

“Do you know what a tower is?”
The Crisis of 9/11 Remembrance
Pedagogy in Samira Makhmalbaf’s
God, Construction and Destruction

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The 2002 international film project *11"09'01 – September 11* consists of 11 short films from different countries. Each short film has a running time of 11 minutes, 9 seconds, 1 frame and is intended as a geographically situated response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The film project begins with a contribution from Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf, entitled *God, Construction and Destruction* (2002).

Makhmalbaf’s film takes place in Iran, where a group of Afghan civilians is shown in the opening sequence drawing water from a drying well. These Afghans are part of the largest refugee population in the world, which dramatically increased in size as a result of the Soviet war in Afghanistan from December 1979 to February 1989. The war compelled Afghan refugees to flee to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, where they sought safety and reprieve from the bloody conflicts at home. In the aftermath of the Cold War, and as the political and economic stability of Afghanistan became increasingly threatened by insurgency

and religious extremism, what had been previously regarded as a temporary diaspora of Afghan refugees became more commonplace and permanent in the years following the war. According to Ashrafi and Moghissi (2002), "[i]n 2000, official Iranian government figures put the total number of *documented* Afghans in Iran at 1,482,200. If the many non-documented migrants are added, an estimate of 2-2.5 million Afghan refugees in Iran seems realistic" (parag. 26, emphasis theirs). Ashrafi and Moghissi (2002) also note that "[a]n overwhelming number of refugees reside in provinces bordering Afghanistan, and are concentrated in the margins of major urban centres. Only about three per cent of Iran's Afghans inhabit refugee camps," with "the rest being free to live anywhere in the country" (parag. 28).

Despite the fact that approximately 97% of Afghans hosted by Iran settled in or near urban areas, Iran has consistently denied full citizenship status to Afghan refugees and their children—many of whom were born in their host country and had yet to step foot on Afghan soil. "Afghan children are automatically considered to have the nationality of their fathers, even though they may not have a valid document to establish their Afghan nationality. Within such an environment, most Afghan refugees in Iran [are] still regarded as aliens or foreigners" (parag. 29). This view of Afghans as aliens or foreigners persists because in Iran, Afghan refugees are granted very little by way of social mobility: "their freedom of movement is restricted; they are not able to obtain travel documents that would allow them to leave and enter the country; and they usually cannot get work permits" (parag. 29). Iran's economic problems in the aftermath of its war with Iraq in 1980 also compounded the increasing public hostility towards Afghan refugees, to such a point that "[t]here was a widespread feeling that Afghans were being nicely provided for by a government that was unable to do the same for its Iranian citizens" (parag. 34).

To help address host countries' intensifying desire to reduce the population of Afghan refugees living within their borders, in 2002 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established a voluntary repatriation program that remains in place to this day. By providing cash grants meant to offset travel expenses and other costs, the program seeks to encourage and facilitate the return to Afghanistan of refugees and their children born in exile. Nader Farhad (2012) notes that as of August 2012, "[m]ore than 50,000 Afghan refugees have returned from exile in Pakistan and Iran so far this year, up more than 10 per cent on the first eight months of last year" (parag. 1). Farhad also remarks that "[m]ore than 5.7 million people have returned to Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, including some 4.6 million with UNHCR help. The return movement continues but more than three million people remain in exile, mostly in Pakistan and Iran" (parag. 4).

Makhmalbaf's film focuses on the Afghans who remain in exile within the borders of Iran. In fact, it is the post-9/11 experience of the camp-dwelling Afghan refugees that the director explores in *God, Construction and Destruction*. Her film's first scenes depict the refugees participating in the construction of a brick shelter. Off-camera, two men provide instructions to the rest of the camp that reveals the shelter must be built to protect everyone from possible U.S. military bombings. The urgency with which the camp undertakes the shelter's construction implies that news has only recently spread that America is preparing to bomb Afghanistan in retaliation for the 9/11 attacks. Uncertain of the reach, extent, and timing of this impending retaliation, the refugees nervously prepare for the worst.

