

Every Change Engendered Its Own Specific Films

Sandra Schäfer

Interview with Siddiq Barmak and Engineer Latif Ahmadi

The following text is compiled from interviews that I conducted in July and November 2004 in Kabul and Nantes with the two Afghan filmmakers Siddiq Barmak and Engineer Latif Ahmadi.¹ Engineer Latif Ahmadi is currently (2006) the director of the state-run film institute *Afghan Film*, Siddiq Barmak – the director of *Osama* – is working on his second full-length feature film.

SANDRA SCHÄFER: When was the first Afghan film made?

SIDDIQ BARMAK: In 1946 Afghan theatre people made the first feature film *Eshq wa dusti* (»Love and Friendship«). After the Second World War, the British wanted to withdraw from India. The Afghan government at the time, which unofficially stood very close to the British, was quite afraid of the imminent changes and announced comprehensive reforms. Society was to become more open.

Beforehand, poems, stories, newspapers, magazines, theatre plays, and films were subject to the censorship of the Prime Minister, who was a dictator. One of the most interesting political plays of the group »Theatre of Education« was staged during these difficult times. There was a positive response from the audience, but the government closed down the theatre. The artists, who were then unemployed, decided to make a film. Even in Kabul, there were only two or three cinemas at the time. Afghan society was still very much sealed off, and Afghanistan was stuck in a deep economic crisis. The artists therefore decided to produce the film in Lahore. The Afghan-Indian co-production was shown for the first time in Kabul in the Kabul-Cinema in 1951. People were impressed to hear actors speaking in their own language, even the songs were sung in Dari. The main actress was Indian, for at the time Afghan women were not allowed to appear in films.

After *Eshq wa dusti*, it was impossible for many years to make a film in Afghanistan. The first feature film shot entirely in Afghanistan was *Manand-e oqab* (»Like an Eagle«) by Khayr Zada which appeared in 1964 – a combination of feature and documentary film. The main figure is a little girl who comes to Kabul from the countryside to watch the independence celebrations. She loses her parents in the crowd, cries and looks for them. Through the eyes of this girl, one sees all of Afghanistan: the city, the progress that has been made. Her path seems to show a picture of the new Afghanistan: the various handicrafts, automobile production in Kabul or the manufacturing of new clothes for women. The little girl suddenly realizes that she is being followed to be abducted and flees.

SCHÄFER: What other films were shown in cinemas at the time?

BARMAK: Mainly Indian films. Several cinemas in Kabul, including Kabul Cinema, were only able to show silent films. They were accompanied by piano and Afghan drum music. In 1955 the cinemas were retrofitted and equipped with sound systems. Many documentaries and newsreels were made between 1950 and 1967. The Shah at the time was interested in art and loved watching films about the royal family and other themes of Afghanistan in the cinema. Most were shot in Afghanistan and then developed in the United States. That took about two to three months each time, so the American government decided to have studios in Afghanistan installed for local cinema. Construction of the *Afghan Film* studios started in 1965 and was completed in 1968. Then films could be developed in Afghanistan, but the laboratory was only suited for developing 16 and 35 mm black-and-white films.

SCHÄFER: Where were Afghan filmmakers trained?

BARMAK: The technical staff was trained at the Poona Institute in India. Several interesting filmmakers such as Khaleq A'lil, Rafiq Yahyaee and Wali Latifi studied in Moscow. Wali Latifi was in the same class as Andrej Tarkowskij, for example. Their teacher was Michail Romm, one of the first masters of Russian cinema.²

Some of the young graduates of the Muscovite and Indian film schools began shooting the three-part episode film *Rozgaran* («Once Upon a Time») in 1968. The first episode, *Talabgar* («The Marriage Candidate») by Khaleq A'lil, was shot in the style of a typical Iranian comedy and the second, *Qachaqbaran* («Smugglers») by Sultan Hamid Hashem, was done in Hitchcock-style. Of course, the policeman was the good guy and arrested all the smugglers, so that everyone could say: «The country is safe.» The third episode, *Shab-e Joma* («Friday Night»)³ by Mohammad Ali Rownaq, was a drama with comic elements – modelled on Iranian and Italian cinema. The Afghan audience loved these sentimental films. People said: «Now we have our own film industry.» Everyone wanted to know something about Afghan film, there were articles in all newspapers and magazines. It was a good start. We were no longer as passive, we made our own films and had our own actors and actresses.

