

A.N.T., Agency and Cinematic Authorship

By

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Abstract

This project was conceived as a study inspired by the careers of Iranian art house filmmaker, Samira Makhmalbaf and Canadian First Nation documentary filmmaker, Alanis Obomsawin, and a single film from the oeuvre of each filmmaker: Makhmalbaf's *The Blackboards* (2000), and Obomsawin's *The People of Kattawapiskak River* (2012). By analyzing the media contexts of these two films, as well as inspecting key elements that constitute the *profiles* of each filmmaker, their films-as-cultural product, and their respective societies, the study ultimately expands on the discourse of *artistic agency* and *Authorship* within *contemporary cultural institutions* – and by extension, the contemporary social *Networks* they are part of – through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005).

As exemplified in the choice of ANT as methodology, this MRP will emphasize the imperatives of *non-binary* strategies, arguing that discourse and analysis based on binary propositions can no longer meet the needs of diverse global networks. As such, the choice of the examples from two vastly different cultures is a conscious and deliberate act to highlight the fact that Agency and Authorship in a networked world are more than ever contingent upon the co-operation of multiple *Actors* within social assemblages and networks, whatever their polity or social mores may be, as opposed to being attributes of self-contained or monadic entities.

Acknowledgement

This MRP, as the final document towards earning a Masters degree, and indeed the MA itself, is in great part about human interactions, attitudes, and networks, acknowledging other individuals, past and present, who have contributed to its thought process and completion. For this MRP, whatever its worth and however contentious or not its content, is an *action*, an exercise in deployment of and an exchange of *agency* which is contingent on the actions of other individuals, and not possible otherwise. This is after all what this MRP has tried to convey. I am in particular indebted to Dr. Selmin Kara, my principle advisor for her invaluable insights and direction, and for being ever available to meet, discuss, and provide support and counsel; to my second reader, Dr. Caroline Langill for her keen and incisive commentaries, Dr. Michael Prokopow for highlighting the importance of integrity and evidence-based scholarship in an always genial manner, Dr. Charles Reeve and Dr. Ryan Whyte whom both remained sincerely approachable and genuine in providing much needed guidance throughout my graduate studies at OCAD University, the support of my family and close friends in assisting me to gain much needed time for my research by excusing me from much of my day-to-day duties, and finally a cohort that served to highlight the need for clarity, impartiality and higher communication skills.

For Pourandokht

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Profiles and Binaries

I

The principal framework informing this MRP has its roots in two distinct identity-related conceptual categories: authorship and agency. Revisiting the concept of *authorship* as it was laid out by *Auteur Theory* in Film Studies, the project attempts to ascertain whether the term still holds any significance especially in the context of the practices of Samira Makhmalbaf and Alanis Obomsawin.¹ Secondly, this MRP will try to verify if, and in what ways, the socio-political structure in Canada and the Islamic Republic of Iran might have led to the treatment of the two aforementioned directors in preferential or discriminatory ways, due to their position as women. To that end I will look into the policies of two particular institutions under direct jurisdiction in each country: National Film Board of Canada (NFB) and The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) in Iran.

The intent of this MRP is to shed light and focus on a discourse about seemingly simple, yet uneasy questions regarding the concept of *authorship*, as it concerns women filmmakers in film industry: How is diversity supported in the film industries of Canada and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and is there still

¹ “Auteur” here is defined as a “gifted” individual director, the personal vision of whom is the singular determining and creative force in the act of filmmaking (Etherington-Wright & Doughty 3).

² “Profile” is a concept Latour uses to indicate the multifaceted nature of a “node” (actor) in a

evidence of gender bias when it comes to filmmaking? Is it meaningful to claim that there are *auteur women* filmmakers today, and is authorship a factor that may help women rise above the preconceived limitations of their gender?

In order to provide answers to these questions, this MRP constructs multifaceted *profiles* of Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin as filmmakers, and of their films as cultural products of the institutions/States they interact with as well as the societies they live in.² Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin are recognized as two individuals, who have astutely understood the social, political, and cultural fabric of the worlds they inhabit independently from their social position, gender, race or a multitude of other known and unknown attributes that make up their profiles. They are both active in a male-dominant industry and a profession that is highly collaborative, requiring of them a higher degree of people skills and subtle negotiating capabilities. In other words, their authorial or directorial power rests in mobilizing what Karen Barad calls “intra-acting agencies” (referring to the agential entanglements of human actors, industry practices, technologies, and institutions), heightened by their awareness of certain social issues such as gender (801-831). This exercise and mobilization of agency is therefore an occupational necessity for Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin, one that they cannot do without if they are to be effective and respected; their decisions, from the most trivial to the most specialized ones pertaining to cast, crew, finance and distribution, are all

² “Profile” is a concept Latour uses to indicate the multifaceted nature of a “node” (actor) in a Network, as opposed to a unitary or binary one (Latour, Networks 806).

further complicated at times by their positions in the industry as *women*. Admirably, they have both compounded those challenges by choosing to make films that directly address and even attack social issues and injustices. The films chosen for this study, *Blackboards* (2000) and *The People of Katakawapiskak River* (2012), both center on basic human rights issues that are in question in both Canada and the Islamic Republic of Iran, such as the right to education, housing and not being subject to discriminating laws and regulations. The single fact that both Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin, have both carved a niche for themselves in the film industry, both nationally and internationally, speaks to their mastery of the powers of negotiation, as well as their creative capabilities. To paraphrase Latour, they have cultivated the habit of locating, allocating, and redistributing action, creating networks that are open to transitions and regard transitions as elemental to the advancement of their art and social objectives. Ultimately, it is this distinction through which the MRP challenges the traditional concepts of auteur and individual agency (Network 797-98).

To go a step further in demonstrating the complex nature of such an inquiry, this MRP has chosen two distinct countries as comparanda: two states with almost opposite polities – one secular and the other religious – though they are both Republics with publicly chosen officials. Notably, these are also two states that *choose* not to co-operate with each other.³ So much is the tension between the two states that the political relations of the two countries of Canada

³ Here “co-operation” is used as defined by Richard Sennett (2013).

and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been completely severed since September of 2012.⁴ It is beyond the scope of this MRP to delve into the reasons behind the move initiated by the Canadian state to terminate direct relationships with the Islamic Republic of Iran; therefore, it is important to note that the comparison is only of interest and use to this MRP in so far as it may help to understand agency and authorship among the marginalized groups in a networked world; and in particular as they relate to the already entangled and imbricated issue of gender differences in these two countries.⁵ Samira Makhmalbaf belongs to a long line of women filmmakers in Iranian cinema, just as Alanis Obomsawin belongs to an industry in Canada that can boast of major female presence in it, dating back to the career of Nell Shipman (1892-1970).⁶ Is it not curious then that women are still perceived as a group under the umbrella of representation discourse under both regimes in the midst of the second decade of the 21st century? And was it not the efforts and struggles of women that added momentum to – if not paved the way for – the deconstruction of representational categories and the calls for diversity to begin with? How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction, if not by citing the fact that the characterization of women, and categorization of gender, or any other form of difference still lingers in most social structures? As it

⁴ On September 7, 2012, Canada closed its embassy in Iran and declared all remaining Iranian diplomats in Canada “personae non gratae,” ordering them to leave the country within five days.

⁵ Canada and Islamic Republic of Iran now look after their “interests” in the other country through Italian embassy in Tehran (for Canada) and Oman’s embassy in Ottawa (for Iran), from Sept. 2012 and Oct. 2013 respectively.

⁶ The actual date for the first woman to appear in an Iranian film was 1931 in the film, *A Brother’s Revenge* by Ebrahim Moradi. The First Iranian director/filmmaker is Rakhshan Bani-Etemad (b. 1954).

will be shown, these are just some of the many commonalities that exist between the two states of Canada and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The similarities are just buried under the ashes of the conflagration of accusations flying between the two countries, stoked by the noxious coal made out of banal and affective reduction of crucial social issues such as gender inequality to the obscurities of the “twin fetishes of victimhood and redemption” (Hughes 11).⁷ To rephrase another line from art historian Robert Hughes, “palaeo-politicians” need “palaeo-arguments” for their rationalizations, while ignoring the fact that social structures can no longer be locally contained (17).

But, why ask these questions to begin with? Because, quite simply issues of representation and authorship are still not clearly resolved, explained and impartially dealt with within the increasingly global cultural institutions that purport having it as their founding mandate. Democratic diversity, as a social ideal, is still not wholly freed from the rubrics and of old binary clichés of minority and gender, and is used or more commonly misused to lobby a cause.⁸ Further, because such questions are often relegated to the “politically correct” camp that expects predetermined answers, or as Robert Hughes would describe them as “pushers of political correctness who would like to see grievance elevated into automatic sanctity” (14). Therefore, in my opinion, *diversity* needs to be re-

⁷ Here Hughes is quoting the poet W. H. Auden (1907-1973), from his *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (1941-42).

⁸ “Binary” here refers to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of *Cultural Hegemony*, arguing that same principle flourishes in most social groups which gain critical mass for political activity (Quentin & Smith 7).

addressed and redressed, if it is to realize its full potential as a social structure with a global outlook, and to prevent it from falling back to what used to be minority or representation discourses. To conflate the two terms is to overlook the significance of the contributions they each made to the understanding of social networks. It should also be made clear that the intention of this assertion, is in no way to downplay the importance of discourse around representation issues, nor is its intent to overlook the hard-won rights of the minorities and turn a blind eye to the plights of the underprivileged. Quite the contrary, the intent is to disentangle such discourse from the web of assumptions and presuppositions by trying to determine the conditions under which agency and artistic authority are constructed, and how ANT can be used to trouble the very concepts of minority and gender, or at the very least limit their debilitating social effects. The intention here is to stress the already established scholarship on the imperative of strengthening the approaches to the concepts of agency and diversity, which have consistently been gaining momentum in the last decade.

