

**Krista Geneviève Lynes, *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits. Feminism in a Globalized Present*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012.**

**Chapter 4: Diffracted Mediations: The Framing of Gender in the 'War on Terror'**

[...]

Passing the Rainbow (2007)

Schäfer and Brandenburger's film similarly begins with a black screen and the sound of voices: "Are you recording?" "Yes." "Is the tape rolling?" "Yes, that's the microphone." "We've covered the lens so that no images will be recorded." On the audio soundtrack, the women choose the names they will use in the film and explain that they do not want to be identified, since their members working in Kabul would be harassed. When the image appears, the women debate whether or not to wear a veil; one woman explains that the film will only be shown in German cinemas and not Afghan ones, and thus that she need not veil herself. This framing mechanism opens on to the subject of the film: the political, social and economic effects of representation, the structure of nascent media industries in Afghanistan, and the transnational circuits of visibility in which many of the women interviewed in the film participate.

The film's subjects are frequently actors in other films—*Osama, At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), domestic action films such as *The Law* (2004), and educational videos funded by American NGOs. They reflect on conditions of life both under the Taliban and in the contemporary moment, as well as media culture itself and the effect of representation on rendering the truth of social life. As such, *Passing the Rainbow* reveals the intersecting transnational, national and local modes of cultural production, and mediates between them by exposing their conditions of production and reflecting with the actors involved on the staging of contemporary Afghan life.

The opening scene of the film (after the framing narrative has indicated the complexity of processes of mediation) records the opening scene of Barmak's *Osama*, thus beginning also with the visible field of bottom-up camera work and icons of invisibility. Here though, the immediacy is even further interrupted through the recording of the film set, the director and assistants, separate takes and preparations for filming. Although Barmak arrests the grounded perspective that initiates the viewer's entry into Afghanistan under the Taliban, Schäfer and Brandenburger refuse immediacy of any kind, focusing instead on the acts of mediation that produce privileged points of view. Prior to the footage from the film set, the camera

approaches Kabul in a moving vehicle, as the filmmakers interview Marina Golbahari, the actress who plays Osama in the film. She recounts that she was chosen because Barmak visited her orphanage and asked if anyone in their family had been martyred; since her sister had recently died, Golbahari burst into tears. She notes, "They saw that my story reflected real life, the life that the film *Osama* is also about. So they thought that I could play this role."

Throughout *Passing the Rainbow*, the film *Osama* is taken as an object of analysis, one that had effects on the actors who played in the film, on viewers in Afghanistan and on the narrativization of the truth of life under the Taliban. The film includes interviews with the women who play the demonstrators, who note that the scene of the demonstration represents "exactly how it happened in real life." Also included is a scene in a girls' classroom, where a young girl recounts the film's narrative. The teacher (who is not only a teacher at the school but also the actor who plays the main character in *At Five in the Afternoon*) asks the girls whether, were the story of *Osama* true, they would like to be boys; the young girl responds in the negative: "Because we are girls and we have a right to live [...]. Why should we become boys?"

The most striking commentary on the film *Osama* occurs in the interviews with Hamida Refah and Zobaida Sahar, who play Osama's mother and grandmother respectively. Sahar notes, "Everything shown in the film *Osama* is true." When the interviewer asks whether they liked the ending of the film, however, Sahar says, "The ending is sad." She continues,

In our opinion, it would have been nice... My role as the Mother should have been to save my daughter. My role was too small. When the old man was taking the girl away, the Mother should have been able to meet him on the way. Then she would have gotten into an argument with him. I would have allied myself with my daughter to defeat the old man. That would have made the film more successful.

Sahar's rewriting of *Osama's* ending demonstrates that Schäfer and Brandenburger's goal is not to verify the accuracy of the film so much as engage the social context in which the film circulates, its conditions of production and the impact of Afghanistan's nascent media industry itself. Central to such a project is an engagement with processes of self-narration among the women involved in the film (and in various media projects in Afghanistan), and thus a reflection on the possibilities that dramatization and performance might open up for the representation of women's experience during the Taliban regime and after.