In 1971 the shooting of *Rozha-ye dashwar* («Tough Days») by Wali Latifi began. During the time of the shooting (1973), the coup d'état by former Premier Daoud took place.⁴ The king was deposed. The script by Rafeeq Yahyahi was based on the novel *Hakem* («Governor») by Shafieh Rahgozar. The head of the regional administration receives the order to travel to a rural area and teach the local ruler that neither the land nor its inhabitants are his personal possessions. He wants to convey to him that there is a law regulating the rights of the inhabitants and the issue of ownership. But the ruler plans to have the head of the regional administration killed. In retrospect it is of course obvious that it is about the battle between two antagonistic systems: modernity and feudalism. He had many socialist ideals, of which none could be sensed in this film – quite to the contrary. The poster advertising the film was all over the city, on cars, busses and billboards. It stated that Afghan cinema celebrated the day of its birth.

In 1972 I saw the film *Andarz-e madar* («Mother's Advice») with my father in the Ariana cinema, a family drama about a young woman in Kabul engaged to a young, intelligent Afghan man, who is completing his training outside Afghanistan. The woman waits a long time for the return of her fiancé. During a picnic she encounters a couple of strangers and is then raped by one of them. She's afraid to tell her fiancé about it and has an abortion.

The film is set in the old and new part of the city. Everything bad occurs in the old part and everything good in the new part. It was a typical melodrama by Khaleq A'lil, another graduate of the Moscow film school.

SCHÄFER: When were the first private production firms founded in Afghanistan?

BARMAK: One of the best-known actors, Mohammad Nazir, founded the first private Afghan film production firm *Nazir Film* in 1973. He was influenced by films like *Cleopatra* (1963) or *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1963). So he collected \$100,000 – that was a lot of money for Afghan cinema at the time – to produce the historical film *Rabia-e Balkhi* («Rabia from Balkh») with other young, talented filmmakers.

The film is about the well-known Afghan female poet Rabia from the province of Balkh. Nazir designed many historical costumes and interesting décors and organized thousands of horses and riders. The directors changed several times during the shooting, something which one notices when watching the film. It hit the screens in 1974 and flopped. Nobody had experience with historical films, and that is why the film was so expensive. Nazir suffered from this failure. He got cancer and died.

SCHÄFER: *What role did NAZIR FILM play for Afghan cinema?*

BARMAK: For many actors and actresses, the film *Rabia-e Balkhi* marked the start of their career; one of them is Salam Sangi, who later became very popular. Even Latif Ahmadi learned how to make films during the shooting, he was studying at the Polytechnic University at the time. A year after the film was completed, he and several friends founded *Ariana Film* (1975). The young men sensed that the country was changing, for President Daoud (1973-1978) wanted to implement real reforms in Afghanistan. He loved cinema. He wanted to control everything, yet he was very open and willing to implement reforms – perhaps too much. He severed the close ties to the Soviet Union and established relations to other countries such as Iran and Pakistan.⁵ He had been very close to the Russians for a long time. Several ministers of cabinet belonging to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan maintained good contact to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Later, however, Daoud wanted to approach the Western states. Many countries promised him money for implementing reforms, Iran and Saudi Arabia, for example. Of course, he wanted to show them how much talent we possess in regard to film and art, at universities or in the economy. In the field of culture, the government of Daoud Khan pursued the development of an Afghan nationalism in a very targeted way. Only few foreigners worked in our country at the time, many large projects were carried out solely by Afghans.