II

The selected methodology to make sense of the seemingly disparate aforementioned concepts such as diversity, globalism, auteur, institutions, collaboration, individual, profile, actors and agency, is Actor-Network Theory and the *rhizome* of offshoots such a mode of thinking has promoted in social and

urban studies.⁹ It must also be noted that thinking in terms of ANT is in stark contrast to a *binary* outlook. In fact, to say “in contrast” does not do justice to ANT, as such a phrase negates its position: in ANT, there is no conception of contrasts, binaries, opposites or dualities, nor of singularities; there are instead *profiles*, *actions* and *redistribution* of those actions as they affect networks. As Latour states:

Take any object: At first, it looks contained within itself with well-delineated edges and limits; then something happens, a strike, an accident, a catastrophe, and suddenly you discover swarms of entities that seem to have been there all along but were not visible before and that appear in retrospect necessary for its sustenance. (Networks 797)

What this suggests is that any object, entity, concept, or individual is comprised of a set of attributes, with lifelines that sustain it and the lifelines *it* becomes in turn for other entities: in short its *profile*. To think in terms of *profiles* allows for an interchangeability of singular entities into collective enterprises and vice-versa. It opens up possibilities as it implies that there are always more options than exists under any dualistic interpretation:

Instead of starting by saying that the really important question is ‘to find out how individual decisions relate to collective actions,’ we want to do exactly what Tarde¹⁰ suggested and refrain from asking this question so as to lessen its import and to turn our attention to a different topic: Is there a way to define what is a longer lasting social order without making the

⁹ The term *Rhizome* is borrowed from Deleuze (A Thousand Plateaus, 1987), as it adds to the understanding of the multifaceted aspects of *Nodes* in a network: a node has multi dimensions and attributes (personalities), the collection of which is what Latour terms *profiles*. It is the view of this project that the concept of *Rhizome*, in addition to other Deleuzian concepts such as *Difference* and *Multiplicity*, align and reinforce ANT concepts.

¹⁰ Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904). French sociologist, criminologist and psychologist. Latour repeatedly refers to Tarde’s in his formulation of Actor-Network Theory. See for instance Latour, Reassembling the Social 13.

assumption that there exist two levels (Latour, 2005)?¹¹

It is clear that the intent here is to avoid reductive descriptions of objects, individuals, institutions, States, and even concepts that have fixed positions and functions, but to search and allow for a *profile* to emerge. To problematize and/or situate social, historical, and cultural practices and issues in binary propositions and discourse – while they may have significant merits of their own, such as raising awareness, inciting action for change, or simply increasing our understanding of a given entity – is nevertheless starting from the limiting position of two specific opposite poles (i.e. individual vs. institution/collective), disregarding a host of other contributing agents, actors, attributes, and actions. It will be reasonable to say then, that presupposed conceptual, social or political dualities limit agency by reducing the options to *act*: the fewer the channels or actants a node has available to it to interact with, the more isolated and limited its agency becomes, and the more a node (if it be an individual) fixates on the presuppositions about those few channels, the less s/he will be inclined to exert her/his agency. This argument is the underpinning structure for capitalist control through predictable, closed, and determined forms Richard Sennett alludes to in his concept of the *Open City* (2013). ANT disrupts control structures as such. It dramatically changes the power dynamics by asserting that agency is an absolute

¹¹ The above quote follows this important question that draws our attention to the limitations of dichotomous evaluations: “By presupposing that there exist two levels, they might have solved too quickly the very questions they should have left open to inquiry: What is an element? What is an aggregate? Is there really a difference between the two? What is meant by a collective entity lasting in time? (Latour et al., *The Whole 2*)

given, and how it is deployed, is in great part determined by the individual's awareness of the cultures they inhabit. This is a critical concept, and together with other micro and macro attributes, they form an individual's profile, which becomes a tool for understanding their various actions. From such a vantage point, it is easy to see how an individual can come to be understood as an institution and vice-versa. Cultivating this fluid and interchangeable mode of inquiry is what Latour holds to be the most prized contribution of the field of science and technology studies:

The search for the production of object and of objectivity is totally transformed now that they are portrayed simultaneously in the world and inside their networks of production. This is the contribution of my field, science and technology studies, of which I am the most proud. You see that I take the word network not simply to designate things in the world that have the shape of a net (in contrast, let's say, to juxtaposed domains, to surfaces delineated by borders, to impenetrable volumes), but mainly to designate a mode of inquiry that learns to list, at the occasion of a trial, the unexpected beings necessary for any entity to exist. A network, in this second meaning of the word, is more like what you record through a Geiger counter that clicks every time a new element, invisible before, has been made visible to the inquirer (Network 798-99).

To examine why Latour regards this interchangeability to be the most significant contribution of ANT, one need only to trace the epistemological and ontological developments of post-enlightenment Europe. From the extreme pole of the hegemonic fatalism of the Church, monarchy and a feudal agrarian society, Enlightenment catapulted Europe to the other extreme pole of indeterminism and freewill. *Reason*, science and industry, purported to give humanity power, control, and agency over the inhabitable world, but in reality they aggravated and complicated social injustices, inequalities and dualities: science and industry

benefited the powerful the most, while it effectively robbed the weak of their God. Enlightenment had brought an end to the duality of humanity and God, but it had no better solution to fill the vacuum it had created, but with lesser and more oppressive binaries. The search for a suitable replacement to that loss would occupy the Western mind for the next four centuries, vacillating between the two, before the spiraling of humanity into chaos in World War II, because the predominant mode of the Western thought remained dualistic, as it does still. What often goes uncontested in such narratives, as in the example of Enlightenment above, is the creation of a concept, enclosed and immured in a set of pre-suppositions that have also stemmed from dichotomous thinking that in turn create a whole new class of *others* having their own new set of grievances, both sides forever locked in a meaningless *tu quoque* argumentation. There were, and still are, those individuals that do not seek, nor see the world as poles and oppositions. Rather they choose to see *action* and *connection* between multiple elements, *networks* and *spheres* throughout the universe, as evinced by certain Western philosophical, social, and scientific theoretical formulations, even including the discipline of art history itself.¹² To emphasize the point further, Bruno Latour states:

Networks are a great way to get rid of phantoms such as nature, society, or power, notions that before were able to expand mysteriously everywhere at no cost. As the study of metrology, standards, empires has shown so

¹² Review for example, and in addition to Tarde's work already mentioned, the works of Naturalist Charles Darwin in formulation of the Evolutionary Theory (*On the Origin of Species*, 1859), the conception of the *General Systems Theory* by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), and conception of Actor-Network Theory (1980) by science and technology scientists Michel Callon and Bruno Latour and sociologist John Law.

well, smooth continuity is the hardest thing to get. As a sociologist of sorts, I have been especially interested in what this revolution does to social theory. And what it does is truly amazing: It dissolves entirely the individual versus society conundrum that has kept social theorists and political scientists busy for the last two hundred years. To sum up a long argument: We have the social theory of our datascape. If you change this datascape, you have to change the social theory. (Networks 802-4).

Stated as such, not only the way out of binary propositions becomes clear, it becomes an imperative, if we are to move out of the circularity they propagate.

Against the backdrop of the methodology of ANT, the multitude of binary-oriented discourse that contemporary media art history has become so deeply entrenched in, are glaringly magnified: Feminist, Colonial, Post-colonial, Queer and Gender theories, and almost all the other frameworks in between (in the 20th Century) revolve primarily around bifurcation: the “one” vs. the “other”, the “gazer” and “the gazed at”, the “oppressed” vs. “aggressor”, “Western” vs. “non-Western”, “minority” vs. “majority”, “individual” vs. “State/institutions”, “inclusion” vs. “exclusion”...are just to name a few. As stated earlier, this is not a reduction of the significance of such theories and discourses. They have paved the way that led to diversity. What is stressed here is that the binary tenets that those theories stemmed from and were partly born as a reaction against, are incompatible with the needs of diverse global cultures and cultural institutions.¹³ It is no longer sufficient, nor relevant to repeatedly dwell on or re-enact grievances, political, or cultural differences of centuries ago, or the present time.

One example of such discourse is the First Nations (colonial) issues in

¹³ It is claimed here that the post-structuralist theories noted, remained entrenched in binary patterns nonetheless.

Canada, which is reluctant to liberal discussion and resists scholarship and research from the “outside” – due to a legitimate cautiousness against non-native categorizations. Yet, if true reconciliatory networks are to be formed, this monolithic viewing of the Other needs to be challenged. This is because the critical tool has become an oppositional institution itself, and it has fundamentally retained binary rationalizations based on binary social relations.¹⁴ There is a marked difference to be sure, between a historical account that tries to offer sufficient and adequate explanation as to why and under what specific social, historical, and political conditions a particular cultural phenomenon materialized, as opposed to a critical report that uses individuals, First Nations and colonists, the cultural products that ensued, or any other entity within a social network, either as sole agents responsible for an event, or as footnotes subject to that particular report’s mandates, and social grievances:

Why do we think that they are individuals who are “in” a society? Because of a discontinuity in the available data. When we gather statistics—and this is what social theorists have done for the last 150 years when they were not doing qualitative field work—the sheer difficulty of getting the data means that you are going to focus on the individual as little as possible in order to get as quickly as possible at the aggregates. Inevitably, you are going to begin to grant to those aggregates some sort of existence by themselves. (Latour, Network 802-3).

That is a succinct answer as to why art history is so entrenched in binary discourse, and why its normative methodological tools are not directly employed in this paper. The rush to get to the “aggregates” obscures the reality of the

¹⁴ Binary Social Relations, and Binary Rationalizations, cultural representations involving Us-and-Them and the creation of the Other, are referred to as concepts that ANT disagrees with and necessarily dismantles, and they are used and referred to as they were laid down in Edward Saïd’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978).

individual actants involved in it, and the aggregate itself becomes an oppositional tool. “Polarization is addictive” as Hughes remarks, “It is the crack of politics – a short intense rush that the system craves again and again, until it begins to collapse” (28).

At this point, it is helpful to introduce and discuss the actants and actors that make up the larger network of the filmmaking practices that are subject to this study. The aim is to show the network itself, and not to dwell on its individual parts (actors), to show the network’s fluidity and its shapeless character that enables it to assume multiple characters at one and the same time. In what follows, I invite the reader to consider the evidence afresh and viewed in multiple permutations that can reveal multiple angles and viewpoints, to suspend preconceptions and/or traditional canons, in order to see the dynamics that could give rise to and support diverse social structures.

Chapter 2

Transformation of Auteur into Actor

I

The concept of the “special” individual, as initially brought to the fore by the British fan magazine *Bioscope* in 1910, turned into a debate by the influential filmmaker and novelist Alexandre Astruc in his seminal article “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-stylo*” (1948). With Astruc’s coining of the term *caméra-stylo*, the status of the camera was raised to that of the *pen*, used to distinguish the literary style of various authors, and by extension that of the director who wielded it, to the unitary source of the film, by means of a metaphor. The underpinning motive was to raise the status of film from a working class form of entertainment to that of fine art, and along with it the status of the director to that of “Author-God” as Roland Barthes, among many others, would deridingly come to use the term (4). The debate was further picked up and promoted by the *Cahiers* group in the 1950’s, leading to its eventual transformation to *Auteur Theory* (Etherington-Wright & Doughty 3-6).¹⁵ This new direction in filmmaking would also necessitate a complete departure from the French cinema of the day known as the “Tradition de la qualité” that favored the production of films based on adaptations of the classics and recognized and lauded the *writer* (as opposed to the director) as the main figure at the top of the creative chain (Etherington-

¹⁵ The term “Auteur Theory” was a mistranslation by Andrew Sarris, appearing in his article “Notes on the Auteur Theory” (1962), of Truffaut’s “La Politic des Auteurs” (1954). The *Cahiers* Group were a group of French directors, writers and theorist, and archivist in the 1950s commonly associated with the French New Wave and the Auteur theory that included Henri Langlois, Andre Bazin, and François Truffaut.