The bustling opening sequence of men, women, and children intently making bricks in the most rudimentary of ways is interrupted by the arrival of the local teacher, who rounds up the camp's children by sternly telling them to leave their brick-making tasks. Along the way, as she offers books in exchange for class attendance, the teacher points out to

the adults she passes that the children should be going to school instead of helping build the shelter. "America wants to attack Afghanistan. We are Afghans all right, but we are refugees in Iran," she says as she enters the camp's makeshift schoolhouse. "Three million Afghan refugees are living in Iran. Whatever happens to them will happen to you too. You can't stop atomic bombs with bricks. Send the children to class." Once the children are finally assembled for class, the teacher tenaciously delivers a lesson on the geopolitical importance of 9/11 and demonstrates the 'proper' way to honour the victims by observing a moment of silence. By film's end, Makhmalbaf makes it clear to viewers that the teacher's pedagogical approach in relation to 9/11 is a failure, but not only because the school-aged children in the refugee camp are unruly and highly distractible. Rather, the teacher's lesson fails because her preferred method of teaching about, and encouraging the remembrance of 9/11 proves exceedingly at odds—and hence, incompatible—with the living conditions, central concerns, and personal, as well as cultural, histories of her students.

The teacher's inability to maintain her students' attention and educate them about 9/11's geopolitical significance raises several important questions. What compels the teacher in the film to imagine that pressing on with her lesson is somehow less futile than making a bomb shelter out of bricks? How, the film seems to ask viewers, could the privileging of education safeguard against the more destructive consequences of international acts of aggression? Taken from the vantage of difficult knowledge, how might the teacher's pedagogy embody, even as it represses the very crises of the subject matter it seeks to represent? The teacher's conduct reveals her firm belief in education's valuable role in a post-9/11 world, but she fails to communicate this view to the students in her classroom. What kinds of education and what modes of remembrance, then, could have the potential to impact students as well as assuage violent international conflicts? What aspect of the teacher's

approach to teaching and remembering 9/11 results in her lesson's "failure"? Lastly, and focusing on the film's construction as a work of art bound to specific historical contexts, why does Makhmalbaf's film about Afghans living in an Iranian refugee camp problematize education's aim of remembering and teaching 9/11 in the first place?

In keeping with the theme of this special issue, "art in times of conflict," this paper deliberates upon the role that art plays in the creation and sustained cultivation of 9/11 remembrance pedagogy. I use the term "remembrance pedagogy" here to refer to the kind of historical consciousness that, according to Roger Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert (2000), enacts "a mindful attentiveness to, learning from, and participation in the memory of the traces of traumatic history" (p. 3). The objective of "9/11 remembrance pedagogy" far exceeds the mere retelling of the suffering of others as a result of the attacks on September 11, 2001. Instead, modes of remembrance pedagogy that focus on the attacks should be concerned with "not only what gets remembered, by whom, how, and when, but, as well, the problem of the very limits of representing and engaging" the event of 9/11. This is so because "in [its] extremity," the event of 9/11 "shock[s] and resist[s] assimilation into already articulated discourses" (p. 7). With this understanding of "remembrance pedagogy" in mind, I closely examine Makhmalbaf's film as a mode of 9/11 remembrance pedagogy that attends to the challenges faced by education in the wake of the attacks, and also in the context of an increasingly globalized and heteronomous world.

The film disrupts the assumption that art in times of global crises is limited only to bolstering practices of "strategic remembrance," a term that Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert (2000) use to denote collective "efforts to mobilize attachments and knowledge that serve specific social and political interests within particular spatiotemporal frameworks" (p. 3). Remembrance as a strategic practice "is aligned with the anticipation of a reconciled future[,] in which one hopes that justice and harmonious

social relations might be secured” (p. 4). At first glance, the concept of “strategic remembrance” suggests a collectively therapeutic and optimistically future-oriented approach to working through grief. However, in its goal of assigning particular meanings to loss and committing them to memory for the sake of ensuring a less violent or catastrophic future, this remembrance practice risks programmatically rendering violent global crises into cautionary tales that do not sufficiently engage with or respond to the specificities and conflicts that attend each of these traumatic events. While in some ways it is needed for its consolatory function in the aftermath of devastation, remembrance as a strategic practice also reinforces dominant cultural norms, values, ideals, and beliefs that may have been unsettled or challenged in the wake of such events. This paper contends that Makhmalbaf’s film both represents and performatively works *against* the concept of remembrance as a strategic practice in its depiction of the teacher’s persistent and, arguably failed lesson. As well, Makhmalbaf’s film models ways in which artistic engagements with 9/11 can and do possess the capacity to provide more than a medium for citizens to remember strategically in terms that bolster their sense of national unity and its myriad exclusions. Makhmalbaf’s contribution to the *11’09’01* compilation employs the film genre to make more ethically accountable the practice of 9/11 remembrance pedagogy. I specifically argue that Makhmalbaf’s portrayal of a “failed” lesson on 9/11 demonstrates how strategic remembrance practices risk equating 9/11 remembrance pedagogy with more hegemonic and nationalist forms of remembrance. These hegemonic forms of remembrance, in turn, threaten the transformative aspects of fostering critical engagements with trauma—what educational theorist Deborah Britzman (1998) considers to be the potential of “difficult knowledge.”