Private production firms like *Nazir Film* and *Ariana Film* were founded in the wake of these reforms. *Ariana Film* developed interesting advertising concepts. In cinemas, prior to the main film, newsreels and short ads with slogans like »Let's drink Coca Cola« were screened. Two Buzkashi teams⁶ rode a race. At the end they lifted bottles of Coke and drank them empty with relish. It was the first time such spots were shown in Afghanistan, and everybody loved them. Latif Ahmadi was highly talented in regard to special effects. For example, he had an old IMO camera from the Second World War with which he could shoot single frames. He created animations for Afghan ads, for example, shoes walking around inside the house. The audience then said: »Oh my god, we have such talented filmmakers! We can do everything.«

In 1976 Latif Ahmadi's first screenplay *Mojassamaha mikhandand* (»The Statues are Laughing«) was filmed. Toryalay Shafaq was the director and Latif Ahmadi the cameraman. The film was about the fate of an artist who – entangled in his love of a woman – transgresses the boundaries of art. The statues he chisels are for a gang of black marketers using them to smuggle hashish and heroin out of the country. *Ariana Film* presented this film at the Tehran Film Festival at which Afghan feature films were shown for the first time. Of course, a number of Afghan documentaries were also shown at the same time, for example, *Afghan Kirgis in Pamir* at the New York Film Festival in 1976. Afterwards, Abbas Shaban, who had studied to become a director in Poona (India), shot the film *Siamoy wa Jalali* (»Siamoy and Jalali«) based on a story by Latif Ahmadi – a Romeo and Julia tale set eighty years ago in Herat. It was the first Afghan colour film, and it had to be sent to a film processing lab in Pakistan to be developed. After many difficulties, the film was finally shown in Afghanistan in 1979.

In 1976 the first TV channels were set up.⁷ But President Daoud died before television started operating.⁸ In the following years, the leaders of the ruling Democratic People's Party used TV mainly for propaganda purposes. The production of TV films commenced in 1978/79.

After Taraki assumed office (1978), no U.S. American films were shown anymore, only Indian ones – and only if they showed peasants winning the struggle against big landowners. Taraki, the Secretary-General of the Democratic People's Party, was already killed in 1979, however, upon the order of his fellow party member and rival, Amin.⁹ After he took over power, he wanted to prove to everyone that he was as liberal as Tito in Yugoslavia and wouldn't be dictated by Moscow. Amin had studied in the USA and even changed the colour of the taxis in Kabul from black-and-white to yellow. He introduced a law allowing the screening of American films, and the cinemas were naturally full of people wanting to see them.

In 1978 the cinema film *Ghulam-e eshq* (»Slave of Love«) directed by Toryalay Shafaq was produced. The main actor was Shah Jahan (»King of the World«), an Afghan actor with an

extraordinarily interesting face, a legendary figure. Today he lives in the USA. *Ghulam-e eshq* is about a man who offers resistance against a feudal ruler. The family of the khan, who lives in the city, visits the countryside, where the khan's daughter falls in love with a resistance fighter. She seeks reconciliation between the resistance fighter and the khan, between the hero and her negatively characterised father. The film was completed at the time when the Russians invaded Afghanistan.

The new regime did everything to change things in Afghanistan, and preferred to see revolutionary peasants and workers in the cinemas.¹⁰ The Democratic People's Party was strongly influenced by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Its aim was to take complete control of art, cinema and theatre, and of course the film *Ghulam-e eshq* was to be altered as well. The censorship authority liked the basic motif, that the hero was a peasant fighting against the khan and thus against feudalism. But they cut the second part in which the hero comes to the city, sees new things and develops himself further. The censors had the film end with a scene in which the hero shoots at the khan, and they claimed that there would be a sequel in which the peasants in the village would finally overcome feudal rule. This second part was never realized, though. That was the prelude to comprehensive censorship in Afghanistan.

SCHÄFER: How did censorship function?

BARMAK: There was a special censorship committee consisting of party members, directors, authors, and journalists. They read the screenplays and decided whether they should be permitted after the films were already produced. There were orders that all cinemas in Kabul should be nationalized, meaning the end of all private cinemas. For example, an entrepreneur had invested one million dollars in a cinema that now suddenly belonged to the government. Many of these wealthy cinema owners died, other people interested in art and possessing private capital left the city in 1978. It was a terrible situation and the beginning of the flight from Kabul.

The new government did not want to tolerate any private film productions whatsoever. The few production firms that had already been authorized were on the verge of completing their first films. In 1978 Torkyalay Shafaq shot his film *Jenayatkaran* (»The Criminals«), and *Golestan-Film* produced the film *Khana-e 555* (»House Number 555«) by Mehdi Doagoy in 1980. In *Jenayatkaran*, the main protagonist works in a workshop. The son of a khan, a rich capitalist, rapes his sister. When the worker finds out about this, he takes revenge and kills the capitalist. People laughed when they saw this, because the brother was very poor, yet he took the right to kill the capitalist. *Khana-e 555* was a typical Indian film with dancing, parties and many young men. I sometimes ask myself why the censorship allowed this film, for it had little to do with the ideals of those in rule at the time. Probably because it propagated the new modern life.