Wright & Doughty 8). The new language in cinema, with the “visionary” director at the helm, meant that film could be stylistically and thematically regarded as the unified work – signified by the unique and recognizable signature technique, style and vision – of a single individual. The controversy and opposition this New Avant-Garde cinema created were not confined to the issue of the director against the writer as film can hardly, if at all, be described as a solitary creation of a director or writer. An immensely collaborative enterprise, making a film needs the co-operation of an incredibly large group of individuals, any one of whom can play a decisive role in the success or failure of the final product: screen writers, cinematographers, editors, set designers, costume and makeup artists, actors and actresses, technical advisors, lawyers dealing with state regulations and other legal contingencies, are just a few of a long and diverse list of individuals that a director cannot do without.

Regardless of these obvious objections the Cinémathèque Française with its group of cinéphiles would pursue the debate that eventually manifested in two of the major developments in film history: the creation of the journal *Cahiers du cinéma* and the *Nouvelle Vague*/French New Wave school of filmmaking. The cinema of the “Tradition de la qualité” was now taunted as the “Cinéma du papa” to emphasize its backwardness and belonging to the past.¹⁶ The irony was that this

¹⁶ See François Truffaut’s seminal text “Une Certain Tendance du Cinéma Française” (1954). The translation of this article can be found in most film theory books. The copy used here is from the archives of the Santa Barbara City College.
<https://soma.sbccc.edu/users/davega/FILMST_113/Filmst113_ExFilm_Movements/FrenchNewWave/A_certain_tendency_tr%23540A3.pdf>

New Wave would soon face crushing criticism, and indeed absolute rejection of the anti-humanist thoughts that would be solidified in the works of the structuralist and post-structuralist intellectuals who would soon follow.¹⁷ Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay “Death of the Author” states:

We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture (4).

Foucault was also questioning this same construct of Author-God in his 1969 lecture “What is an Author?” in which he remarked, “The word *work* and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author’s individuality” (104). In fact by the time of these critical remarks from Barthes and Foucault, merely a decade after Truffaut’s text “Une Certaine Tendence du Cinéma Française,” anti-humanism was well on its way in European intellectual circles, and the concept of *auteur* was a prey not to be left alone. French anti-humanism, generally speaking, was a denunciation of both foundationalism and an Enlightenment-inspired progressive view of history as the result of the actions of autonomous agents (O’leary, Falzon 119). Neither was the Cahiers group able to prevent the salvo of criticism directed at them when they could not arrive at an accord among themselves as to what exactly constituted this new approach. André Bazin’s complaint a few years into the practice of the *Cahiers* group “that our finest writers on *Cahiers* have been practicing it [*auteur* criticism] for three or

¹⁷ What is referred to here is the belief that “I”, the thinking “subject” was an illusion, predominantly in the works of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida.

four years [they] have yet to produce the main corpus of its theory” is revealing (Hillier 257).

The views of the French New Wave as set forth in François Truffaut’s seminal text “Une Certaine Tendance du Cinéma Française” (1954), and under what Truffaut titled “la politique des auteurs,” identified two disparate principles that needed to be present in a film, for it to be regarded the work of an auteur director. First the concept of *Mise-en-scène* was cited, which in essence was a formalistic tool for film analysis and critique, and secondly the “director’s personal expression,” a term susceptible to subjective interpretation constituted the conditions that an auteur had to strive for.¹⁸ As a result the *content/plot* (further reducing the position the writer) had no bearing in the making of the auteur, at least for Truffaut himself, and instead the *thematics* would be a subsection of the *Mise-en-scène* in further aiding to recognize the work of an auteur (Etherington-Wright & Doughty 12).¹⁹

A general survey of Auteur Theory would not be complete without a reference to its American main proponent, Andrew Sarris, and its tenacious opposition, Pauline Kael. Sarris in his 1962 essay “Notes on the Auteur Theory,” had mistranslated Truffaut’s “La Politic des Auteurs” (1954), but the name stuck, and almost immediately met with the staunch opposition of the film critic Pauline

¹⁸ *Mise-en-scène* literally means “put into the scene,” originated from the theater, and refers to everything that appears on a *frame*, such as lighting and set design, all aspects of acting with the exception of dialogue, costume and make up.

¹⁹ Thematics refers to the recurring *themes* in a selected director’s body of work (i.e. historical, political, social, etc.), what do they tell us and how they are relevant in understanding of the film, as particularly handled by that director.

Kael. What ensued between the two was a decade long debate culminating in a series of articles in *The New Yorker* magazine.²⁰ The verbal feuds between the Sarris and Kael were so heated that they had produced their own followers dubbed the “Sarristes” and the “Paulettes.” This is worth noting, as it is indicative of the fundamental flaws of the *Auteur Theory*, foremost among which was its androcentric core, to which Kael had rightly reacted.²¹

II

The condensed history of the origins of *Auteur Theory* recounted above is to provide a point of departure, and a timeline in the development of the auteur concept, and not meant as a detailed account of the *French New Wave*, or contemporary *Auteur Theory*. It tries to give an idea of the milieu in which it was originated, in order to magnify its main flaw: though the Cahiers group was mocking the Cinéma du papa, and looked to the new future, they failed to see that they kept the traditional “papa” authority figure intact, riding on the last waning waves of modernism. That attitude of needing an authority to look up to, was not however limited only to the field of fine arts and literature. Rather it was the persistence of the same chronic symptom of a social pathology and a sleight of hand by the powerful devised for the maintenance of power and ruling their

²⁰ For a closer read see Sarris’ article in *The Village Voice Blog*:
http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2010/12/andrew_sarris_v.php

To reach Kael’s articles, see *The New Yorker* web site:

<http://www.newyorker.com/search?qt=dismax&sort=score+desc&query=raising+kane&submit=>

²¹ Andrew Sarris biography on the TCM website:

<http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/person/1391541|0/Andrew-Sarris/>

subjects traceable as far back to Homer's *Odysseus*. It was the lingering of the same old tradition of Greek Tragedy, that cult of breeding heroic figures and Gods that had an interest to keep the underprivileged and lesser mortals forever dependent and excluded: *Valhalla* and *Mount Olympus* was not for just anyone, though it would not be long before humanity would swing to the other extreme pole: with Gods gone and claimed dead, now it was time for humanity to turn on itself. After the War, humanity was entering a new stage of ideological mutation, and in the throws of existential angst, it had perhaps had enough of authority figures. With all the genuine thought and intent that might have gone into the creation of this new *auteur* figure of the cinema, it was at core still based on those same principles that humanity was denouncing. What was not initially seen or felt was the total derailment from that path, or that it was getting into a circular argument against the self to end up where it started; whatever substance was there was depleted. Nor is that attitude showing any signs of abatement, now in the second decade of the 21st century, it has just lowered its standards to ensure a steady line of second rate Gods in the form of celebrity production, "in the same spirit, tennis could be shorn of its elitist overtones: you just get rid of the net" (Hughes 7).

Hughes' aphorism above is felicitously fitting as it touches on both the questionable notion of the elite and how it may be attained. Indeed, why not the director, or anybody as the celebrity then? We just need to form groups of individuals that will agree to adhere to a set of self-serving specular rules, to

ensure a steady production of quasi-celebrity figures. And if not that, we can lower any individual achievement to fit our watered down standards. This “lowering of the net” is echoed in T. J. Clark’s latest book on Picasso (2013). In relation to the “abominable character of most writing on the artist” Clark writes:

Its prurience, its pedantry, the wild swings between (or unknowing the existence of) fawning adulation and ad false refusal-to-be-impressed...the pretend-moralism, the pretend-feminism, the pretend-intimacy (“I remember one evening in Mougins...”); and above all the determination to say nothing, or nothing in particular, about the structure and substance of the work...For how can it be that this - this second-rate celebrity literature - is the response we have to the century’s most difficult pictorial thought...? What would we say if the books we had on Darwin and Einstein and Kafka and Lenin were of the same miserable kind (4-5)?

What Clark and Hughes highlight in their text is not to be confused with promotion of elitism, rather it speaks to a “tendency” (to borrow Truffaut’s word) in our culture to avoid the real issues, through maudlin or over-simplified approach. What they point to is the staggering truth that, as if the likes of Barthes, Foucault, Althusser, Derrida, and the arguments of the anti-humanists, structuralists, post-structuralists had never existed, that we had miraculously jumped from the tortured self of modernism to the oasis of Google where multiple *Avatars* exist to mask and fix any problem. The struggle to define *self*, agency and identity, as one of the foundational goals of the Freudian psychoanalysis – that aimed to bring more of the *it*, (the subconscious *Id*) to the realm of the “*I*” (the conscious *Ego*) – and the complete reversal of them by the post-modern thoughts – where nothing of the “*I*” could remain – cancelled each other out (Roderick 2012). It is under the rubbles of these struggles that the question of *Individual*

Agency, and many other “matters of concern” as Latour would say, became moot (Network 2011). There is no need for Godlike figures of worship, but that does not mean Individual style or agency does not exist. Neither does it mean that individuals like Makhmalbaf, Obomsawin, have no exceptional merits as artists. Isabelle Stengers’ 1991 article “The Question of Author in the Modern Sciences,” incisively speaks to the last two sentences at the same time that it presents a vigorous argument against the question of author. While Stengers does not negate particular abilities of different individuals, she does not separate the “individual” from the “history” of the discipline they are engaged in. By reminding us that Author and Authority have the same root, and medieval practices...gave them a sense of interdependence,” Stengers assert that “authority” comes from the history of the field:

Scientists acknowledge ‘nature’ as their sole ‘authority’, the phenomena of which they are concerned with, but they know that the possibility of this ‘authority’ having authority is relative to a history which gives them both their theories and tools, and the degree of freedom which will define the risks which could beset their problems (2). For the landscape of the sciences, at any given time, qualifies the authors who are active in it (6).

