

### Poetic cinema

Movies are entertainment, but 'cinema' usually implies that there is an artistic component within the work that reinforces the narrative but can also be appreciated independently of the narrative for its aesthetic impact. It is most often noted as a visual component, but it can be part of the film's sound design, or it can be the juxtaposition of separate artistic components, which can become a steady flow of images, sounds, and metaphors that mirror or rhyme with each other. These can be so overpowering in their spiritual or psychological reflections that they supersede the importance of the narrative in the appreciation of the film. In literature, works of this nature are referred to as 'poetry,' and when you hear the word, 'poetry,' in connection with a movie, you immediately think, 'cinema.'

Arrow Academy has released a captivating two-platter Blu-ray set with three very cinematic films that they have entitled **Mohsen Makhmalbaf: The Poetic Trilogy** (UPC#760137145288, \$50). Each film is very different from the other two and the desire is very strong, upon completing the third film, to start over again with the first. Makhmalbaf is an Iranian filmmaker who was a bonafide member of the Revolution, but began to question the values of the ruling party when their methods and decrees became as oppressive as the regime they had replaced.

The first movie is unquestionably the best one, the 1996 *Gabbeh*. Reminiscent in its design of *The Color of Pomegranates* (May 18), it is set among a nomadic tribe that has no implements of technology, although at the end, they arrive at a modern city. The tribe herds sheep and makes rugs, and the principal splendor of the film is the colors that burst forth from the fabrics they wear, the flowers around them, and the wool they work with as the rugs are constructed (a gabbeh is a type of rug, although it is also the name of the heroine, who may or may not exist) or washed in the crystal clear streams. The narrative has a strong folk tale quality to it and is also a little confused, as a female member of the tribe is not allowed to be married until other milestones, such as the return of her uncle from the city, are passed, though as each one is achieved, another materializes. Running 73 minutes, the plot is presented vaguely, but every moment of the film is thrilling as it celebrates nomadic culture and tradition, blends the people with their environment, and uses visual trickery and sleight-of-hand to dazzle the viewer with its mysteries. The government, incidentally, thought Makhmalbaf was going to make a documentary about the rugs.

The movie looks gorgeous, too. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, it has the vivid immediacy of an HD demo disc, and the temptation to freeze and marvel at every frame is compelling. The DTS sound also has a crisp, bright presence and a stimulating surround design that is as captivating as its images.

The second film, *The Silence*, is truly bizarre, as it has elements that are similar to the first film, about the making of musical instruments, but blends it with an absurd satire about a blind boy who keeps getting lost in the city because instead of going to his job as a guitar tuner, he impulsively follows noises and music when he hears it on his way to work. The young actress appearing as the blind boy, Tahmineh Normatova, plays blind by simply closing her eyes and holding her hands out in front of her. It seems ridiculous at first, but as the 76-minute film advances and its narrative becomes more and more fragmented, the humor of how the boy is being presented rises in prominence. Just as *Gabbeh* offers a serious appreciation of rug making as a foundation for its fantasies, so *The Silence* seems to try to do that with the musical instruments although, like the hero, it keeps getting distracted instead. Using Ludwig Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* as its connective throughline, the 1998 film is not as transcendent as *Gabbeh*, but it is continually wry and intriguing, and quite entertaining if you accept it on its own terms.

Again, the picture, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, is crisp and vivid, although its composition is not as consistently phantasmagorical as *Gabbeh*. It's only phantasmagorical sometimes. The DTS sound is outstanding, and is again elaborately structured and detailed, to the delight of one's surround system.

What gets carried over to the third film, *The Gardener*, is the wry humor. The 2012 film is ostensibly a documentary about religion, although the two men shooting the documentary, played by Makhmalbaf and his son, Maysam Makhmalbaf, are somewhat fictional in design, and while the movie incorporates footage that each of them is shooting, there is also a third cinematographer shooting them, who remains unacknowledged. The film begins as a presentation of the attributes of the Bahá'í faith, which began in Iran, and it continually returns to that topic as the two filmmakers spend a day in a garden on the grounds of a Bahá'í temple, observing the flowers (a compelling visual link to the first film) and the activities of a gardener, who appears to actually be another actor, or, at least, is cooperating with the film's narrative. The two filmmakers also interview believers, visit Jerusalem, and argue with one another about the nature of religious faith. Documentary footage of the founding of the Bahá'í faith is included as well. Running 86 minutes, there are times when the film seems sophomoric in its challenges to the precepts of religion, but the humor of its structure and the ease with which it shifts from one setting to another sustains its viability, and what it really becomes, quite cleverly, is an examination of the different nature of maturity between a parent and an adult child, and how that very relationship could be considered a metaphor for the relationship between God and Man.

