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Author(s)	John Mount
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The Apple/Sib/ La Pomme

Iran/France 1997

Director	Cast
Samirah Makhmalbaf	Massoumeh Naderi
Screenplay	Zahra Naderi
Mohsen Makhmalbaf	Ghorban Ali-Naderi
Director of Photography	Azizeh Mohamadi
Ebrahim Ghafouri	Zahra Sagharisaz
Editor	Amir Hossein Khosrojerdi
Mohsen Makhmalbaf	
©MK2 Productions & Makhmalbaf Productions	Certificate
Assistant Directors	tbc
Marzieh Meshkini	Distributor
Akbar Meshkini	Artificial Eye Film Company
Sound	tbc feet
Behrouz Shahamat	tbc minutes
	In Colour
	Subtitles

Concerned families in a poor district of Teheran, Iran, petition the director of welfare about the Naderi family. The parents, a 65-year-old unemployed man and his blind wife, have virtually imprisoned Zahra and Massoumeh, their 12-year-old twin daughters. The girls are illiterate, unwashed and profoundly lacking in social skills. They are taken into care temporarily while their welfare is assessed.

The parents plead for custody of their children, promising to change their ways. The girls are returned with strict instructions on their upbringing from a woman social worker. The father initially makes an effort to teach housework to the girls, but locks them up again when he goes shopping. During a visit, the social worker finds the girls incarcerated. When their father returns, she sends the girls out to play and locks him behind his front door, handing him a saw and telling him to cut the door's bars if he wants freedom.

The girls steal ices from a young ice-cream vendor (a sympathetic neighbour pays for them). They encounter a small boy who jerks an apple on a string in front of them from his upstairs bedroom. They return to their father who reluctantly gives them money to buy apples. The girls meet and play with two sisters. After a trip to an old watch-seller they all return to their father's house and set him free. He leaves the house with the social worker's approval to buy the girls watches. Their blind mother stumbles out into the street and grasps the same apple the boy dangles before her.

Samirah Makhmalbaf's impeccable feature-film debut is a witty and precociously intelligent docudrama whose focus is fixed firmly on its subject rather than on its making. (Self-reflexiveness is becoming all-too common in contemporary Iranian films.) The 18-year-old director was fascinated by the media coverage of the Naderi family and their imprisoned children and contacted them immediately. This being film-friendly Iran, she was able to involve all members of the family, various neighbours and the authorities (as well as several members of her own family) in a fictional, semi-improvised recreation of

the twins' experience that was shot in a couple of weeks while they were still in the process of acclimatising to the outside world. And although her father, director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, collaborated as editor and scriptwriter, the film is very much her own.

Perhaps because the writing of the script followed rather than preceded each day's filming, the performances are relaxed, natural and strikingly unaffected (especially the children), even when the characters – such as Ghorban Ali-Naderi, the father – are dissembling. His overprotection of the girls never quite squares with their neglected state. But his simplistic, slightly self-serving devotion to the patriarchal Islamic codes he grew up with and his penurious dependence on handouts and small payments in return for prayers (he is jocularly referred to as “the Mullah” at one point) explain much. His blind wife, who resembles a shrouded rag doll coming apart at the seams, is an even sorrier sight – full of mistrust and quick to curse. As Ghorban says of his predicament: “I have hot bread in one hand and ice in the other.”

But the film's main concern is the girls and their introduction to the neighbourhood. The sight of the twins stumbling from their courtyard like liberated battery hens, struggling to comprehend and communicate with the outside world, is especially resonant. The calm, assured persistence of the indefatigable social worker who is bold enough to lock the father in his own house until he sees sense points to the increasingly prominent role of women in Iran and the contribution the twins can offer society if given a chance. Nonetheless, this is a freedom for women that is to some degree at odds with western notions of women's empowerment. Still, this pragmatic determination is written into the film: Makhmalbaf shot her first scenes in video out of necessity and switched to film when she could lay her hands on stock.

Makhmalbaf is scrupulously non-judgemental and takes a carefully liberal line that skirts explicit criticism of any concerned parties. But beneath its superficially simple documentary appearance, this is a highly aestheticised film with remarkably assured direction. The mysterious chanting on the soundtrack, chosen in preference to a more traditional score, creates a subtle, uncertain atmosphere. And allegorical visual motifs are artfully arranged throughout like illustrative tiles to add a further layer of poetic ambiguity. The image of the hand of one twin watering a sickly pot plant through a barred door encapsulates their misfortune. Mirrors introduce the girls to themselves and the apple the twins cherish hints at sustenance and the getting of wisdom. In an almost cruelly funny final scene, this apple is dangled before the blind mother before she grasps it. It's interesting, given this scene's directorial ambivalence, that although the film seems to end on a positive note for the family, in reality the girls have been placed in a new home, presumably because the behaviour of their parents was too ingrained to change.

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