

Cinema, a Private Affair

A History of Afghan Film: On the Film Series "SPICE IN"

Bert Rebhandl

In Afghanistan, there is a derogatory word for people returning to their own country from exile. They are called "dog washers" because one assumes that they did humiliating work in rich countries, the pay of which nevertheless allows them to show a certain amount of wealth in their own homeland. They buy and renovate destroyed buildings; thirty years ago some already lived in places they now lay claim to again and buy back, if they can't assert their rights. The local neighbours can't afford the sums being paid.

Wazmah Osman also returned to Afghanistan from exile. In the early 1980s, she first fled with her mother to Peshawar in neighbouring Pakistan and later went to the United States. Her father, Abdullah Osman, remained in the region and participated in the fight against the Soviet occupiers, initially from Pakistan and later on Afghan territory again. He was tortured in the notorious Pulchakhi prison and until today suffers from the consequences of violence. But he is not a broken man. As a physician and psychiatrist, he is involved in building up the country, mainly committed to helping orphans. In the film *Postcards from Tora Bora*, Wazmah Osman documents her return to Afghanistan. She gathered numerous photographs and films from relatives living dispersed all over the world that show "the old way of life" – an upper-class family in the 1970s, a time in which Afghanistan had the opportunity to become a modern country. Wazmah Osman's film begins with pictures of her parents' wedding. She then wants to compare these images from the past with today's reality and experiences one disappointment after the other. In the zoo, there are no more elephants, the river that once meandered blue between the buildings in a panorama view of the city is now almost dried up, and the idyllic garden in the north-east of the country, where many family festivities took place, is overgrown. As if to therapeutically get over and playfully surmount the difference between then and now, Wazmah Osman also intervenes in the images, adding small animations. For a short moment the pool shimmers with blue water again.

In a destroyed country like Afghanistan, cinema has become a private affair. The actual history of film must gradually be reconstructed again; for the time being it is foremost "home movies" that mark something like a cinematographic heritage. And yet the country was by no means always separated from the wealthy cinematography of neighbouring India and Iran – this is one of the insights to be gained from the film presentation *SPICE IN* shown in Berlin, Kassel and Hamburg, with which Sandra Schäfer, Regine Dura and Elfe Brandenburger compiled a short history of Afghan film, predominantly from the perspective of and with a view on women. In the ruins of Kabul, an entire national culture has been lost, the remains of which are now being arduously salvaged again. Yet many people still remember the time before the violence began, the "old way of life". Afghanistan is a country where in the past decades each liberation again led to war. In 1978 the country was freed from feudalism, in 1979, to support the communist puppet government, the Red Army invaded the country and was immediately entangled in a long guerrilla war against the Muslim mujahedin. In 1989 the Soviet Union withdrew its troops, but the liberation to which the United States had contributed by providing the resistance with huge amounts of weapons ended up in a fierce civil war between factions of the mujahedin. In 2001 the United States freed the country of the Taleban, who in the 1990s had more or less pacified the country but established an extremely repressive regime. Since then, Western powers are attempting to install, if not civil liberties, at least a minimum level of security in Afghanistan.

The mid-length film *Talabgar (The Marriage Candidate)* by Khaleq A'lil from 1969 (originally part of the three-part episode film titled *Rozgaran – Once Upon a Time*) gives an impression of the conditions prior to 1978. Due to its age and the many interruptions in Afghan history, the film is almost more interesting as a cultural-historical document than for its (moralising) plot. The montage at the beginning shows faces of grim men playing poker. Afterwards, two

of them take a taxi back to the city. Along the way they see a beautiful young woman in a bus and demand that the chauffeur follow it. Later on in a house of an apparently well-to-do man, Hassan makes a call as a marriage candidate – the film heads towards a pathetic point, the humiliation of the good-for-nothing and his being handed over to the executive authority (at least that is what the last scene, someone reaching for the telephone, suggests). Talabgar shows quite well how modernisation in Afghanistan of the 1960s led to the emergence of an urban middle class in which, although patriarchal pre-eminence was retained, women were able to take on an independent role. They could dress Western-style, receive a university education and even reject a marriage candidate. Up to the present day, the conflict between father and daughter over the selection of a partner for life is the central theme in commercial Indian films – to which Talabgar alludes mainly through the music, but also through the constellation. In the twenty years that have past between Talabgar and the short film Saya by Nacir Al Qas from 1990, the conditions have clearly changed. The focus in this film is on a mother with a child. She has a new partner who rejects his stepson – a striking scene shows the child being put to bed in one corner of the room, while the man settles in on the opposite side of the quarters. In the evening the woman goes from her son to the other side and caresses the man's wrist, a mediating gesture that has no effect. Saya tells the story of the woman fleeing with her child. But relatives advise her to not forfeit the man's favour. The film ends with the little boy being abandoned at a lively bazaar.