The allegory of 'passing under the rainbow' in *Osama* is thus taken as a central metaphor for *Passing the Rainbow*, since the conditions of acting, performing and passing open onto the social conditions of representation in Afghanistan, entailing the orchestration of visibility by various parties. The film contrasts the young girl who refuses the offer to be transformed into a boy with a day laborer, Maleka, who has passed as a boy since the age of six in order to work to support her family. It also contrasts interviews with theatrical re-enactments ('stagings') of short family dramas that expose the gendered dynamics of the family and society. Through one figure that is included in multiple scenes in the film—a woman who is rendered as a black-and-white videographic figure—these contrasts are framed explicitly as part of the film's work of representation or mythical figuration. Passing under the rainbow thus involves not only disguising as a boy but also the multiple transformations available to different figures in and through representation. Filming itself becomes a means of 'passing under the rainbow,' of fictionalizing, dramatizing, visualizing, documenting.

The framing of mediation itself as an act of passing under the rainbow is closely tied to the situatedness of media objects in the expanded field of visual culture. As noted above, the conditions of reception of *Passing the Rainbow* itself are foregrounded from the outset of the film. The interviews surrounding the film *Osama* are also meant to elucidate how the film functions in the emerging sphere of national cinema, as a cultural product that speaks not only *of* but also *to* contemporary Afghan society.

*Passing the Rainbow* reflects on several other historical and contemporary examples of Afghan media production. For example, in one scene, two women (one of whom is the videographic figure of a woman) watch the 1974 film, *Rabia of Balkh*, based on the real tenth-century poet and princess, Rabia-e Balkhi, who fell in love with a slave, Bakhtash, and was murdered by her brother Hares out of envy and lust for power. Her death provoked a slave uprising led by Bakhtash, which liberated the province from the tyranny of Hares. The film was one of the country's first feature film, and became a sensation when it was released in 1974. Under the Soviet occupation, the film was condemned, and was further threatened as part of the Taliban's quest to destroy Afghanistan's film archives in 1996. A recent review of *Rabia of Balkh* in the British newspaper *The Independent* noted:

[...] by 1996 it exemplified everything the Taliban feared and detested: a lavish historical epic with an enchanting queenly figure at its centre who could be seen, most dangerously, as the embodiment of the

sexually liberated, political emboldened woman. Fuelling the Taliban's ire, the role was played by the sultry Afghan actress Seema, clad in sumptuous, tightly tailored costumes, who was cast opposite Abdullah Shadaan, also the director of the film.<sup>1</sup>

The film *Rabia of Balkh* thus plays an important role in the history of Afghan cinema, but also in the figuration of a proto-feminist political agency, one which in many respects resembles the ethical call for justice in Sophocles's *Antigone*.<sup>2</sup> The embedding of the film within the frame of *Passing the Rainbow* articulates a history of feminine protagonists whose private acts (in this case Rabia's love for Bakhtash; in *Osama*, the young girl's defiance of the Taliban's ban on women in public activities) have critical ethico-political effects on the law.

*Passing the Rainbow* not only examines instances of Afghan's national cinema, however, but the position of these films within the expanded media landscape. For instance, the film includes several scenes from low-budget, domestic action films produced by Film Saba Ltd. The director of these films, Saba Sahar, is also an actor who frequently uses martial arts to combat crimes, such as kidnapping and sexual harassment. In an interview, she explains, "Sadly I must say that the Afghans have forgotten their own art and have developed a great taste for foreign films, such as Indian and American films, which feature a lot of action." Another scene in *Passing the Rainbow* records the set of a public service announcements funded by the American NGO Peace Eye, entitled *Little Carpet Makers* (2004). The director explains that Peace Eye runs facilities to help prevent pregnancy, provide free clinics and doctors and supply pharmacies with free medicines. The educational film, on the subject of birth control, would be shown in border regions and villages for free through a mobile cinema apparatus.

All of these instances reverse the relation between top-down and bottom-up media outlined in the Greimasian schema above. What appear to be grassroots media—low-budget educational video—or local television productions—Sahar's *The Law* among others—are built on imported popular cultures (Hollywood or Bollywood) or directly funded by transnational NGOs. Conversely, national cinema (with its highly orchestrated and aesthetic rendering of everyday life) provides a space for dramatizing social life under the Taliban and under repressive regimes more broadly.