Britzman’s concept of “difficult knowledge” “signif[ies] the relations between representations of social trauma in curriculum and the

individual's encounters with them in pedagogy" (Britzman and Pitt, 2004, p. 354). While an educational theory of difficult knowledge welcomes the desire to understand and bear witness to historical trauma, it also recognizes the resistances that accompany and constitute educators' and students' confrontations with experiences commonly perceived or characterized as "unspeakable." Difficult knowledge thus poses a crisis for, as well as a crisis of, education. It is a crisis *for* education, since immersing oneself in the details of such harrowing events is necessary when addressing their myriad legacies. Difficult knowledge is also a crisis *of* education because teaching about and learning from traumatic experiences are themselves affected by the agonistic events that education strives to represent through pedagogy and curriculum. Such is the case with the teacher in Makhmalbaf's *God, Construction and Deconstruction*.

Indeed, the film's portrayal of the disconnect between the teacher's pedagogical strategies and her students' ability to relate to what she is trying to teach suggests that despite her well-meaning intentions to comprehensively (and hence, faithfully) memorialize, interpret, and conceptualize the attacks as a watershed geopolitical event, widely adopted modes of 9/11 remembrance such as those portrayed in the film risk becoming out of touch with the complexity of the event's significance in the specific contexts in which they are enacted. Three issues preoccupy Makhmalbaf's film: distinguishing between "learning from" versus "learning about" traumatic events; historicizing and contextualizing historical trauma; and lastly, assessing the significance of art and artists in education and public remembrance. The film's insightful engagement with these specific concerns conveys their influential impact upon the futures of remembrance pedagogy as a mode of attentive historical consciousness. Deliberating upon these three issues is an important undertaking, especially if doing so helps foster more

ethical means of addressing the kinds of difficult knowledge we encounter in the myriad aftermaths of 9/11.

"Learning from" versus "learning about" the traumatic event of 9/11

The sequence of the local teacher rounding up her students to go to school is followed by a longer segment that shows her delivering her lesson in front of an unruly classroom. The teacher, who remains nameless throughout the film, promptly begins her lesson by asking her students if they know what event of great importance transpired very recently. Despite the curiosity implied in the question, she cuts short any responses that do not hint at the answer she is specifically seeking. For instance, in reply to one student's suggestion that the event has to do with either the man who died after falling in the camp's well or a student's aunt being buried to her chin and stoned to death in Afghanistan, the teacher shakes her head and insists that the answer she is looking for has, in her own words, more "global" importance. The teacher's leading questions gradually reveal to the film's audience her twofold pedagogical objective for this lesson, namely: the generation of class discussion regarding key details about the 9/11 attacks, and the observance of a moment of silence as a means of properly honouring those who died at Ground Zero in New York City.

Nothing, however, goes as planned in this lesson. At best, the children are unruly because they cannot stop chatting about issues of immediate concern in the camp. At worst, they are clueless about 9/11, since the puzzled expressions on their faces communicate the fact that the teacher seems to presume too much about her students' capacity to grasp and relate to her lesson's central topic. For instance, she assumes that the children would know the geographical location and political significance of New York City, and understand the meaning of such

notions as “airplane hijacking” and “terrorism.” When she finally tries to gauge her students’ general comprehension of 9/11 and the event’s significance, the teacher realizes that the children—who, like her, are refugees made destitute by the social, political, and economic upheavals of the Cold War and global capitalism—have no concept of what “office towers” and “mobile devices” are. Disregarding these glaring gaps in the students’ knowledge and hence, disregarding their inability to appreciate the lesson’s geopolitical import, the teacher resolutely presses on with her planned class discussion and subsequently imposes a moment of silence intended to educate the children about the “proper” way to remember and pay respects to the 9/11 victims. It may come as no surprise that the students are inadvertently defiant of this moment of silence, choosing instead to continue chatting casually amongst themselves about God’s ability to destroy and create human beings.

