out in which politically charged situation they were to maneuver, what it meant to intervene in the precarious gender relations from a Western perspective, and what this film might imply and precipitate in Afghanistan itself. They also had to clarify where and how to make their own point of view visible.

The film starts without an image. “Are you recording?” “We’ve covered the lens so that no images will be recorded”. “Why do you cover your face?” “For safety reasons. We have to keep ourselves and our activities secret!” We are immediately inside the question of the veil, on a path woven with pitfalls, and we are told that veil and burka are also strategic devices, things that are occasionally thrown to each other, that one strips off or negligently lets slip. The title of the film *Passing the Rainbow* refers to an Afghan legend about passing the rainbow (“Kaman Rostam”), which makes it possible to change one’s gender. An off-screen interview with a girl, who has been living as a boy since she was six to help sustain her family, gives the traditional legend a pragmatic political anchor in the present.

The filmmakers Sandra Schäfer and Elfe Brandenburger are mainly concerned with *agency*, with creating scopes of action and with the way in which the interrelations between images and actual living conditions can be grasped. A teacher is also an actress and plays the role of the president in the film. A girls’ theater group in Kabul rehearses a play dealing with the elections. A policewoman shoots action films. An activist of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan advocates the radical separation of state and religion. Marina Golbahari, the leading actress in Siddiq Barmak’s film *Osama* (2003), explains how much her life has to do with her role. The actresses of a large demonstration (film) scene discuss the current political situation. And the girl Malek\_a has long been living as a boy so that she can work.

With their participatory working method, resulting in a number of staged scenes frequently developed together with the Afghan protagonists mentioned above, the two directors drew a complex picture of a complex situation. This collaborative, many-voiced approach may at first have appeared too multi-layered for most German (documentary) film festivals, which still favor classical, compact documentations. Moreover, via an “authentic” viewpoint from inside the nation, one’s own ethnocentric classifications can easily be ignored, as they are projected on the view of an “insider-informant”. The episodic character of the film, as well as its discursive negotiation of gender relations and the history of Afghan cinema that dispenses with a victimizing, superior documentary view – the observing filmmakers repeatedly make it clear to what extent they and the persons being observed are participants in the process of filming – seem to have contributed to the film initially finding an audience via the context of art.

An insert right after the film’s prologue counters possible misunderstandings: “This is not a documentary on the situation of women in Afghanistan. Those involved pursued strategies with which social norms could be subverted. For this it was necessary for some people to be hidden from view in order to be able to appear in the film. The transitions between real and fictional scenes are fluid.”<sup>14</sup>

What are the questions raised here? A basic decision had to be made in regard to where and in which way the film could be viewed. Should it bring back a few exotic and miserabilist images, like so many tourist film souvenirs? What would it imply, if the film was screened and discussed in Afghanistan as well? Is it the intention to return with the film to the persons who were involved? What about the relations of representation? Which images would pose a threat to the protagonists? One of the protagonists had meanwhile married into a conservative family, and it would have been necessary to remove all scenes with her from the film – but the filmmakers came up with a different solution: The young woman was made unidentifiable by means of a specter-like blur effect,<sup>15</sup> while retaining her movements, words and habitus in the film.

The starting point of the film project *Passing the Rainbow* was a short documentation of the shooting of the first Afghan feature film *Osama* (2003), directed by Siddiq Barmak after the end of the Taliban regime. In this “making of”, Berlin-based artist and filmmaker Sandra Schäfer focused on the restaging of a large demonstration scene of women dressed in burkas, to which, surprisingly, almost 1,000 females had appeared. The location manager spurred

on the extras: “Remember your grief! They didn’t allow you in the streets! Shout out loud all this grief! Remember the mines!” The women’s cries also addressed highly topical issues: “We are hungry! We are not political! We need work!” But their appearance in the film was also remunerated work. The camera is focused on all the efforts required to create the impression of “authenticity”: The clothes are supposed to look ragged; the cars are smeared with mud to produce the credible patina of the real. At times, a green police VW bus can be seen in the background – a sign of the development aid given to the Afghan police by the German federal government. The filmmaker Sandra Schäfer and the cutter Elfe Brandenburger asked themselves why so many women took part in the film recordings and what the profession of an actress, long controversial in Afghan society, actually entails after the end of the Taliban regime.

“Whether a film is fictional or nonfictional is, in my opinion, a question of the greater or the lesser falsification of the material that is being filmed. There is an arbitrary element in any film. [...] I think to distinguish fiction from nonfiction (the terminology is arbitrary), we must keep in mind that there is a gradation in the falsification of the elements of which the film is made. I define falsification as the arbitrary distortion, the displacement of genuine elements,”<sup>16</sup> the author Sergej Tretjakov wrote in 1927.