In terms of iconology, Saya is oriented to neorealism, and the situation is also analogous, for in 1990 Afghanistan could indeed grasp itself as a liberated society, comparable with post-fascist Italy. The impatience in regard to gender relations, however, is already a sign of the politics to come – the desire for a *tabula rasa*, for orderly conditions under which nothing refers to the turmoil of the past anymore. The child is a disruptive factor that must be eliminated. The emotionalism with which Nacir Al Qas repeatedly uses the music from Sergio Leone's Once Upon a Time in the West (the piercing sound lasts just a short moment, so that it is more of a disturbing interspersion than a film-historical citation) can be interpreted as a response to processes of deterritorialization that took place in spaghetti westerns. Saya appears as a film that has become unconnected somewhere between the history of politics and film – there are allusions to traditions (the “neorealistic” face of the main actress, the music that is out of context, the documentary shots of passers-by, the family conflict as the pivotal element of the region's genre and social order), but the fundamental relations of exchange of world cinema (general forms in local manifestations) seem not to function in this case. Instead, Saya has the effect of returning back to square one in terms of cinematography, and the Morricone chord refers to the precise opposite of a functioning genealogy.

The notion of an eradicated tradition can be found in Amina Jafari's Zanan va sinema, a documentary in which the female director tells of her own search for an actress for a film. “Don't you want a cinema like in Iran?”, she asks in another scene, thus expressing her lack of understanding why Afghan women are very hesitant to accept role offers for films. “In Iran, 20,000 people come to a casting session,” one man remarks. While researching female presence in Afghan cinema, Amina Jafari comes upon Talabgar from 1969. The performance of the actress at the time would no longer be legal today, because the representatives of the Islamic Transitional Government of Pakistan, who are interviewed in Zanan va sinema, make mandatory veiling the top criterion when selecting women's roles in cinema. Moreover, they seem to be above all interested in moral edification fables. Finally, Amina Jafari meets Marina, who played the leading role in Siddiq Barmak's Osama (2003) – because the rules under the Taliban regime did not allow women in public without lawful male accompaniment, the twelve-year-old girl became a boy. The scene in which Marina's hair are cut so that she can pass as “Osama”, is until today the worst she remembers. The tragic irony is that a film such as Osama, which once again called to mind the difficulties women were faced with under the Taliban regime, has meanwhile gained unforeseen relevance to the present.

The degree to which the liberties of women are again taken back (or have never been honoured), particularly in rural regions, again connects the female position in society with total objectification. The widow Gul Afroz, who in Roya Sadat's film Se noqta (2004) plays a main role, “belongs” to the family of her missing husband. Her brother-in-law Shir is willing to

marry her, but the price would be that her three children be given to the custody of the grandparents. The film, which was shot on video under extremely difficult circumstances in a village in the south-western region of Herat (near the border to Iran), shows the social conditions in an exemplary situation. The most important man in the region is the Khan, who is surrounded by armed men and controls opium smuggling. Everyone must report to him, even the men from which Gul Afrooz expects help – her “older advisor” or Shir, who would like to possess beautiful Gul Afrooz but shies away from taking on the responsibility for her hungry children. Between these scenes depicting an all but hopeless situation, there is a flashback to the happiness of her youth, the secret engagement with a man named Firooz, whose will was broken by the Khan (and who today hangs about in the village as a piper). The central problem of “manlordism” is most clearly expressed in a song that a group of young girls sing on their way to the river: It is a blunt protest against the marriage rules (“Men sting like scorpions”), while at the same time expressing what is left of female self-assertion which, however, cannot be upheld in the daily struggle for survival. *Se noqta* ends with Gul Afrooz bowing to “running errands”, she is apprehended at the border by Iranian guards and (against the law) not sentenced to death but to life in prison. This film, which is exemplary in many respects, ends with the cell door closing and the separation from her ill, youngest child: The circumstances of its production allow no “production values”, in this case as well the main actress stood under the extreme pressure exerted by her own family, the plot is reduced to the simplest circumstances of real life.

At the same time, the not only geographical proximity to Iran offers an opportunity – since for the time being Afghan cinema is no match for India’s (or Hollywood’s) commercial cinema, but instead dependent on connections to Iranian film culture. The forms between pictorial tradition and representative fable developed there (for which films from the Makhmalbaf Film House mainly stand) can be realized with a minimal budget and also without official permission. In an interview with Sandra Schäfer, Siddiq Barmak indicated that it took a lot of courage for Roya Sadat to realize her film.¹ It is by no means certain that the development of Afghan society in the coming years will make cinema a legitimate art form with a functioning infrastructure – instead, it appears as if female and male filmmakers were in exile in their own country.

This text was first published in kolikfilm No.9, March 2008.

<http://www.kolikfilm.at/>

¹ www.mazefilm.de/seiten/umschwung.htm