In this light, the interview with RAWA in *Passing the Rainbow* is of particular interest. The documentary crew asks the representative from RAWA whether they work with other women's organizations that make

films, citing the example of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, an organization that makes films on the experiences of women who want to divorce and who were beaten or raped. The interviewer asks, "Are you in contact with such or similar projects in other countries?" The RAWA representative responds as follows:

We have no direct organizational contacts with them in the sense that they can force their views on us and we have to conform to them. Unquestionably a person's thoughts and mentality depend on his or her social environment. In less developed countries, of which Afghanistan is one, women have been told for years that they should only perform certain activities. In Europe, women already engage in all these activities. I'll give you a little example. It doesn't apply to everyone, but some people here think like this. Above all, those men who have a backward and misogynistic mentality. They say: "Women can neither do agricultural work nor work as an engineer!" But that is simply not true! What a European woman can do, an Afghan woman can do, as well. There are no mental or anatomical differences between us. A European woman, for example, has very different expectations and ideas. Maybe her notion of equality is different. A European woman who works in a factory demands the same wages as a man. But the Afghan woman doesn't even think about such demands. And why not? Because in Afghanistan there aren't even the factories in which women could work. Even if some women in Afghanistan do not yet have the self-confidence, for some the main issue is finding work!

Whereas the question invites the possibilities of exchanges and collaborations among feminist media activists in different locations—the possibility Mohanty raises of a 'feminism without borders'—the response defends against a possible co-optation of RAWA by outside influence.<sup>3</sup> Given the mobilization of RAWA and its videographic projects in the expanded field of wartime visual culture, it seems logical that RAWA would defend its work against the accusation that it be a mouthpiece for other interests, including transnational feminist politics.

More than this, though, the RAWA representative's reflection on feminist consciousness in Afghanistan works to overturn the U.S. rhetoric on the 'plight of Muslim women.' In his 2002 State of the Union address, George W. Bush said, "The last time we met in this chamber the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school. Today women are free, and are part

of Afghanistan's new government."<sup>4</sup> The RAWA representative stresses that the very term equality (particularly as defined within Western feminism) cannot be a basis for feminist politics in Afghanistan where unemployment, poverty and lack of access to basic necessities crosses gender lines. RAWA's focus on providing education and basic medicine thus reframes the terms of feminist politics in the Afghan context, and does so in such a manner as to subvert the join of visibility and equality in U.S. discourses on Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era. That the representative responds in this manner to a question on media collaborations with activists in other parts of the world indicates the stakes of locating media production, first within the context of the transnational field of visual culture, and second, within the material conditions of existence in a given location.

The representational strategies of *Passing the Rainbow* not only trace the location of specific media in culture and their effects on self-representation, but also seek to find other channels of representation, channels that rupture the ideological closure of the field of visual culture. Two key strategies emerge in this regard: a reframing of the terms of invisibility, and a valorization of theatricality in representing social life and contradictions in women's experiences. With regard to the former, *Passing the Rainbow* includes an interview with a day laborer, Malek/a Mohammad, who has passed as a boy since the age of six. The interview unfolds over three separate scenes—the set of the film *Osama*, a square in Kabul where day laborers wait for work, and the view of the city filmed through the film crew's vehicle. Unlike the character Osama, Maleka joins observations on the material necessities of her crossing (she notes that her mother was young and, when her father died, she had no alternative but to go out and work) with reflections on her own gender identity. In the first interview, for example, one of the translators remarks that her voice is very low, and in the final interview (which is the last scene in the film), the questions center on her gender identity:

Q: Wouldn't you like to walk through the rainbow and thereby actually become a boy?

Maleka: Sure, why not?

Q: You don't want to be a girl?

Maleka: Why not?

Q: Do you like to dress like a woman from time to time?

Maleka: No, I don't like women's things. Just kohl eyeliner. When women paint themselves with lipstick, it puts me off.

Another voice: You'll be amazed at how well she rides a bicycle. The same goes for motorcycles and cars, by God! They wanted to offer her a role in a film, but she would have had to wear a burka. She said, "I'll only go there in men's clothes" Even when I threatened to kill her, she refused to wear women's clothing.

