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Arabian Nightmare

It would be easy, and tempting, to hail *Kandahar* as a masterpiece without even seeing it: It's a foreign film, it takes on social issues, it's directed by Iranian master

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Mohsen Makhmalbaf, it speaks to the causes of our war on terror and first hit U.S. shores right as the city of Kandahar fell to the Northern Alliance. When *Time's* Richard Corliss, who presumably has seen the film, named it the best of 2001, he cited many of the aforementioned factors, in addition to the film's visual beauty.

And the film is astonishingly well-made, especially when you learn that the cast consisted almost entirely of amateurs, the production was guerrilla-style and Makhmalbaf had to constantly wear a disguise as a result of all the death threats he was getting.

Makhmalbaf's last film to play L.A. screens (though not his most recent), *A Moment of Innocence*, which showed the Henry Jagloms and Lars Von Trierses of the world how a self-referential indie film should be done, was one of the cinematic highlights of 2000, and this one doesn't disappoint on a qualitative level.

It's also very accessible to those unaccustomed to Iranian cinema, as almost half the dialogue is in English and the story plays like a feminist's *Apocalypse Now*: An expatriated Afghan journalist (Nelofer Pazira, who attempted a similar journey in real life) must journey from Iran into Afghanistan, and the heart of darkness that is Taliban-controlled Kandahar, to stop her despondent sister from committing suicide on the night of the 20th century's last eclipse.

Yet there is one significant and frustrating detail about the film: Having established the premise, the film ends before the journey does. It isn't possible to spoil the ending, as there really isn't one; the quest simply

continues out of our sight. It's as if *The Fellowship of the Ring* were titled *Mordor* and had no guaranteed sequels.

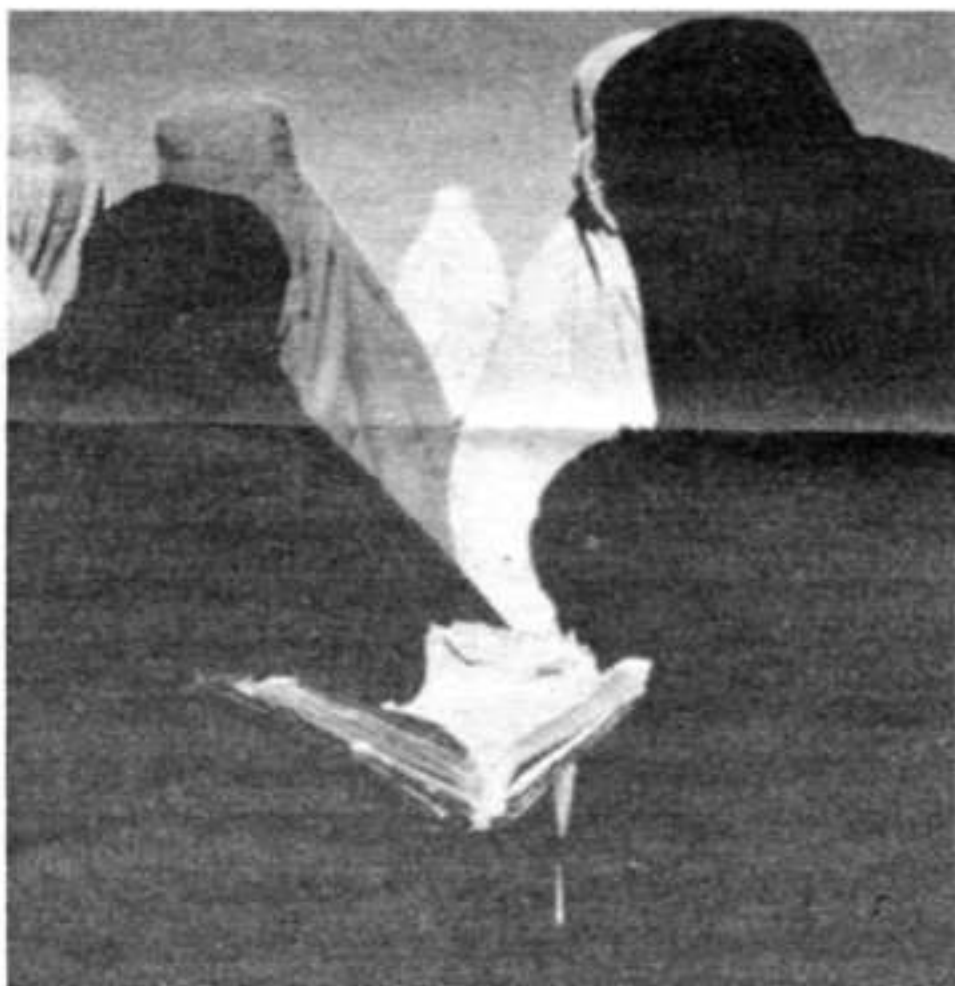
Perhaps to one more familiar with Iranian cinema, an ending might be implied, but proving that any definite solution is implicit in the work is a challenge on a par with explaining *Mulholland Drive's* ending. (Thus, many critics proclaim both films to be brilliant, simply because it's easier to believe an art-house filmmaker has a grand master plan than that he ran out of time or money.)

That said, *Kandahar* is still a film worth your time, and if you know going into it that there's no closure, it'll give you all the more freedom to enjoy what is there. Thanks to recent news, we all know about the tyranny of the burka, which masks women head-to-toe and causes them to resemble large pepper pots. We also have some idea that, as one character puts it, "weapons are the only modern thing in Afghanistan."

Makhmalbaf made the film before September 2001, so he was forced to cover some ground that has since been well-trodden upon. It's in the details that the film really shines. Among the characters escorting our heroine are a young boy (Sadou Teymouri) kicked out of religious school for, among other things, not giving the correct word-for-word definition of a Kalashnikov rifle; an African-American "doctor" (Hassan Tantai) hiding under a fake beard and working with only the most basic medical knowledge of the average Westerner, thus making him an expert by Afghan standards; and a one-handed hustler who scams prosthetic legs from relief workers for resale. All are essentially playing themselves.

The most significant stretch required by an actor occurred when a local mullah who disagreed with his government's use of military force agreed to play a stricter, pro-Taliban mullah. Of the actors, only Pazira, Tantai and Teymouri are even credited in any official capacity (and recent reports allege that Tantai may in fact be a terrorist hiding behind an alias); the rest presumably seek anonymity to protect themselves.

Then there are the images of children being told not to pick up dolls, since they might be booby-trapped to explode; or the scene in which a whole crowd of amputees on crutches set off as fast as they can toward a series of slowly descending parachutes containing mechanical legs. At that moment, you don't know whether to laugh, cry or wonder what drugs someone must have slipped you. Then you realize it's simply a reenactment of a weekly occurrence, and all you can do is praise the director for bringing such absurd tragedy to the world's attention. ■



Kandahar

Written, directed and edited by Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Starring Nelofer Pazira, Hassan Tantai and Sadou Teymouri. Opens Friday.