The Russian invasion changed people in Afghanistan. They realized that our country was to be made equal to the Soviet Union. The ministries were renamed to committees, the government and the party was centralized. I remember how Latif Ahmadi closed his firm *Ariana Film* because it had become so difficult to produce independent films. He didn't even have the money for the postproduction of his own film *Gonah* (»Sin«, 1983), for which he had written the script, done the camera work and acted as director. The state-run agency *Afghan Film* bought his film, and Latif Ahmadi became a member of *Afghan Film*. Then the other private institutions and firms, for example, *Shafaq Film*, were closed. They produced one more film, but were already much too influenced by the party: *Eshq-e man, maihan-e man* (»My Love, My Country«, 1983) – even the title was strange. Everyone was dependent on the Country's one large film institution, on *Afghan Film*.

SCHÄFER: How could one still make films in this situation?

BARMAK: Everything had to be in line with the party. Of course there was also a state committee responsible for the areas of radio, theatre and cinematography, *Afghan Film* as well. There were annual plans that prescribed five films on a certain topic, for example, on the fight against the enemy, the mujahedin, or on the revolution of women. These specified

themes also had to be covered by theatre, music productions, radio, TV, film, and newspapers. Everyone shut their eyes because they all had to earn money.

I remember that Latif Ahmadi shot the film *Farar* (»Escape«) in 1984. The film won awards at film festivals in Moscow, Tashkent and Kárlóvvyváry. The party had ordered that the film show the difficulties of fleeing from Afghanistan. Latif Ahmadi made an objective and realistic film.¹¹

For this reason, *Farar* was also re-edited and the end of the film was altered according to the wishes of the censorship authority. Many films shared this fate, including a further film by Latif Ahmadi: *Sabur-e sarbaz* (»Sabur, the Soldier«, 1985). The protagonist of the film is a commander of the mujahedin who in this role is to arouse aversion in the audience. But through the choice of the sympathetic actor and the directing, his role took a turn. He crept into the hearts of the spectators and won their sympathy. A »villain« was made a hero. Therefore several scenes of the film had to be cut.

The government financed the film production, and a number of young artists made use of this opportunity to become filmmakers. It was a good opportunity and practice for them, so they ignored the ideological side. Young Afghan filmmakers received scholarships at the time to study in Moscow, Tashkent, Warsaw, Sofia, the GDR, or Czechoslovakia. I was one of these young people who went to study in Moscow in 1982.

SCHÄFER: You returned to Kabul after your film studies in 1987. How had the city changed since you had left?

BARMAK: When I returned from Moscow in 1987, around 2.5 million people lived in Kabul. Up until the early 1980s it had been 400,000 to 500,000 at the most. The air was clean, there weren't as many cars and there were 25 cinemas.

The mujahedin posed a great challenge to the Afghan and Soviet governments. The worst economic and social problems in the Soviet Union were related to the war in Afghanistan. When Gorbachev assumed power, he announced perestroika. These changes in the Soviet Union also had an impact on the situation in Kabul.

*In 1986 Dr. Najibullah came to power and proclaimed national reconciliation. Political persecution diminished, and the filmmakers and other artists could again also turn to themes such as love or deal with other issues, and not just with the revolution or the situation of the workers and peasants. There was no complete freedom during that time either, but at least on the outside a lot of things became more liberal. Latif Ahmadi shot the film *Parandaha-ye mohajer* (»Immigrant Birds«, 1986). It was very political but it was based on the idea of national reconciliation.*

Prior to these changes, between 1980 and 1986, sixteen full-length feature films were produced, almost all of which were propaganda films. Among the young directors were Jawanshir Haydari, who had studied in Sofia and Belgrade, Wahid Nazari, who today lives in Germany, Musa Radmanish, Saeed Orokzai, Obaid Orokzai, and Faqir Nabi. Then a next step of reconciliation was initiated, with which a new phase of Afghan cinema commenced. From 1987 to 1992, when the mujahedin seized power, various melodramas, detective films and a few love stories were made.