Q: In the film *Osama*, the girl is in constant fear of getting found out. Is this fear justified?

Maleka: If my heart is pure, I have nothing to fear. When men stand before me, they're all like women in my eyes.

In many respects, this interview provides the most unmediated testimony in the film, a reflection on the young day laborer's experiences and identity, and the complex negotiation of passing at the social and subjective levels. That Maleka remains invisible throughout the film not only serves to protect her identity, but also highlights the political necessity of invisibility outside the iconic/iconoclastic binary outlined above. Invisibility is coded not by the language of the "shadowy enemy," nor by the rhetorical trope of the veil, but as a strategy of survival in a public space where gendered divisions continue to inform the material conditions of existence.

The second key strategy—the valorization of theatricality—in turn reverses the assumptions about visibility and rights in the iconic/iconoclastic binary. Rather than make visible through women's testimonies of life under the Taliban, *Passing the Rainbow* instead chooses to interview actors regarding their impressions of fictional film narratives. Moreover, the film records a series of 'stagings,' dramatizations of fictional scenes in which many of the women who participate in *Passing the Rainbow* act out elements from everyday life, fantasies, educational messages and so on. In one scene, a woman plays a brother who cannot find work, but forbids his sister from earning money through acting. The dramatization provides the sister with the occasion to discuss democracy and rights under the Karzai regime. Another dramatizes a female Afghani president who redresses a wrong for a family. Another enacts a report by the television anchor woman (the 'staging' includes a woman with a chair on her head to simulate the television screen) informing the public on the importance of voting.

Schäfer and Brandenburger believe that these theatrical stagings provide sites for the "counter-production of representation, for new definitions and reinterpretations of gender roles and power relations."<sup>5</sup> These stagings seek to represent the emancipatory but unrealized wishes of participants, their accounting for but also subversion of social norms. The production of fictional visual narratives forms part of Schäfer and

Brandenburger's social intervention through the film, opening the possibility that participants change roles, articulate freedoms and rights, dramatize conflicts from daily life and make visible the contradictions between constructed images and real living conditions. Thus interrupting both the documentary footage of media production in the film and the interviews with actors about Afghan media culture, the stagings in fact refract the social conditions of life in Afghanistan. They represent not only the reality of daily life but allegories, aspirations and conflicts in order to reflect critically on Afghan society and to shed light on the construction of representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Arifa Akbar, "Jewel of Afghan Cinema Saved from the Taliban," *The Independent*. 9 May 2009, accessed 22 April 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/jewel-of-afghan-cinema-saved-from-the-taliban-1681824.html>. The article mentions also that the film was rescued, alongside up to six thousand others, by the archivists at the National Film Archive, who concealed the film reels behind a hastily constructed false wall prior to the Taliban's campaign against the archives. Siddiq Barmak is quoted in the article as saying, "It was created in the first private studios in Afghanistan and it was about a historical, classical subject that every Afghan learnt at school. I remember seeing the posters and wanting to go and see it in a movie theatre. It had the most famous names of the day but it also faced a lot of problems in its making, with four directors working on it and no government funding."

<sup>2</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, Antigone has been raised in contemporary critical thought as a figure for ethico-political (and specifically feminist) acts. Antigone must either obey the laws of the state or follow her sense of justice, bury her brother Polyneices's body, and publicly declare her act of defiance. This defiance transgresses not only state edicts, but also the circumscribed role of women as non-citizens, as well as proper kinship relations (she desires, after all, to lie down in the ground with her brother). In revealing her act to Creon, she asserts the ethical choice she makes, and invites the punishment the edict requires. Creon thus banishes her to a cave (a permutation of the sentence of death by stoning).

<sup>3</sup> There are multiple instances of this response throughout the film, either in order to acknowledge the right of a director or official to make decisions, or to resist the implication that one is a mouthpiece for a specific



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group or interest. The repetition of this response itself indicates the nature of free speech in the political climate of Afghanistan.

<sup>4</sup> George W. Bush, "The State of the Union: Present Bush's State of the Union Address to Congress and the Nation," *New York Times*, 30 January 2002, Section A, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Sandra Schäfer, *stagings. Kabul, Film & Production of Representation* (Berlin: b\_books, 2009).