The “history” Stengers refers to, is very much akin to Latour’s Networks. It is again through lucidity of an approach informed by science that we are able to argue that singular “authorities/authors” cannot exist, nor can be defined solely on their own. For only a scientist readily admits that even “scientific facts” are “steeped in theory” and therefore remain “logically contestable” (Stengers 2). This observation will also raise the question of subjectivity and its position in a

given network, which will be expanded on in its particular relation to biography (not profile) in the next chapter, showing why profiles are preferred to biographies in a network.

Chapter 3

Subjectivity & Biography

The first issue presenting itself in describing or identifying an individual, object, or a group (System), is the realization that very little can be said about any of them with absolute certainty. Such facts do exist in science, as in a proposition like: The sum of the three angles of any triangle composed on a two-dimensional surface will be 180° . This simple example suggests that subjectivity exists within the human mind and not in objects, people, events, and concepts. The less factual, the more “subjective”, “hermeneutic”, “relative”, “blurry”, “discursive”, “interpretive”, “taxonomical” it becomes according to the person who is examining it. But as Latour observes, “The task is not to overthrow but to make explicit” (Some Experiments 3), magnifying Wittgenstein’s declaration about his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence” (3).

Few *biographical* accounts and events can be stated clearly and explicitly, beyond stating proper names and titles: such information does not tell us *how* they ended up in a particular social status, or *who* they really are, even if stated by the person him/herself. It is common, at least among the artists, to fabricate information about themselves: one only needs to read the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini or Tracey Emin, or look into Arshile Gorky’s attempts at

changing his origins.²² Examine the following sentence from Tracey Emin's autobiography, *Strangeland*:

But at the moment of my birth into this world, I somehow felt a mistake had been made. I couldn't scream or cry or argue my case. I just lay motionless, wishing I could go back where I'd come from (3).

As if Emin possessed such extraordinary mental capabilities at the moment she was born. Heavy excursion into biographical details is therefore exceedingly problematic, as they cannot explicitly account for, nor represent the totality of the imbricating and concatenating events and circumstances that occurred (Bennett 149-156). This point is the crux of what Barthes and Foucault argued for in their analysis of the author and text: the written text becomes a *separate* entity the minute it leaves the author's desk, no longer to be confused with the person/author who wrote it, nor the person (in case of biography) it is about! Neither the author, nor the subject will be present to substantiate what is written, and the more the temporal distance for the author or the subject, and less factual the contents of what the text contains, the more problematic an accurate interpretation of what is written will be. It must be stressed again that this is not a banal claim to subjectivity, but stating an inherent condition that *leads* to subjectivity in the *absence* of *reproducible* fact. It is the cure for subjective attitude. A person's life and motivations can never be as clearly and accurately summed up as the example of the rule of the triangle mentioned, too many variables are at play, and the majority of them remain concealed from view. The

²² Gorky inventively introduced himself as a cousin of writer Maxim Gorky, the Russian political activist. See Christopher Knight (2011).

written text becomes many entities at one and the same time: an *actor* and independent agent in itself no longer tied to its author, acquires its own *agency*, it *was* the creation of the author, becomes a tool for other *actors* within the *network* it exists to use or act upon in whatever way the mandate of the agent using it calls for, vacillating between autonomy and subjugation simultaneously. In short, the text acquires a fluid, shapeless character capable of representing multiple personalities as diverse as its readers and subject to their individual interpretations of it. Understood as such, a written biography can no longer be accepted with a singular, fixed meaning, but a collection of data, or a *Profile*, which stresses its chameleon nature. As one of the main arguments of Actor-Network theory touched on earlier, this ability to shift identity and function is true of any object or person within a network and a key concept to assist us in ridding our thoughts of polar and reductive paradigms, and understand how “matters of fact” can change to “matters of concern”:

A matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theatre (Latour, What Is 39).

This is also how Latour explains the metamorphosis of an *object* to a *thing* and vice-versa. It is with such an approach and mindful of such principles that profiles of Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin, the two films *Blackboards* and *The People of Kattawapiskak River*, and of such institutions as NFB in Canada and Ministry of Culture in Iran, are presented. All are regarded as actors within interconnecting spheres and networks, inherently endowed with and capable of exercising agency.

Chapter 4

I

Samira Makhmalbaf

Samira Makhmalbaf is an Iranian art house filmmaker and screenwriter, in the style of the Iranian New Wave cinema.²³ She also dabbled in acting in her father's (Mohsen Makhmalbaf) film *The Cyclist* (1987) at the tender age of eight. Makhmalbaf made the official selection list (Un Certain Regard) in the 51st Cannes Film Festival at age 17 with her film *The Apple* (1998), her first feature length film.²⁴ She won her first international award with her second feature film *Blackboards* (2000), receiving the Jury's Award (Cannes Court Métrage) at the 53rd Cannes Film Festival.²⁵ Makhmalbaf was born into a family of filmmakers: her father is the internationally acclaimed Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf (b. 1957) and her mother Marziyeh Meshkini (b. 1969) has also achieved international acclaim as a screen writer and director.²⁶ Samira has two siblings, both active in multiple aspects of filmmaking: her brother Maysam Makhmalbaf (b. 1981) is a still photographer, cinematographer, editor, documentary filmmaker and producer (*Buddha Collapsed Out Of Shame*, 2007 is his most notable production), and her sister Hana Makhmalbaf (b. 1988) is also a director, script

²³ The Iranian New Wave Cinema is an offshoot of the French New Wave Cinema, established in 1964.

²⁴ Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira's father was the screenwriter and editor of *The Apple*, and her mother Marziyeh Meshkini was the assistant director.
<<http://www.cannescourtmetrage.com/en/edito>>.

²⁵ Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira's father was the screenwriter and editor of *Blackboards*, and her mother Marziyeh Meshkini was the assistant director.

²⁶ Meshkini won three awards at the Venice International Film Festival in 2000, and was the screenwriter for *Buddha Collapsed Out Of Shame* (2007) by Hana Makhmalbaf, her other daughter.

supervisor, writer, and still photographer. Samira dropped out of school at age 15 to study in her father's film school known as *Makhmalbaf Film School* (est. circa 1996). Makhmalbaf Film School, though initially intended to be established as a legitimate accredited school open to the public, remained in essence a family run operation, and *Makhmalbaf Film House* was in fact the production department of that school. The closely knitted fabric of what came to be known as Makhmalbaf Film House, its operation, history, and in particular its inseparability from the history of its founder Mohsen Makhmalbaf, is essential in understanding Samira Makhmalbaf's career as a filmmaker. As such a brief excursion into the profile of Makhmalbaf (the father) is crucial.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf was a revolutionary at the time of Pahlavi monarchy – the regime in power before the Islamic revolution of 1978 – and spent approximately five years in jail under that regime. He had started to write stories while in prison, and his career as a filmmaker started during the early years of the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a war-film director, at age 25. His early films and ideology were resolutely and openly in the service of the Islamic Revolution. He would eventually change direction to become an independent art house filmmaker, would go on to found the Makhmalbaf Film House (circa 1980), and become a staunch critic of the Islamic regime in Iran as well as a human rights activist. He has been in exile, living in London, U.K. since 2005 (Tapper 124-25). That trajectory from an individual in a “wild goose chase after the Islamic Cinema”, to the artist, and human rights activist most recently found

expression in his acceptance of an invitation to attend the Jerusalem Film Festival in Israel (Dabashi 81). In a recent interview with the Guardian Magazine (U.K.) Mohsen Makhmalbaf explained his motives for accepting that invitation:

I went there to take a message of peace...I try to unite people through arts, I am citizen of cinema, and cinema has no border, and in fact before my journey to Israel my film travelled to that country many years before (Dehghan 2013).

Among the major succession of events that turned Mohsen Makhmalbaf into a “messenger of peace” and a “citizen of cinema” that he now sees himself as was the forced sale of the Makhmalbaf Film House (with the exception of the name) in 1996, as a result of the debt that he incurred in making of his film *A Moment of Innocence* (1995). According to Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the film was to be restricted from screening and distribution by the *Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance*, unless certain revisions were made.²⁷ Makhmalbaf recalls:

One option was to let “A Moment of Innocence” be cut to pieces, as our thought and art would be, yet be the owners of a house. Another option was to sell the house and return the debt my film had caused, let the film be permanently detained, but not cut into pieces and lost its meaning and sense. All members of my family, including Hana who was the youngest one, said they didn’t want the house and that owning the name would suffice. And that we would use the name of the house from that moment on, to title all our productions (Web, Makhmalbaf Film house 2000).

Such synopsis provides telling insight into the dynamics of the network in which Samira Makhmalbaf was a primary *actant*, and which also informed her training,

²⁷ The ministry in the Islamic Republic of Iran, under authority of which - among various other responsibilities to oversee the production and dissemination of various other cultural and educational activities - films and their content are reviewed, before they can be released for screening. Complete lists of various rules and regulations that must be observed can be viewed on their web site: The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance <<http://www.farhang.gov.ir/en/deputies/performance>>.

awareness, and direction as a filmmaker.²⁸ Two separate aspects of the Makhmalbaf family profile are speculated here to have played a significant part in forming Samira Makhmalbaf's inclinations as a film director: her father, Mohsen Makhmalbaf spent two years in Afghanistan in the 1990s, during which he carried out human rights projects, and the breaking of the Iran-Iraq eight-year war in 1980, which coincided with the nascent Islamic Republic of Iran as well as the birth of the *Makhmalbaf Film House*.²⁹ It was during such catastrophic years, signified by routine and deliberate chemical bombardments of the Iranian civilians, that Samira was born, and Tehran, the city she and her family lived in, was a primary target. It would seem natural, considering the life-events above, that Samira Makhmalbaf would mature as a director whose films would thematically focus on socio-political issues. Her films are, at core, documentaries and social commentaries, however disguised under the genre of art-house. The art-house label automatically ascribes a certain type of authorial agency or individual vision to the filmmaker, overshadowing the network of relations and the complex entanglements of actors and actants that inform a director like Makhmalbaf, making her a powerful node within a larger network. As will be shown, Obomsawin was also influenced by the socio-political web of relations surrounding her, which eventually led her to pursue her career in filmmaking as a documentarian.

²⁸ In Actor-Network Theory, an *actant* is any human or non-human actor within a network, taking the shape they do as a result of their relation to one another, and thus defines what an *actor* is more accurately.

²⁹ This is also according to Makhmalbaf's statement in his Web and site. See: <<http://www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=mohsen>>.