Khakestar (»Ashes«, 1991) by Saeed Orokzai, for example, is about a person who loses his mind because of drugs. They destroy his family and the rest of his life. I also remember a naïve and sentimental love story titled *Hadesa* (»The Incident«, 1986). The film tells about a love that fails in face of the circumstances of life, about how hard it is to get money and about the danger of becoming involved with people doing dirty business. Afghan cinema was on the rise and became increasingly professional. Among the important young filmmakers of that time were Homayoun Marawat, who made documentary films with a good sense of humour and poetry. In 1992 he shot the film *Zoghal-e sabz* (»Green Coal«) outside of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the political situation soon got worse. Dr. Najibullah was toppled and the mujahedin seized power. Several film projects were halted and never completed, because the directors or actors fled. The few who stayed in Afghanistan and continued to make films included Homayoun Paiz, Ahad Zhouwand, Nour Hashim Abir, who shot the film *Uruj* (»Ascension«, 1995), and myself. And so there was nobody left to continue operating *Afghan Film*.

SCHÄFER: Was AFGHAN FILM then closed down?

BARMAK: No, quite to the contrary. Films were still produced. Each historical and political change engendered its own specific films.

Of course, due to the war, not very many films could be shot, but we produced five shorts, two television films, and in 1995, in addition to *Uruj*, the feature film *De koso sargardan* (»Wandering Alleys«) by Ahad Zhouwand. It was the second film in Pashto. It is about a child with all his wishes and expectations. The boy dreams of his deceased mother and wishes for a white horse that stands for his lost dream. He cannot gain a foothold anywhere, is constantly exploited and made a scapegoat. At his mother's grave he starts crying and bewails his lonesomeness. This scene symbolizes the fate of the Afghan people. Unfortunately, the film never reached its audience, for with the conquest of Kabul by the Taleban in 1996, the doors of all cinemas were shut.

SCHÄFER: You mentioned the film ROZGARAN, in which the comic elements remind one of Iranian cinema. Are there other influences of Iranian cinema?

BARMAK: What are the differences between Afghanistan and Iran? They only exist due to the political borders and the oil in Iran. We have a lot in common in regard to language, tradition, poetry, legends, and mythology. Apart from that, there was a different direction in Iranian cinema that was very similar to Italian or French comedies that came from Europe to Arabia. One cannot fail to notice the proximity between Italian, Egyptian and Iranian films.

As an art form, technology and industry, cinema came from Europe, and for this reason everyone at first took the same path as European cinema. But after they mastered the technical side, the Afghans developed their own film language, as did the Iranians. At the beginning, it was very similar to Egyptian, Italian and Indian films. I remember the great influence that Indian music melodramas had on Iranian cinema in the 1950s and 60s. There was a lot of music and dancing, even the stories were the same. So there were also many Indian-Iranian co-productions. But when I speak about Afghan films such as *Rozgaran*, I refer to the comic similarities to Iranian film. People's life here is similar to that of the Iranians, the difference being that Iran was rich and our society poor.

SCHÄFER: Since when have women gone to the cinema in Afghanistan?

BARMAK: My uncle told me that in the Kabul Cinema in the old part of town, which is now destroyed, there were screenings for women only once a week in the 1940s and 50s.

Before 1960, there were only four or five cinemas in Kabul. Many girls and women even went there alone and sat next to strangers. That changed in 1979 when the Russians came. Insecurity increased, and the cinemas cancelled their evening screenings. People who moved to Kabul from the countryside didn't visit the cinema at first; women were even forbidden to do so. After about ten years, the situation changed, so that entire families watched films together, thus establishing a new cross-generational audience.

The fact that women rarely go to the cinema alone is a side-effect of the war. Several years ago, there were still special family screenings in the afternoon at 5 p.m.

SCHÄFER: Are the individual cinemas specialized in any way?

BARMAK: Most cinemas show Indian films, but there were three cinemas in Kabul, the Ariana Cinema, the Zeynab Cinema¹² and Park Cinema, which mainly specialized on European, American and Iranian films. In 2003 an agreement was made between Iranian distributors and an independent Afghan organization, as well as *Afghan Film* to show 26 Iranian films in Kabul.