While parts of the film are less compelling visually than the other two films, other segments will have you once again hitting your Still Frame button to savor individual compositions. And, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1, the transfer is immaculate. The DTS sound has a constant surround presence and is finely detailed.

The first two films appear on one platter, accompanied by trailers and a passable montage of production photos and promotional materials. *The Gardener* appears on a second platter with another trailer and still photos. A 61-minute interview with Makhmalbaf is included on the second platter, as well, going over his biography, his films, his insights on the state of Iranian society and his filmmaking strategies. "If a film is not attractive, audiences leave the theater, but when they leave the theater, they ask themselves, 'What was the meaning of that?' They need something more. But, if the film has magic, you want to come back and watch the film again. The magic makes film more eternal." Also featured is a playful 17-minute promotional interview with Makhmalbaf about *The Silence*.

Additionally, film critic Godfrey Cheshire provides a very good commentary for *Gabbeh*, explaining why he admires the film so much and deconstructing its various attributes. "This combination of realistic image and dreamlike image, the alternation back and forth creates a interesting state of mind in the viewer. You don't know exactly what's going on in a lot of different moments, and you're going back and forth between something that may be realistic, may be depicting something that you should just look at on a documentary level, and yet, the fact that it goes so often to things that are dreamlike really induces a kind of state of suspended judgment, and also makes you think about what's going on in a symbolic sense. The viewer really has to fill in the meaning here, and create the meaning as this goes along. Is this an allegory? It's obviously not just a straight documentary. The characters are almost like figures from a dream, or indeed, figures from a carpet that have come to life. They don't have kind of recognizable psychology, even though they have feelings that are there, that are dramatized. So much of this depends upon the sensuality of the image, and the senses as portrayed in the image."

He provides a thorough history of the production, goes over Makhmalbaf's career, and deconstructs the film as it plays out. "As far the poetry goes, the poetry is something that is woven into this film throughout. The film itself, the gabbeh, the visual aspect might be considered a visual kind of poetry, and then we will see here, shortly, that poetry is a way that people will communicate with each other, which is very true to the lives of these people that we're seeing."

He also examines Makhmalbaf's politics and how that is manifested within the film. "Colors are political, not just aesthetic. The reason for that being is that as the Iranian regime went along, they increasingly codified how women could dress and how they could be represented in media. And one of the things was decreeing that they had to use only just dark, grey black colors in their dress, and this sort of suggests a very theocratic severity that Makhmalbaf became very opposed to. So introducing color is part of the philosophical thrust of this. It's very much against the regime, and of course there's even an irony that nomadic tribes people have greater freedom than the citizens of the cities where these dress codes are more closely enforced."

### Walsh comedy

A dated but still moderately amusing 1935 MGM comedy, **Baby Face Harrington**, has been released by Warner Home Video as an *Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574657468, \$22). Charles Butterworth plays a small town clerk who mistakenly believes a broker played by Donald Meek has robbed him. He robs the man back, and through a series of misunderstandings and so forth, becomes a central figure in a group of real thugs and bandits. Una Merkle plays his wife, Eugene Pallette is a relative and Nat Pendleton is one of the thugs. Running 62 minutes, the narrative is somewhat predictable and the humor depends upon the reliable clowning of the various character actors, but the film was directed by Raoul Walsh of all people, and he brings just enough of an edge to the proceedings to keep the narrative intriguing and the viewer invested in how things will turn out. It does not have the energy or the tight construction of the best comedies from the era, but it is a workable concoction that is closer to the average sort of entertainment one would have come across in the day.

The full screen black-and-white picture has its share of scratches and grain, but is in adequate condition, and the monophonic sound is workable. There is no captioning, and a trailer is included.

### Unscrupulous lawyer

Dennis O'Keefe is the unappealing hero of the 1938 MGM legal world romance, **The Chaser**, a Warner Home Video *Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574678203, \$22). He plays an unscrupulous lawyer who helps traffic accident victims trump up their injuries, while Ann Morriss is an investigator that the transit company hires to get the goods on his scams. She eventually falls for him—although why she does is a mystery—and then feels guilty when he tells her she is the only one he can trust. Yes, there is obligatory redemption at the end, and Lewis Stone delivers an excellent performance as an alcoholic doctor that O'Keefe's character employs for his court cases, but regardless of how the heroine feels about him, the viewer will find the hero's morals contemptible and his dilemmas well deserved. The full screen black-and-white picture is in fairly good shape, with minimal wear, and the monophonic sound is okay. There is no captioning.