If one deems the objective of the documentary more in working on social deficits, many of the questions pertaining to what is staged in the documentary recede to the background. The endless debates on “true” and “false” appear as a diversion from the fundamental question related to the interest with which filmmakers are engaged in the production of “Wahrnehmung” [perception]. The filmmaker Hartmut Bitomsky says that the notion of the “authentic” is entirely discredited anyway. “Reality is always on the run. A documentary film cannot arrest reality, it can only recreate it.”<sup>17</sup> He describes the documentary filmmaker him/herself as a means of production. Based on this concept of production, he then distinguishes a “first production” from a “second production”, the latter being everything that takes place during the recording of a film. The “first production” is that which we call “reality”. Reality is therefore grasped as something that is produced: Which (social and political) forces were at work and did the directing?<sup>18</sup> This is what the “second production” must visualize. The filmmakers of *Passing the Rainbow* have gone a step further in this respect.

The 71-minute film *Passing the Rainbow* by Sandra Schäfer and Elfe Brandenburger is concerned with what it means to work as an actress in Afghanistan – either professionally or as a layperson: “gender roles” taken literally. What role-playing means becomes clear in a programmatic scene at the beginning of the film. It is introduced with a wink. The directors discuss a tricky arrangement in advance with the teacher, Aiqela Rezaie: They suggest to the female headmaster that Aiqela is the most suitable person to be filmed during school lessons. Without showing up the headmaster, we, as viewers, are accessories to a (documentary) staging that points to the conditions of filming, which are quite complicated. Time and time again, the two directors depict how their Afghan colleagues give advice and intervene. The wide range of references to the history of Afghan cinema and media-related framings evoke interactions and contradictions between the images and the actual living conditions. A girls’

theatre group performs in a tent flooded with light: The female newscaster calling for elections has a folding chair on her head, the chair’s legs marking the TV screen.

Saba Sahar, an action-film director and policewoman who is enthusiastic about martial arts, relates her work and her view of Afghan society: “In practice, women have not been granted even 40 percent of the rights due to them.” In another scene we see a pale green curtain gently swaying in the wind, a tiered cabinet with small, turned columns and golden capitals topped with pastel-colored flower arrangements around a television set showing the Afghan period film *Rabia-e Balkhi* (Rabia from Balkh, 1974). It is about the 10<sup>th</sup>-century poetess and princess of the same name who, with her love of a serf, had rebelled against the love and class relations of the time. She paid for it with her life and the ensuing rebellion of the serfs led to liberation from tyranny. One of the female viewers on the sofa joins in with the dialogues of the period film, which she knows by heart: “Don’t try to intimidate me!”

1 Cf. Brian Winston: Claiming the Real. The Documentary Film Revisited, London 1995, p. 8.

2 The Totalizing Quest of Meaning in: Michael Renov (ed.): Theorizing Documentary, New York/London 1993. Pp. 90-107.

3 Klaus Kreimeier in: Geschichte des deutschen Films, eds. Jacobsen, Kaes, Prinzler, Berlin 1993.

4 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Q1ShappZqk&feature=channel>. 08/08/2009: 12 565 views of the Farsi version, 459 of the French and 3623 views of the version with English subtitles.

5 Loc. cit. Transcript of the English translation: <https://un.poivron.org/~tasche/index.php?page=index>. No longer accessible since 06/28/2009.

6 See also Tom Holert: Regieren im Bildraum, Berlin 2008. Hito Steyerl has coined the term documentality to designate the governmental functionalization of images, meaning propaganda. See <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/en>.

7 Hamid Dabashi: Iranian Cinema. Past, Present and Future, London New York 2001, p. 225.

8 Sebastian Bodirsky (email from 06/30/2009).

9 Loc. cit. p. 223. However, the author Negar Mottahedeh prefers to illustrate her reckless theory of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema “as apotheosis of 1970s feminist gaze theory” with films by male directors like Bahram Beyza’i, Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf! (in: Displaced Allegories. Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema, Durham and London, 2008).

10 During the film festival SECOND TAKE <http://www.mazefilm.de/seiten/kabul/index.htm>: mazefilm in cooperation with CACA-Kabul, Afghan-Film and Open Asia.

11 <http://www.mazefilm.de/videos/etmad.htm>.

12 Bill Nichols: Representing Reality, Bloomington 1991: “What we consider ethics in one system may be politics in another.” p. 102.

13 Sandra Schäfer in: In Retrospect. Interview with Sandra Schäfer, Zara Zandieh and a Fictive Person Named MAZY conducted by Karin Rebbert 01/21/09 [www.mazefilm.de](http://www.mazefilm.de).

14 *Passing the Rainbow* 0:02:23. Dari, spoken by Saghar Chopan.

15 For the Afghan version shown in Kabul, this blur mask even had to be intensified.

16 Symposium on Soviet documentary held by the Soviet journal *New Lef* in 1927. In Lewis Jacobs (ed.): The Documentary Tradition, N.Y. 1971, p. 29.

17 Quote from an interview with Hartmut Bitomsky in Stefan Römer’s documentary film on Conceptual Art: Conceptual Paradise, 2006: 0:07:03.

18 Loc. cit. Conceptual Paradise 1:03:30 – 1:05:55.