Latif Ahmadi had the idea to offer screenings specially for women in the Ariana Cinema and the Baharestan Cinema, but unfortunately no-one wants to invest money or time in free film screenings for women. I find the offer of film screenings only for women a very good idea. The former Zeynab Cinema is located in the vicinity of the Ministry of Women Affairs and the

emergency hospital. I told the Minister of Women's Affairs, Ms. Habiba, that there is an interest in re-establishing a cinema only for women. My distributor in Italy supports this project. She told me that a supermarket is supposed to be built there and a cinema with two or three auditoriums, but the ministry didn't understand the concept. We are looking for investors in the USA. If we succeed in building up the cinema again, it would be an excellent venue for a women's cinema.

SCHÄFER: Why is this cinema named after a female name Zeynab?

BARMAK: It is also the name of a grand-daughter of the Prophet Mohammed, but it has nothing to do with that. The cinema was the idea of President Daoud's wife. Her name was Zeynab. When the cinema was built, it was said that the idea stems from the president's wife, so let's name it after her.

SCHÄFER: In Bagh-e zanana (Women's Park) there is also a bazaar in addition to the park grounds frequented by many women. The female director of the Women's Park said that she regularly received threatening calls. She deferred her idea to organize film screenings in the park to guarantee the safety of those women who can hardly leave the house – except for weekend outings in the park.

BARMAK: Nowadays, people are a lot more confident, and Kabul's administration takes assertive action against these kinds of threats. I'm longing to know whether we will get support for the Zeynab Cinema.

SCHÄFER: What is the role of women in Afghan cinema? Since when are there female directors?

ENGINEER LATIF AHMADI: The career of women in cinema began in 1964, as actresses in the film *Manand-e oqab* by Khayr Zada.

BARMAK: The only one who comes to my mind as director, screenwriter or camerawoman is the famous TV director Farida Anwari. She made the film *Golden Both*. She also adapted one or two theatre plays. One was titled *Bazm-e Sultan* («Night of the Kings») – a very powerful and interesting piece. But she didn't work for cinema. I also remember another woman, Parwin Pazjok, who worked as director and painter on the first Afghan animation film in 1985/86. She now lives with her husband in Canada. There were several women who studied film critique, décor and acting, but not to become a director or screenwriter. I studied together with Atilah Daschband, for example. She graduated as a costume and set designer. When she finished her studies, she wanted to join *Afghan Film*, but Kabul University needed her as a teacher. Julia Latifi, the daughter of Wali Latifi, graduated from the Moscow Film Institute as a film critic. I think she today advertises for feature films in San Francisco. Since the end of the Taleban rule, a new generation of women is arising in film production. Ariana de Lavari has started a feature film project. Of course, there are now camerawomen like Shakiba Adil and Halima Hosseini, who worked on the documentary *Man agar barkhizam* («If I stand up», 2004). One of these women, Roya Sadat, is very courageous. She shot the feature film *Se noqta* («Three Dots», 2004) in Herat, which is currently in postproduction.

SCHÄFER: What literature was important for you when you started making films?

BARMAK: I remember all this literature coming from Iran: books on film technology, introductions to directors, producers, cameramen. Of course, there were also a few books on Hollywood films and some Russian books, since we were able to read Russian. But if you are asking what stories and novels we read, then it was predominantly short stories that served as models and inspiration. In the hundred-year Afghan history, there are no more than ten or twelve novels. Our authors love short stories and include everything in them.

SCHÄFER: *Can films shot here now be processed at AFGHAN FILM again?*

AHMADI: Only black-and-white films. Depending on the contract, we now send 35 mm colour films to Iran, India, Russia or other countries. That is very difficult, because the director naturally wants to view the material the moment it was shot. We are currently trying to set up a colour laboratory. Many teams from abroad come here to film. Then they immediately send the material to another country to be processed, to then view it and continue filming. When Siddiq Barmak filmed *Osama* (2003), he sent his material once a week¹³ to a lab in Tehran, and the rush prints were sent back to him from there. But everything else, editing, sound processing and postproduction, was done at *Afghan Film*. But it is sometimes very dangerous to send the material, for example, during the revolution 25 years ago, when we had filmed very exciting scenes with President Amin.