In comparison to the easily distracted response of the students, the teacher is predominantly cast as an austere figure and the source of authoritative “knowledge.” However, this characterization of the teacher is telling in itself because the specific pedagogical response she enacts is affected by, at the same time that it defends against, the knowledge she represents. In fact, the teacher’s behaviour throughout the film performatively embodies the ways pedagogy is a symptom of the historical trauma of 9/11. While it would be tempting to criticize and blame the teacher for her inflexibility, her very comportment illustrates how the conflicts inherent in historical traumas and world crises are enacted at the level of pedagogy. Difficult knowledge invites us to consider how the teacher is affected by a larger set of political conflicts, and how her 9/11 remembrance pedagogy forecloses in the name of psychological defense. The teacher’s anxious desire to disseminate the facts of 9/11 calls to mind Britzman’s discussion of Sigmund Freud and what he argues are the two dynamics of learning, that of “learning about” and “learning from.” Britzman (1998) explains that “learning about an

event... focuses upon the acquisition of qualities, attributes and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might even say, a detachment) between the learner and what is to be learned" (p. 117). The teacher's act of inflexibly adhering to her lesson plan (this, despite the apparent failure of her lesson) may well demonstrate this anxious urge on the part of the educator to provide all the required or "mandatory" material she is convinced her students must learn about the 9/11 attacks. This rigid routine may in fact underline her struggles to represent the difficulty of such knowledge.

What explains the teacher's compulsion to continue with her lesson, despite her awareness that the students are not able to fully comprehend the implications of her words? The response to this question has much to do with how "learning about" historical trauma is bound up with the practice of strategic remembrance. Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert (2000) point out that a key feature of strategic remembrance is its insistence upon foreclosed lessons that promulgate the importance of specific historical traumas, the recollections of which function as warnings or caveats against future destruction and suffering. Moreover, strategic remembrance is bolstered by "a hope that anxiously attends to a horrific past in expectation of the promise that, by investing attention in narratives that sustain moral lessons, there will be a better tomorrow... [one that is] fully cognizant of the warning that forgetting could lead to a return to the horrors of history" (p. 4). But as well intentioned and highly invested the objective is of strategic remembrance, according to Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert (2000) "the continuation of local and global violence suggests that such a pedagogy rarely serves as an effective safeguard" (p. 4) against future historical traumas. Yet this mode of historical remembrance persists in its over-determination of the future through repetition: "[a]s if caught in some form of repetition compulsion, such remembrance practices can only respond with further directives to

tell again, and to tell with increased urgency, thereby invoking an absolutist moral demand that one must listen" (p. 4).

It is for this very reason that, as a proponent of strategic remembrance, the teacher in Makhmalbaf's film appears steadfastly (and perhaps even hegemonically) to insist upon the relevance of her lesson. She does this, even and, especially, when her students prove resistant or indifferent to the urgency of what she hopes to impart as knowledge regarding the historical and social relevance of 9/11. Furthermore, her persistent policing of what and how the children ought to "learn" about 9/11, as well as what they are to "remember" for posterity, rejects any engagements with counter-narratives of the attacks that do not prove harmonious with what has purportedly been deemed "official knowledge." At a key point in Makhmalbaf's film, when the students repeatedly guess what event of "global importance" happened recently, the teacher rhetorically asks the question: "Who knows anything?" Given that the teacher continues to reject the students' contributions to the class discussion of 9/11 as neither "global" nor "important" enough, this seemingly casual or innocuous rhetorical question of "Who knows anything?" carries with it an unsettling implication. Implied in the teacher's question is an assumption that the students' knowledge is not equally of worth when compared to the "facts" about 9/11 that the teacher possesses. In this way, what the teacher views as "globally important" inadvertently runs the risk of elevating specific—and oftentimes nationalist or Ameri-centric—narratives of the attacks. In fact, the teacher's insistence on dwelling only upon the narrative of innocent American victimization at the hands of "terrorists" threatens to reproduce the notion that the decades-long plight of the Afghan refugees (among whom the teacher and her students are counted) do not matter nor deserve as much attention, especially in comparison to the plight of the American citizenry in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Judith Butler's (2004) discussion of the "hierarchy of grief" (p. 32) provides an apt description of this scenario. She observes that, "there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable'" (p. 32). The teacher enacts a strategic remembrance limited only to rehearsing key occurrences that comprise the event of 9/11 proper. Her lesson amounts to what in psychoanalytic theories of education has been called a "passion for ignorance," which Britzman (1998) says "sever[s] the quest for an understanding that exceeds the order of things" (p. 57). Inadvertently or not, this "passion for ignorance," that manifests itself through the teacher's lesson, also becomes complicit in the hegemonic privileging of the dominant majority's interests and well-being, to the detriment of marginalized peoples whose lives – her own curiously included – are often subjugated to the whims of those in power. This is why more is required of educators and students than simply teaching and learning about historical trauma, because as Britzman says, "[t]he work of learning is not so much an accumulation of knowledge but a means for the human to use knowledge, to craft and alter itself" (p. 4). Stated a bit differently, the accumulation of knowledge may in fact defend against the question of how uses of knowledge might craft and alter itself, but also the subject and the world.