II

Western Influences

On a different vector, a point must also be made about the interest of foreign investors as influential actors in co-production, promotion, and distribution of Iranian films, in particular French production and distribution companies, such as MK2 and CB2000, which have direct links with and personal interest in various European film festivals, from 1981 to the present.³⁰ The funding that the *MK2* company invested to produce Mohsen Makhmalbaf's feature film *Gabbeh* (1995) – a film which went on to win several international awards, with its rights owned by MK2 – would fund a *15 minute* film in France. Another example is Marco Muller, who was the director of *Locarno International Film Festival* from 1991-2000. Muller who served as consultant to the *Venice International Film Festival* from 1981-1992, has co-financed more than 100 films, and supervises *Fabrica Cinema*, a *Benetton*-backed production company created in 1988. *Fabrica Cinema* co-produced Samira Makhmalbaf's *Blackboards* (2000), which as mentioned went on to win the Jury's Prize at the Cannes film festival (Tapper 94).

³⁰ Ciby 2000 (Richard Tapper, the source of this information, has written it as CB2000) is a French film production and distribution company founded in 1990 by Francis Bouygues (1922-1993. French businessman and film producer). It was best known for producing art house and independent films in France and in other countries. MK2 is French production company founded by Marin Kermit (b. 1938). Kermit is producer, director, distributor, and film exhibitor. See: <<http://www.nytimes.com/movies/person/96792/Marin-Karmitz>>.

These examples help illuminate two distinct points. First, they reveal the profit-driven motives of the film festival circuit, reminding us that whatever altruistic claims they may represent on the surface, they are in greater part, if not entirely, driven by financial motivations, while they can also take pride in “discovering” *other* cinemas (Tapper 94-96). Moreover, this “discovery” and showcasing of the *other* by the West has unsettling undertones and resurrects a colonial overtone that will be further discussed in pages ahead in relation to Alanis Obomsawin’s practice as a member of the Abenaki First Nation in Canada. Secondly, such collaborations raise the equally uneasy question as to whether there is an attempt by the West in trying to develop diplomatic ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran through promotion of cultural exchange, using art house films as one of the most socially accessible and potent forms of art. Of course the use of film for political purpose is not a new concept. Politicians understood this concept very early on. One only needs to be reminded of the celebrated films of Leni Riefenstahl³¹ or more recently, of the post 9/11 mass media usages of the highly edited footage of war scenes serving “the economy of threat” (Bennett 127).³² Such information becomes unsettling when viewed in contrast to circuit

³¹ Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) chronicled the rise of Third Reich and Adolf Hitler to power, in clear support of the Third Reich. It included many excerpts of speeches by the Third Reich leaders, including from Hitler. She also enjoyed a personal relationship with Hitler. For further reading see: Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf* (1925). Riefenstahl, Leni. *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir* (1995).

³² For a more in depth discussion of this topic see Jill Bennett’s chapter on “Affective politics/exposé” in *Practical Aesthetics* (124-129).

festival's mandates such as "encouraging emerging talent" (Fremaux 2013).³³ Martha Buskirk's most recent scholarship on the collusion between art, *Creative Enterprise* (2012), politics and commercial gain is an eye-opener, however obvious a "matter of fact" it must be. One can imagine how irksome Martha Buskirk's arguments might be to big business which operates under the auspices of names such as Film Festivals and Auction Circuits, Art Galleries, and Biennales, when she posits:

The smooth segue between art and political intervention is just one indication of how permeable the concept of art has become in the face of recent practices. Just as there is no consensus about what art is supposed to look like in the context of the heterogeneous present, there is also no agreement on what it is supposed to do. Aesthetic pleasure might or might not be at odds with theoretical complexity or political efficacy. Nor is it always clear what advantages are to be had by designating a gesture or phenomenon art, given the many points of resemblance between proclaimed artistic acts and other strategies for political intervention, cultural critique, as well as commercial promotion (315).

Examined from Buskirk's vantage point, there is a stark difference between the affective biographical aspects stated earlier about artistic aspirations of Makhmalbaf family and the reality of how those convictions end up being represented or used. These latter assertions, as will be shown, fully apply to Alanis Obomsawin's practice as well when seen in relation to the second wave of feminist movement in North America, especially in terms of how it affected the practices of the National Film Board of Canada and its subdivision Studio D, and

³³ This phrase is quoted from Thierry Fremaux's mandate statement of Cannes Court M trage. The activities of individuals with close ties to circuit festivals, such as aforementioned Muller, and corporations such as MK2 and CB2000, have a direct impact on casting a shadow of a doubt on the authenticity of such phrases. It speaks to an apparent conflict of interest, which cannot be ignored. For the full statement of Fremaux see: <http://www.cannescourtmetrage.com/en/edito>

the ever-increasing Canadian state's stake in repairing atrocities committed under the colonial rule against the First Nations of Canada.

In the nearly past three and a half decades of Iran's history under an Islamic Religious regime – contrary to the secular state of Canada – the social and political limitations imposed on a woman filmmaker are further exacerbated with particular gender-based religious laws. Gender and rights issues in Iran, should not be conflated with those applicable to women in Canada. Women filmmakers are undoubtedly a much smaller, somewhat marginalized group in the industry of filmmaking in both countries, but the *nature* of that categorization is not to be automatically assumed as identical. It needs to be pointed out again that freely applying Western epistemologies to other cultures throughout the world takes us back to colonial arguments, as it will bring to the forefront other political machinations and interests: no one is fooled into believing that the admiration and attention given to Ai Weiwei in recent years has nothing to do with the West's attempts to besmear competing powers such as People's Republic of China, just as it is now abundantly clear that the motives of the colonizers to “educate” the colonized in Canada – in order to help them overcome their “primitive” state – was not a humanitarian motive but one aimed at subjugation (Tuhiwai Smith 25-28). Therefore it is highly problematic to apply Western concepts, in their Western context, to women in the Islamic Republic of Iran or any other non-Western society. The issue of *Hijab* is one example of the misconceptions that can arise from such freehand superimposition of ideologies: in Iran, the Islamic

religious rule of conduct governing the appearance of persons in public is not solely imposed on women, it equally applies to men, alas in a different way. Men cannot go topless in public under Islamic rule, and will be scorned when appearing sleeveless, or in shorts. In majority of Arab nations men's outfits far more closely resemble that of the women population than in the Islamic Republic of Iran. That the Western "manifest manners" may become desirable in a non-Western country, does not mean, neither is an indication that one is more advanced than the other, nor does it mean that an ethnic group is under more restriction in one culture than another (Vizenor 16). It is simply two different ways of life, a point that the First Nations of Canada have been fighting to make their colonizers understand.

In a further attempt to expose the weakness of sweeping binary concepts, primarily as deployed in a puritanical sense by the West, and in particular as applied to the issue of women filmmakers as minority or treated as unequal to men in Iran, there is an extremely critical point to be made: Iranian language, Farsi, is not a gender-based language, as opposed to the Romance languages dominant in Europe and Arabic languages of the Middle East. Farsi does not have third person pronouns *He* or *She*, and objects are not divided in two groups of Masculine or Feminine. The concept of separation of gender in language is remarkably *not* Persian to this day. It is the view of this paper that this divide in language is one of the primary sources encouraging a conscious, as well as unconscious perpetuation of binary concepts, and bifurcation of social issues as it

is an ever-present affirmation of difference in everyday life. Consider the origins of the word *man* in English:

In Old-English and Anglo-Saxon, the suffix *-man* was gender neutral: it had and retains, the same meaning as “person” today, referring to all people equally. To denote gender, it had to be qualified: a male was called a *waepman*, a female *wifman*. This gender-free use of *-man* gives us forms like chairman, fisherman, craftsman (Hughes 22).

This does not mean that women in The Islamic Republic of Iran are treated equal to men in every respect because there are no gender pronouns, neither is it making a case for such an argument in the slightest. In the same vein there are no concept in Algonquin languages for “forgiveness,” nor in the Inuit languages for “laziness”, and to transpose them onto these cultures will only serve as a self-referential critique of the observer, which incidentally is the West in both cases of Canada and the Islamic Republic of Iran (McIntosh 6). If nothing else, this concept alone serves to demonstrate the fundamental difference of how differently the world is viewed by different cultures, and the caution with which any nation should employ its socially-constructed binary tools and values in its encounters with and appraisal of other cultures.

Chapter 5

Alanis Obomsawin

The other major filmmaker in this study, identifiable with a different set of variables that ultimately define the vastly different social network of Canada, is Alanis Obomsawin. As a member of the Abenaki First Nation of Canada, Obomsawin has had to face and negotiate a different set of issues in her filmmaking career and her everyday life. While Makhmalbaf was born into war and a country in the grip of social and ideological revolution, Obomsawin had other dire and deeply rooted social issues and barriers to overcome, in comparison to Samira Makhmalbaf: not only women's suffrage in Canada was not extended to First Nations until 1960, without losing their "Indian" status, (date of Suffrage for the "white" women in Canada was 1916-18 for other provinces, with the exception of Quebec gaining which was included in 1939), but also the fact that the feminist movement did not address the non-white and First Nations women's rights until well into its third wave in the 1990's.³⁴ Then there was/is the entangled and legislative nightmares of the *Indian Act* (1876), some examples of which are: By marrying out, a woman would lose her "Indian status" and all her claims as a member of Canadian First Nation. Compulsory *Enfranchisement* (males only, at age 21) under the *Indian Act* remained enforceable until 1961 – and was not voided until the revisions under Bill C-31 in 1985 – which meant that

³⁴ For a history of Suffrage in Canada See Canadian Museum of History web page: <http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/elections/el_008_e.shtml>. Or Human Rights Canada web page: <<http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/en/browseSubjects/votingRights.asp>>.

if a woman with an “Indian status” married an *Enfranchised* male, she would also lose her status (along with her children), as in effect she was marrying out. Amendments under Bill C-31, allowed women to keep their “Indian status” if they married out and granted “status” to their children, but not to their grandchildren, in effect replacing the hitherto *Blood Quantum* rule with the “two generation cutoff clause.” There was further revision to this particular clause of the *Indian Act* in 2011 under revisions of Bill C-3 about which Pamela Palmater in *Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity* writes, “with Bill C-31 I will be entitled to both status and membership, but it will exclude my children” (28). Numerous examples of the same strain can be cited, one of which should also be mentioned: the Canadian Constitution was patriated, adopting the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as a fundamental part of it in 1982, but the last federally-operated *Residential school* in Canada was officially shut down in 1996, and it would not be until June 11, 2008 that the “wrong” policies towards the First Nations in Canada would be acknowledged by the federal government, in an apology made on “behalf of Canada” by Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Palamter 32).³⁵ For the young Obomsawin identity issues went far beyond gender inequality: she and her nation’s very existence and heritage as human beings were subjects to what the West made of them.