BARMAK: Between 1978 and 1979, when President Amin was in power, there were many strange things that happened in Afghan cinema. President Amin, who was simultaneously Secretary-General of the Democratic People's Party, wrote a screenplay with the assistance of Daoud Farani on his bloody coup d'état and his »special leadership qualities«. He himself was to play the role of the hero in the film *Enqelab-e saur* (»April Revolution«), and the plan was that the role of all other politicians were to be played by the politicians themselves and not by actors. Amin forced his cabinet and even his own family to re-enact their experiences. When the flag stemming from the time of Daoud Khan was hoisted, a fighter plane flew over the government building to simulate a bombing and make the scene appear realistic. At that moment, passers-by thought that the revolution had broken out and started cheering. This one minute cost dozens of people their lives. They were imprisoned and then executed. President Amin suggested that Latif Ahmadi do the camerawork for the film *Enqelab-e saur*.

AHMADI: At the time, I was the producer at *Ariana Film*, Daoud Farani was the director and the production firm was *Afghan Film*. The shooting of the film was completed, but postproduction never began, for the political situation changed again when the Russian invasion took place. *Enqelab-e saur* wound up in the archive, except for a few documentary scenes that I used in *Farar*.

BARMAK: There are a number of highly explosive scenes in *Enqelab-e saur*.

AHMADI: We filmed several episodes in Jalalabad, in Tajbek, in the Darul Aman Palace, with prisoners in Kabul, and with the military. When we filmed in Polikom, it was as if the earth were shaking beneath my feet.

BARMAK: It was one of those nights during which they executed political prisoners until the early morning hours. President Amin was a very dangerous man. He could laugh and be friendly, but he was one of the most dangerous political personalities in Afghanistan, just as dangerous as Saddam Hussein or George W. Bush.

AHMADI: We ate with him in his palace at least ten times. He laughed, he talked about cinema and said, you are my best friends. You are making a film for Afghanistan and the entire world. You are heroes. He acted very generously. Nonetheless, *Enqelab-e saur* remains an outstanding contemporary document.

BARMAK: But the film material was stolen from the archive in the middle of the night by the Soviets, or to be more precise, by Uzbek filmmakers. It is now time to write an official letter to *Usbek Film* or *Mos Film* and ask these people to give the film back. If there are difficulties, we should request international support – especially by the FIAF, the International Federation of Film Archives, of which we are now also members.

AHMADI: In the coming years, the material will be returned to us, and then people can finally view this film. All persons who worked on the film are still alive and can give an account of it.

SCHÄFER: Would it be better if Afghan film production were privatized?

AHMADI: Cinema is private all over the world. It does not belong to the government. It belongs to the people. But in Afghanistan, cinema has been under the total control of the government since the 1980s at the latest.

I recently visited the United States with Mr. Karzai and presented a plan for Afghan film that was accepted and is to be seriously pursued in 2005. *Afghan Film* must become a private production firm for all film projects that have to do with Afghanistan. The government or the institutions that cooperate with *Afghan Film* on the basis of joint ventures should participate with a maximum share of 49 percent. Most film teams wanting to make films in Afghanistan lack technical equipment. So it would be good if *Afghan Film* could provide it. I am working on having filmmakers, other countries and investors seize the opportunity to cooperate with *Afghan Film*. If we achieve that, Afghan cinema will grow and develop.

SCHÄFER: How widespread are DVDs and VHS?

BARMAK: Especially CDs are on the rise. They are for the most part pirate copies from China and Pakistan. One can easily find DVDs for one or two U.S. dollars. For example, I found a box with Spielberg films and bought it for around ten dollars. The quality is fantastic. There is no law prohibiting things like that. There are loads of films that reach Central Asia from Pakistan. And that is what Afghanistan has been accused of. We also had a number of problems with television stations that broadcast porn films at night. A law was passed prohibiting that. Yet we must secure democratic freedom of speech. Everyone has the right to choose the films they want to see.

SCHÄFER: What will Afghan film production look like in the future?