In the tradition of First Nations, a person is introduced by her name, as well as by her origins: Alanis Obomsawin’s last name in Algonquin languages

³⁵ *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*: see Canada’s Department of Justice web page: <<http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/just/06.html>>.

means “pathfinder” and her *Abenaki* ancestors are known as “People of the First Light.” Obomsawin was born in 1932 in New Hampshire in the Abenaki Territory. At nearly 6 months old, her family moved back to the Abenaki First nation reserve *Odanak*, located in the Quebec province of Canada. It was there that she would learn about her roots and the traditions of her people from her aunt Alanis who showed her how to weave baskets, and her mother’s cousin Théophile Panadis who “taught her the old ways of the Western Abenaki, along with the songs and stories that would become a central part of later work.” Things would change in 1941 when her family moved to Trois-Rivières, located only 48 kilometers from the Odanak Reserve, where they were singled out as the only *Native* family. Obomsawin recalls: “that’s when the trouble began. I attended a school in the town’s slums, that’s when they told me that I was poor, that I was dirty, that we were savages” (Lewis 7-9). She lost her father at age 12, three years after the move to Trois-Rivières. That tragic loss, along with the hardships she had suffered at Trois-Rivières, served as the decisive catalyst that pushed her to rebellion against prejudice and racism:

My life changed when I was 12 ... My father died and I decided I wasn't going to get beat up at school every day by the other girls in the classroom. It was just a decision – just like that I said, 'no more'. And that's all there was to it. It stopped the next day. (Monk 60)

That fighting spirit and the realization of the prejudice and racism, as well as the imperative to act against it, became the central theme in Obomsawin’s life and work. She finally left Trois-Rivières at the age of 22, armed with a wealth of traditions and Oral knowledge of her people. In the late 1950s, she moved to

Montréal where she soon found her way into a circle of artists, poets, writers, musicians and filmmakers, including Leonard Cohen, Mort Rosengarten, Vitorio, Derek May, and John Max, among others. She remembers them as “very cultured people, and I learned a lot from them, their way of being” (Lewis 24). It was in such an environment that she emerged as a singer, and she started to participate in folk music festival circuit around Canada, as well as performed in public places such as museums, schools, and prisons. Obomsawin had begun to follow in the footsteps of the Anishinaabeg, the Algonquin speaking people of Wabanaki, and their oral traditions of storytelling taught her by the aforementioned Théophile Panadis.³⁶ The primary motivation behind her activity in those days was to help revive a pride in Native children, and to promote the Native oral histories: “Obomsawin's first love centres on Aboriginal youth” (Steven 176). Almost six decades later, at the age of 81, she would still prove that love by making the award winning film *Hi-Ho Mistahey* (2013), centering on First Nations children’s right to education. In 1965, a documentary on her performances and her social activism produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) brought her to the attention of two National Film Board producers, Wolf Koenig and Bob Verrall, and earned her an employment opportunity with the NFB in the capacity of a “native” advisor to documentaries Koenig and Verrall intended to produce (Lewis 29). In parallel, Obomsawin continued with other personal projects

³⁶ The Wabanaki Confederacy (*Wabenaki, Wobanaki* - translated roughly as “People of the First Light”) are a First Nations and Native American confederation of five principal Nations: the Mi’kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki, and Penobscot. Anishinaabe or Anishinaabeg (plural) is the autonym often used by the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Algonquin peoples. They all speak closely related *Anishinaabemowin*/Anishinaabe, of the Algonquin language family.

including multimedia educational kits for the Manowan and L'Hawat tribes in 1967. Drawn into the world of film as a result of working at NFB, which soon coincided with the NFB's initiative under Kathleen Shannon to create *Studio D*, she went on to produce her first film in 1971, *Christmas at Moose Factory*.³⁷ *Studio D*, and the production opportunities – from providing the needed equipment to funding, to distribution – it facilitated, became for Obomsawin what *Makhmalbaf Film House* was for Samira Makhmalbaf.³⁸ For the next 22 years Studio D was in operation – before federal budget cuts and internal restructuring at NFB forced its termination in 1996 – and long after it, to present day, NFB would remain the major source of funding and distribution of Obomsawin's film production as a First Nation documentary filmmaker/director. To date (2014), Obomsawin has produced over 40 documentaries on First Nations issues.

In the case of Obomsawin, the connection between *film* as the chief medium of choice for her artistic practice, and the First Nations oral tradition of preserving history and culture, is one of poetic justice.³⁹ *Film* as an artistic medium, as well the science and technology that its creation required (for the recording of both sound and image) is a wholly Western (non-“Indian”) phenomenon. Produced as a *documentary*, film is indisputably a recording and

³⁷ Kathleen Shannon OC (1935-1998) was a Canadian film director and producer, best known as the founder and executive producer of Studio D of the National Film Board of Canada. In 1986, Kathleen Shannon received the Order of Canada for her work at Studio D and her contribution to the feminist cause.

³⁸ Studio D, was the first government-funded film studio dedicated to women filmmakers in the world.

³⁹ In addition to having been a singer-songwriter, and storyteller, Obomsawin is also a trained engraver and practiced it for 25 years with exhibitions in North America and Europe.

preservation of *oral, visual, and gestural* attributes of life's events and the conditions. Ironically those were the very attributes, by virtue of which the colonizers dismissed the histories and traditions of First Nations. In that sense, film is one the most felicitous of all the Western inventions that is now in the service of the First Nations cause: it has turned the tenets of European colonizers' ideologies, – that of the absence of a written history as proof for a lack of civilization – used to justify their actions on themselves; utterly exposing their illogical and insupportable flaws in dismissing Oral as Savage and by extension the insidiousness of the colonial “grand narrative.” Through the technology of the recording of sound and image, film has validated Oral traditions. A well-documented recording of images and sounds (film) of an event is treated as substantial evidence, admissible in a court of law (ironically the “Western” court of law), and has the power to override a written, sworn and signed account of it. Film-as-evidence was used in a court of law, as early as 1929 in the United States and 1938 in England, and post 9/11 almost every aspect of daily life is automatically recorded as moving image (surveillance) for such purposes (Michaelis 186).⁴⁰ The agents that condemned the Oral/Visual traditions, went on to invent how to record it, and by giving it physicality, validated it, while utterly nullifying one of the most founding arguments for colonization. Film would also forever make the colonizers' claims to the contrary impossible: *Hollywood* depictions of the “Indian” as savages will remain as condemning evidence for as

⁴⁰ Think of the Boston marathon bombings in April 2013. The whole case was established, and tried based on recordings of the surveillance cameras and cell phone recorded conversations.

long as humanity exists, and in the hands of First Nations activist groups in diverse and colorful social roles such as that of *A Tribe Called Red*, those Hollywood film segments create a jarring effect while the unsuspecting “white” crowd realized what they are dancing to.⁴¹ In Hollywood Indian film narratives, the colonizers have unwittingly documented their *state of mind* towards the “Indian,” and no sugarcoating of it will ever be able to reverse what colonialism was/is about: the “imperialism’s outpost, the fort and port of imperial outreach” (Tuhiwai Smith 23). Those depictions of the “imaginary Indian” that Marcia Crosby speaks of are not a phenomenon of the past, Hollywood’s latest contribution was *The Lone Ranger* (2013), neither is there any sign of the cessation of the West’s infatuation with such imagery (20). Gerald Vizenor also speaks to this chronic pattern of Western mind:

Michael Blake must have been cued to continue the simulations in his novel, *Dances with Wolves*.⁴² “There were Pawnee, the most terrible of all the tribes,” he wrote. “They saw with unsophisticated but ruthlessly efficient eyes...And if it was determined that an object should cease to live, the Pawnee saw to its death with psychotic precision. The motion picture of the same name counts on the bankable manifest manners of the audience to associate with the adventures and discoveries of an errant cavalry officer who counters the simulations of savagism in *his* stories. The tiresome tantivy of tried and true horses with no shadows, and the Western tune of manifest manners, is the most serious deliverance of civilization ever concocted in the movies or literature (6).

⁴¹ *A Tribe Called Red* is a Canadian electronic music group, employing elements of First Nations music and Powwow, in conjunction with video installations of repetitive film segments edited from Hollywood “Indian” films of 1920s to present day, among other imagery attesting to the common stereotyping of the “Indian” by Western cultures.

⁴² *Dances With Wolves* was a 1990 film directed by Kevin Costner: Tig Productions/Magnetic Intl. U.S.A. 1990. DVD-ROM.

A bit of history clarifies this point further: for a people to prove a history and a culture of their own, there had to exist a well documented, *written* account of it, in line with the Eurocentric notions and literary canons of the time. The absence of literature meant the absence of a “cultured” society with a history. In other words, a nation without literature, a written history, a well-documented written account of their cultural practices, achievements and theories, was not a nation at all in the binary logic of European colonizers. This was the starting point of the de-humanization of the “Indian” to savages, one of the many ways of the West to create *otherness*: once a people were made *invisible* by having stripped them of history, culture, right to self-governance, and humanity, they could also be stripped of any human claim including the right to ownership of *Land* (Tuhiwai Smith 35-40).⁴³ It is not hard to follow that trajectory to the 19th century ideologues of the *Manifest Destiny* in the United States. Film, in its contemporary form in the 21st century, as shown by Obomsawin (among many other First Nations filmmakers), is serving to permanently preserve the traditions of oral cultures, re-built the ones lost, and gather and re-unify a divided and scattered people. What better tool for a storyteller like Obomsawin than a camera? The “master’s tool” can indeed be used to bring the “master’s house down” (Tuhiwai Smith 19).⁴⁴

⁴³ This is among the arguments presented in the post-colonial text *The Empire Writes Back* (2002), and which Tuhiwai Smith refers to in her text *Decolonizing methodologies*, 2008.

⁴⁴ Here, as opposed to Andre Lorde’s quote used by Tuhiwai Smith, I am arguing that the Master’s tools - in the case of Obomsawin, Film - can bring down the Master’s house. This is of course not a negation of Lorde’s concept, but taking it a step further.

With that slice of history of the “Indian” in mind, consider what the numerous *Treaties* and the Wampum belts that recorded their proceedings and decisions could mean today if the event and negotiations surrounding them were recorded in film, as opposed to their written versions on paper in the words of the Western “civilized” colonizers, on behalf of the “Indian” who could hardly understand the legal cul-de-sac they were intended to be. Film, in particular in the genre of documentary and hybrid documentary is a powerful tool for the exercise of agency as it embodies the spirit of the witnesses to an event, and irrevocably ties the presence of particular individuals to the proceedings of it. In that sense it is like a Wampum belt that served as proof of an event, and an agreement to have taken place. Both the Wampum belt and the film forever implicate all who were present, and extend that presence in time. They both *record* without using the *written* word. Obomsawin, and indeed Makhmalbaf, have been doing just that, turning “matters of facts” to “matters of concern” by recording and bearing witness to what mattered enough to be *cared* for.⁴⁵ They show the perpetual flux between matters of fact and matters of concern in the prismatic forms of activism, de-colonization, *survivance*, de-historization, social commentary, and art.⁴⁶ Other ironies exist which further illuminate the profiles of both the Canadian state and Obomsawin alike: Obomsawin is a recipient of the *Order of Canada* – a colonial expression of honoring merit of highest order bestowed on a citizen, handed down

⁴⁵ *Care*, “Sorge” in German, is term borrowed from Heidegger, as used in *Being and Time* (1927).

⁴⁶ *Survivance* is a neologism among many coined by Gerald Vizenor, from combining survival and resistance, aiming to disrupt and expose the reader’s preconceptions.

from the monarchies and colonial powers that caused the demise and sorrows of the First Nations to begin with – yet, she has resisted to be “assimilated” at the core, through *survivance*. Obomsawin’s career is a testament to the First Nations’ commitment to independence of voice, self-determination and unmediated sovereignty, and enacts Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s fight towards decolonization:

Indigenous Peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways...there are numerous oral stories which tell of what it means, what it feels like, to be present while your history is erased before your eyes, dismissed as irrelevant, ignored or rendered as the lunatic ravings of the drunken old people. The negation of Indigenous views of history was a critical part of asserting colonial ideology (28-29).

Alanis Obomsawin’s more than 40 documentary films addressing the issues of the First Nations Peoples in Canada, and a career that exceeds 35 years speaks to the desire of telling her people’s stories. She directed her most recent films *The People of Kattawpiskak River* (2012) and *Hi-Ho Mistahey* (2013) at age 81.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This film exposes the deplorable state of education on the reserves such as Attawapiskat First Nation, and centers on Shannen Koostachin’s activism that lead to Shannen’s Dream movement after her death at the age of 15. Obomsawin interrupted the filming of *Hi-Ho Mistahey* to make *The People of Kattawpiskak River*, as the housing issue on that reserve turned into a crisis in 2012. For a detailed discussion of the film see Active History web site: <http://activehistory.ca/2014/02/hi-ho-mistahey-shannens-dream-youth-activism-and-the-struggle-for-indigenous-schooling/>

Chapter 6

Two Films & Two Institutions

Having discussed Makmalbaf and Obomsawin, positioning them in their respective social networks and identifying some of the primary connectors directly linking them to other actors within their society, this paper can now turn its attention to the two particular films, as well as to the primary institutions as actants without the support of which the films could not have materialized in their present form.

Film in the context of Actor-Network Theory becomes a multifaceted agent, capable of agency, as well as being an object or a tool for the use of other actants within the social Network in which it was created: it has agency in that (like a Wampum belt) it is a recording of an event or a story, it reveals information about its makers and the society it was made in, and it has both embodied and disembodied attributes. On the other hand, film becomes a tool in the hands of corporations and political groups that rather ignore its agency, superimpose onto it their own, and are interested in how they can use it to self-serving ends (recall MK2, CB2000, Riefenstahl, Hollywood, and so on), also like a Wampum belt in the wrong hands or behind a glass in a museum. Film as any entity and as an agent in a network finds its meaning and function in relation to other actors and agents while it also affects and is affected by the biography/profile of the creators (as well as that of its particular viewer), history, individuals, and institutions that had a part in shaping its content and production.

As is evident, *institutions* have also more than one dimension to them, and are affected and changed by other agents acting on them. It is with that attitude that Samira Makhmalbaf's *Blackboards* and Alanis Obomsawin's *The People of Kattawapistak River* are analyzed: not only from an auteurist, or formalist approach common to film critique and analysis, but also in relation to biographies, policies, and institutions such as NFB and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in their case.

Before proceeding to discuss the films, it must be pointed out that the analysis presented is by no means a criticism of either director's approach to filmmaking or their artistic consideration. Once again, the two films used in this study are seen as *actors* in themselves and this study is interested in them as they fulfill another layer of either director's profile, as well as those of the cultural institutions and states that were part of the process of their manifestation as cultural products. If a critical appraisal of the films and their directors was necessary however, it is the opinion of this paper that they are among the more socially concerned of directors and consequently the films are among the cultural products that can help make a difference in their society for they have imbedded in their content a consciousness towards humanity and promote an ethics that respects life. Therefore, the analysis that follows should be viewed under the rubrics of ANT and the overarching claim that films are products of a network, not to be misconstrued as subjective criticism targeting either director or film.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ This point was at length discussed in chapter 3.

The aforementioned films are quintessential works of Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin, respectively. Although the works of Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin fall under the two different modes of filmmaking, namely documentary and art-house, they share many similarities, as the creative impulses of both directors are informed by and conceived of social issues, as well as the directors' personal life experiences. Foremost among the common stylistic and thematic elements identifiable in the practices of the two directors are: a persistent interest in the social as thematics, a cinematographic realism and naturalistic mise-en-scène that do not favor special effects or any other embellishments for mass-market consideration, limited use of professional actors, the use of *affect* as a tool to capture the audience – an activist element that is at the heart of their production – and a penchant for documentary-style storytelling: though Makhmalbaf's films are classified as neo-realist art-house cinema, I would argue that they would be better identified as hybrid documentaries, docu-dramas or docu-fiction.⁴⁹ There are no films in the oeuvre of Makhmalbaf that do not address existing or factual social issues as a core subjects, and *Blackboards* is an arch example that supports this claim. That Makhmalbaf's films are classified as art-house fiction has more to do with the politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran, than with the content or technical aspects of them.

Thematically *Blackboards* and *The People of Kattawapistak River* are

⁴⁹ This style of film can be traced back to the works of the American documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty (director of the *Nanook of the North*, 1922), to practices of Craig Hight and Ohad Landesman today.

almost identical: they are both about children's education and welfare; atrocities of war and the inhumane use of chemical weapons; the negligence of State to look after its people; deplorable conditions of life that take away human dignity, rendering a person invisible and disposable; and the struggle of those people to cope. In short, both films expose the startling lack of *respect for life*. Conversely, the lack of the *voice* of the institutional agents the films are *implicating* (i.e. Canadian government in Obomsawin's film, and the states of Iran or Iraq in Makhmalbaf's) might be troubling, as neither of the two films allow for counter-arguments of the agents they reprove of.⁵⁰ Both films fight an illusive disembodied "they" or "them," who are absent. The viewer can feel the presence of some negative agent, but the negative force is not represented in actuality or voice. What matters for both directors is to expose the inhumane and unacceptable conditions to which people are reduced in order to subsist. This absence of the antagonist's voice or allusion to a disembodied "evil" becomes a powerful *affective tool* provoking an intense emotional response to the *victims'* cause. Affect, in Baumgarten's definition is an immersive "sensori-emotional experience" that can heighten our experience of the world we inhabit through the five human senses (Bennett 2-6). Whatever rationalizing arguments there may be for the use of *affect* as a tool in film, it cannot avoid complications. To begin with it re-enforces and encourages polarization by confining the viewer in a binary

⁵⁰ It should be noted that what is intended by the "voice" is the actual presentation of Canadian state officials in the films, presenting their side of the argument. Obomsawin's films are government funded, but that fact should not be translated into presupposed conclusions about the state's position/voice on the matter presented.

mode of thinking due to forgone and irreversible conclusions, when it unilaterally identifies the opposition as a malicious singular source of oppression. This is why the lack of voice of the supposed “aggressor” is problematic. Affect may produce a certain discrediting overall effect that may backfire and create a response opposite to the filmmaker’s intent: once the emotional response to the affective imagery cools and the rational mind takes over, the viewer might realize the vacuum of evidence, and further become aware that her/his sympathy was being solicited by a one-sided argument. In the end, the viewer might feel violated by being subjected to a traumatic experience they were not warned of.⁵¹ Further, *affective imagery* – such as real children distraught and crying, as in the opening scenes of Obomsawin’s film – places the viewer in the position of a helpless witness, stripped of all powers of intervention, in an act that is unassailably distant and/or in the past, giving rise to a feeling of *Resentment*. In *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche explains this process:

Every sufferer, in fact, searches instinctively for a cause of his suffering; to put it more exactly, a doer, – to put it still more precisely, a sentient *responsible* doer, – in brief, something living, on which, either actually or in effigy, he can on any pretext vent his emotions (91).

Affect encourages just such behavior as humans naturally respond to it, and does so at the expense of reducing the complexities of an event to a single responsible source, actor, or actant. It is a mode of antagonism and inciting, rather than one of

⁵¹ Another example of this argument can also be found among the current “Trigger Warning” debates in academia to warn the reader/spectator of potential associations that may be triggered by the event they are about to participate in, or subjected to. See for example: <<http://entropymag.org/on-trigger-warnings-part-i-in-the-creative-writing-classroom/>>

seeking understanding, cooperation, or resolution. Lastly, it is effective only on the viewers who have a propensity for binary world-views, or if not, those who can be manipulated to acquire it. Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin, perhaps use affect because they know the power of affective and emotional imagery. A Wampum Belt can once again be compared to a film in this context: it records both sides of an event equally, and not just a singular view harbored by either side. What is at stake when a film engages in a one-sided argument through the heavy use of the artillery of affective imagery, is that it can in the end enervate the indisputable “matters of concern” it was trying to express: it reduces the matters of concern into matters of fact, and “care” into grievance (a la Latour).

Expanding on the classification of the oeuvres of Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin, I would like to add two points. The first relates to the difference between the State regulations in Canada and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the severity of repercussions of not following them, and the second, to a prevailing mode of social and cultural interaction in Iran that prefers *implying* to *bluntly* stating a point, or what Sennett categorizes as a *subjunctive* rather than *declarative* mode (Sennett 123). With regard to the first point, the rules of filmmaking in Iran are set in place by the *Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance*, and must be observed if a film is to be approved for distribution. Further, there is the fear of severe repercussions, persecution, imprisonment, or worse, if the contents of a film take the form of political dissent. It is important to

acknowledge, of course, that *censure* happens everywhere, even in Canada.⁵² But the severity of its enforcement has a direct relationship to the degree of the incompatibility of what is being said or done to the established cultural values and state's policies, laws and regulations.⁵³ Political activism is a precarious occupation in many countries, democratic or not, and the safeguarding of individual rights and freedoms is not simply a matter of including them in the constitution: one can think back to the events of the G20 in Toronto to verify that individual rights and freedoms can be suspended anywhere, be it Canada or the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁵⁴ Makhmalbaf is aware of placing herself in a precarious position by choosing to use her films as cultural commentary, just as Edward Snowden is by exposing his government's unconstitutional activities at home and abroad.⁵⁵ The issue of activism is a separate matter from that of filmmaking, and gender. Conflating them may serve to create false rationalizations similar to the use of *affective imagery*, and it can seldom provide a substantial explanation.