AHMADI: As is probably obvious to everybody, Afghanistan is developing in the direction of a democratic system of government. Therefore it can be assumed that there will be no hindrances for filmmakers. The private production firms possess a permit of the Minister of Culture, and we try to support them. I assume that as soon as these firms start producing and there are then one hundred of them, one will most likely find at least five or ten filmmakers who deal with cinema in a respectful way – to the benefit of Afghanistan and film culture as such. They should make films for »our people«. The people in our country are not that educated, a large portion of the population is illiterate. A bit of melodrama and action is needed as an incentive. They need less intellectual films. They couldn't really relate to these films. They don't want to go to the cinema to see their lives again on the screen. There are currently two models of filmmaking in Afghanistan: on the one side, the private film production firms that make feature films for the Afghan audience, and on the other, those who make films for the sake of cinema. Cinema for the world, for festivals, to show Afghanistan's real face. On the one hand, it is magic, and on the other, not one-hundred percent reality, but a certain realism all the same.

In Afghanistan there is a distance between what people think and the film, something you can see particularly in the case of *Osama*. Most people in Afghanistan have seen the film. We screened it here around five times, but there are also DVD copies. The film *Osama* is made more from the perspective of foreigners than from that of Afghans. The Afghan audience does not like it when the actors say something negative. The director must clearly say how things are, but the audience is reluctant to accept it.

SCHÄFER: How was the film criticized?

AHMADI: There are many people in Afghanistan who speak Pashto, but they are not accepted because the Taleban had their stronghold in the Pashtun regions. The majority of the Taleban and Al Qaida supporters actually come from Pakistan. It was claimed that the film *Osama* was directed against the Pashtuns.¹⁴ But the director never had any discriminating

intentions. Yet it was indeed the case that the Taleban were dependent on the Pashtuns. Many Pashtuns live in Pakistan, and the Taleban were trained in Pakistan. But something has happened in Afghanistan that is changing everything and has given people back their lives.

This is a revised version of a text that was first published in Kabul/Teheran 1979ff: *Filmlandschaften, Städte unter Stress und Migration*, Sandra Schäfer, Jochen Becker und Madeleine Bernstorff (ed.), b_books Berlin, 2006

1_A further conversation with Siddiq Barmak on the history of Afghan cinema was published in 2001 under the title *Without cinema there is no sense in living* in the magazine *Film international*.

2_In 1965 Michail Romm shot the documentary *Obyknowenny Faschism (Triumph Over Violence)* (editor's note).

3_Saturday evening according to the Christian calendar (editor's note).

4_Mohammad Daoud Khan had already been head of the government between 1953 and 1963 under Zaher Shah. In 1973 he again seized power with the help of the military, and Zaher Shah went into exile in Rome. Daoud had the »Republic of Afghanistan« declared and a new constitution passed in 1977 (editor's note).

5_Daoud counted as a close friend of Shah Reza Pahlavi, who was installed by the USA in Iran in 1953 through a coup d'état (editor's note).

6_Buzkashi: National sport in Afghanistan, in which two competing teams ride a race to bring the body of a beheaded goat from one marked place to another (editor's note).

7_With the help of Japan, a television studio was set up in Kabul in 1976. Today, Japan also lends support to the areas of TV and film in Afghanistan (editor's note).

8_Daoud was killed in 1978 during the so-called Saur Revolution, a coup d'état by the Democratic People's Party, and replaced by Nour Mohammad Taraki as president (editor's note).

9_Hafizullah Amin had already become the actual ruler of Afghanistan under Taraki's government, which led to interventions on the side of Moscow due to his distance to the Soviet Union. After a coup against Amin launched by Moscow failed, he declared himself president and had Taraki murdered. To not lose Afghanistan as a bridgehead, the Soviet Union occupied the country in December 1979, which triggered the war in Afghanistan (1979-1988) that claimed between 1 to 1.7 million lives. Amin was shot dead right at the beginning of the invasion (editor's note).

10_Between 1980 and 1986, Babrak Karmal and the Democratic People's Party officially conducted government business. (editor's note).

11_When the film *Farar* was screened at the festival *Kabul/ Teheran 1979ff* in Berlin, there were heated debates on this issue (editor's note).

12_It was still destroyed at the time the interview was conducted (editor's note).

13_There are flights between Kabul and Tehran once a week via »Ariana Air« (editor's note).

14_Some of the Taleban actors in *Osama* speak Pashto (editor's note).