The second point raised as to the tendency of the Iranians towards a

⁵² Some examples of films banned in Canada are: *24 Heures ou Plus* (1973), *Not a Love Story: A Film about Pornography* (1981). See NFB web site: <<https://www.nfb.ca/historique/1970-1979>>.

⁵³ One of the most recent cases is the Edward Joseph Snowden (b. June 1983) issue of leakage of classified documents on media outlets (2013). See: Harding. "Writing the Snowden Files: 'The paragraph began to self-delete.'" *The Guardian*. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/20/edward-snowden-files-nsa-gchq-luke-harding>>.

⁵⁴ In 2010, during the G20 in Toronto, civilians were "unlawfully arrested and/or detained. See: Perkel, "G20 Report blasts Police for 'Unlawful' arrests, Civil Rights Violations." *The Toronto Star*. <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/g20-report-blasts-police-for-unlawful-arrests-civil-rights-violations/article4179372/>>.

⁵⁵ Edward Snowden sounded the alarm on the US National Security Agency's (among others) spying on civilian in cyberspace and through other channels, such as cell phone text messages and/or conversations. For further reading see the following article: <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/20/edward-snowden-files-nsa-gchq-luke-harding>>

subjunctive mode of interaction has its roots in the cultural make up of Iran. Social interaction and communication in Iran prefers open, indirect, malleable, and negotiable expressions as opposed to abrupt, on-the-nose declarations, however true: being blunt in Iran is quite often immediately translated into hostility or simply impoliteness. This means that the use of euphemisms, metaphors, and implying the intention rather than stating it outright, is second nature to Iranians, one of the first things a Persian is taught, and so it is commonly practiced and understood in everyday conversations by almost everyone. Further, *poetry* and *poets* are among the higher, if not the highest, prides of Iranian culture, especially those that are metaphysical, spiritual and transcendental in their tone. A vast majority of the multitudes of adages and proverbs from poetry have found their way into the everyday life of Iran and to be able to produce well suited metaphors and euphemisms in conversation is considered a sign of respect to others, good bringing up, and good education. Samira Makhmalbaf behaves according to that cultural framework so her movies are naturally inclined to suggestiveness, rather than assertions or insinuations, even when the subject of her film - *Blackboards* - is the chemical bombings of the town of Halabja during the Iran-Iraq War: a bomb's shell fragment is shown, people lay dead nearby, but the actual atrocity referred to, and its magnitude both remain undisclosed.

The most sticking resemblance of the two films are not to be found in their scripts, cinematography, or their themes, but in a conviction that both Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin share as women directors; that is, to choose to

exercise their agency as filmmakers to make films that have at times a subtle yet distinctive activist mandate. That activism has many layers: by the simple act of engaging in a male dominant industry, they defy that dominance, foreground women's social rights, and by extension challenge the concept of gender as synonymous with limitations, inequality, and a social barrier. If they are vying with other men in a heavily male-dominant environment, they are not necessarily placing much importance on the preconceptions that are part and parcel of minority discourse. Their continued practice is a formal and absolute act of resistance to conformity. Further their activism does not stop with the issues of women's rights, but spreads as a voice against all forms of social injustice. Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin's films are sensitively shot, advocating and pushing for diverse causes in whatever form, technique, or aid available to them, and with a focus on what *they* need to do as directors and representatives of their gender, regardless of the critique they may receive. That is, Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin have in some way or another come to the realization that *agency* is inherently a given attribute (perhaps close to the way that Elizabeth Grosz formulates women's agency in the new materialist thread of third wave feminism), and it can be exercised in the most dire of circumstances, to negotiate, or circumvent whatever the limitations an Institution or a State might impose, and at the same time be astute enough to secure whatever aid they may be willing to provide (Grosz 139-158).

The Government of Canada on the other hand, – whatever it may be held accountable to, for its past or present management, understanding, or lack of sensitivity towards the First Nations, or Women’s rights issues – is increasingly acknowledging its “transgressions” and seeks to amend them. For one, it has proved vitally beneficial and has been supportive of Alanis Obomsawin’s career as a First Nations woman filmmaker through NFB.⁵⁶ It has also shown that support in the ultimate form of recognition by decorating Obomsawin with one of Canada’s highest and most prestigious honors, an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2001. Such actions, however small a remedy they may be in comparison to the colossal wrongs the state has committed, such as the Residential School program, at least serve to indicate that those wrongs are *now* acknowledged, and that Canada is moving in the direction of endorsing diversity.

These are evidence to the many facets of an Institution/State as an agent within a social network, just as there are many facets to the individual as a social node. Likewise, the Islamic Republic of Iran and its institution, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, have extended the same opportunities to Makhmalbaf as they do to anyone else, of whatever gender.

⁵⁶ Another major Canadian government initiative was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in 2008 to investigate human rights abuses associated with the Residential Schools System. For further information see TRC web site: <<http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3>>

Conclusion

This paper has deliberately followed a non-categorical, prismatic, open-ended and “subjunctive” discourse to avoid regression into the Western binary canons. It has argued the limitations of worldviews that are dichotomous at their core. This is not a new idea; variations of it can be found in almost all disciplines covered under the umbrella of Science, Medicine and Humanities, and under many different names, among which are Relational theory, Complexity theory, Assemblage theory, and of course Actor-Network theory. The principle around which such theories are formed is the realization of the ultimate unknowability of all the actors/agents/actants in a given Network, which is itself an actor in another larger network and so on. Therefore, epistemologies and ontologies that are based on unitary or binary principles cannot provide sufficient description of the dynamics at work within complex networks; instead they end up labeling that which they cannot explain as being extraordinary, exceptional, or the work of an auteur-God. It must be made clear that binary approaches have their own function and importance, but they are limited in what they purport. Like niches in a much larger and more complex structure of a cathedral, binary theories soon reveal to be part of larger network of knowledge. Understanding this concept in analysis of social formations and interactions, and addressing the exigencies of the world that is inexorably moving towards globalization is vital. Though globalization is still in its early stages, it is an unavoidable fact that cannot be ignored, and the more complex and connected our world becomes the more incompatible and

counterproductive binary approaches prove to be as a mode of understanding. The most recent scholarship in Urban Sociology stresses the need to step away from dualities in a global setting in favor of adopting “frontier” thinking. The Dutch-American sociologist Saskia Sassen describes *global cities* as *frontier zones*:

[a] space that makes possible kinds of engagements for which there are no clear rules. The resolution of these encounters can become the occasion for playing out conflicts that cannot be easily engaged in other spaces...Novel types of actors can emerge in this assembling, often with the option to access domains once exclusive to older established actors, notably national states (389).

The “frontier” thinking Sassen promotes is also found in the scholarship of the American sociologist Richard Sennett in his differentiation between *borders* and *boundaries*:

A boundary is a relatively inert edge; population thins out at this sort of edge and there is little exchange among creatures. A border is a more active edge, as at the shoreline dividing ocean and land; this is a zone of intense biological activity, a feeding ground for animals, a nutrient zone for plants (79).

In human social settings, this division into boundaries remains a normal and accepted practice. “Indian” Reservations are one such model, as was Pruitt-Igoe urban housing project, where there are palpable cutoff lines between the inside and the out. These models are prone to failure and eventual extinction, as they become increasingly isolated, inert systems that discourage day-to-day cultural interactions, and perpetually promote a gazing over the fence attitude, a knowing at a distance, and antipathy. Actors in border conditions are less active and can have lesser “connectors” to outside actors. Sennett does not leave the concept of

“border-condition” in a theoretical realm and suggests concrete social behavioral precepts that could be incorporated into everyday social practices to promote “boundaries” and “open spaces.” He suggests a mode of social behavior that is subjunctive, dialogic and empathic in approach, as opposed to one that is declarative, dialectic, and sympathetic. While the first set encourages openness and dissolves “boundaries” by a curiosity towards others, the latter promotes dualities, “borders” and feeling sympathy for the distant *other* (22-82). Sennett, in a preliminary lecture discussing his upcoming book, *The Open City*, links the policy-making interests of capitalism and power (i.e. Canada & Iran) to the “border-condition,” or “closed city” model as it helps create predictable and therefore more easily controllable environments through stringent laws, authority, division and control (Sennett, CRASSH 2013).⁵⁷

Sennett’s “edge-conditions” are in line with Sassen’s concept of “frontier;” they both promote “open” social systems, and both correspond and complement Latour’s Actor-Network Theory. While it is highly unlikely that any of these scholars consider their theories “the” explanation to social issues, they have problematized unitary or binary approaches and worldviews. Makhmalbaf, Obomsawin, their films, auteurist theories, diversity, ANT, ethnicity, Canada, Islamic Republic of Iran, NFB, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic guidance, are *all* among a whole host of other variables: they are *all* actors within social

⁵⁷ Date of the publication of Sennett’s book *The Open City* is not yet determined, but a PDF of *The Open City*, can be viewed at Sennett’s web site:
<<http://www.richardsennett.com/site/SENN/UploadedResources/The%20Open%20City.pdf>>.

networks, capable of exercising agency towards other actants, shaping and reshaping social networks and spheres within which they exist and/or interact with.

Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin are “auteurs” simply in the sense that they *do* exercise their agencies as actors within the social networks they live in, as opposed to being inert. So do other agents such as NFB and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. It is *how* one chooses to practice their agency that is important, not *what* social group they end up in; this is what has to be stressed, not vice versa. A binary investigation can prove useful as a starting point (as in deconstructive analyses), but it must evolve beyond its dualities if it is to be truly inclusive.

Makhmalbaf and Obomsawin have in practice mirrored Sennett’s model of subjunctive, dialogic and empathic interaction, and have proved its effectiveness by having risen to national and international acclaim through their works. It is a grossly reductive reasoning, as it is disrespectful, to see them merely as representatives of marginalized groups from within a “victim” position, and not as powerful agents that have understood and navigated the social fabric, which they are part of and portray. Auteur-filmmakers in the modern or French New wave sense of the term, defining an artist as a highly gifted individual in direct relationship with the higher powers of the universe, is increasingly a meaningless sentiment in a networked and globalized world.

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