In stark comparison to the concept of "learning *about*," for Britzman (1998) "learning *from* an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight" (p.117, my emphasis). Britzman goes on to say that "[l]earning from demands both a patience with the incommensurability of understanding and an interest in tolerating the ways meaning becomes, for the learner, fractured, broken, and lost, exceeding the affirmations of rationality, consciousness, and consolation" (p. 118). The pedagogical

approach of “learning from” thereby proves more accommodating to the anxieties, resistances, and uncertainties that often accompany encounters with historical trauma. Moreover, “learning from” perpetually defers the impulse to fully apprehend or claim mastery over traumatic experiences. Instead of favouring efficiency and a totalizing mode of knowing when grappling with a traumatic event like 9/11, “learning from” dwells with the protracted process of working through trauma. Consequently, as a mode of historical consciousness, the dynamic of “learning from” runs radically counter to the objectives of strategic remembrance, since it rejects the very notion of assigning “definitive” (and hence, “normative”) meanings and interpretations to experiences of unspeakable suffering and loss. Put another way, “learning from” treats encounters with historical trauma as interminable works of mourning that yield neither absolute guarantees nor definitive truths for the future. Resisting the seductive pull of the passion for ignorance, “learning from” instead extends hospitality to the “ongoing problem of... attend[ing] to... remembrance of the past without foreclosing the possibility that this attempt to remember will rupture the adequacy of the very terms on which a memory is being held” (Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert, 2000, p. 6).

While Makhmalbaf’s film portrays the teacher’s pedagogical failure, it is, however, not simply a vehicle of strategic remembrance. Quite the contrary, the film casts into doubt the assurances of a better future that strategic remembrance promises. How, after all, could simply learning about the details of the attacks “stop atomic bombs” better than a brick shelter ever could, if those to whom such details are imparted are granted little choice but to passively accumulate and retain such informational knowledge? The film screens the shortcomings of strategic remembrance through the dramatization of the students’ resistance to the knowledge offered by their teacher. In this way, the film’s audience is confronted by “the vicissitudes of learning from difficult knowledge”

(Britzman, 1998, p. 118). Such a confrontation "acknowledg[es] [that] learning [is] a psychic event" and that—rather than an enemy of or obstacle to learning—"resistance is a precondition for learning from knowledge and the grounds of knowledge itself" (p. 118). It is in this way that Makhmalbaf's film seeks to make more ethically accountable the practice of 9/11 remembrance pedagogy. By showing its viewers that new paradigms of remembrance must be thought in the aftermath of the attacks, the film presents itself as ever-mindful of education's "own ethical implication" that it "must interfere" and "make something more of [itself]" (p. 10).

Historicizing and contextualizing historical trauma

While observing a moment of silence in honour of the 9/11 victims, the students chatter impulsively, thereby thwarting the teacher's desire for the class to engage in the solemn remembrance of those who passed away in the attacks. Disappointed in the students' inattentiveness, the teacher comments on their "innocence," castigates them for their lack of self-discipline, ushers them outside, and makes them line up at the foot of the brick kiln's chimney. Once the students assemble under the glare of the sun, the teacher points at the imposing smoke stack. She instructs the children to look up at the smoke billowing from the chimney and quietly think about those who died as a result of the attacks in New York City. After a moment's hesitation, Esmat, one of the more voluble young boys in the class, asks the teacher what he should do if he feels like talking during this moment of silence. The teacher brusquely tells him to bite his lip and just look at the chimney—a gesture that would supposedly convey to his teacher, peers, and fellow refugees that he is thinking about the victims of 9/11. Esmat reluctantly does what he is told, but not before an expression of confusion and frustration crosses his

face as he gives his teacher one last, lingering look before he obeys her instructions.

As filmic narrative and socio-political commentary, Makhmalbaf's film *God, Construction and Destruction* is fraught with ambiguity. Just who exactly in the film is deemed "uneducated" or "ignorant" about 9/11 and this event's at times over-determined (yet no less conflicted) legacies—the students, the teacher, the film's presumed audience, or "all of the above"? Haim Bresheeth (2010) describes the film's complexity in the following manner:

In contrast to many of the other episodes [from the film *11'09'01*], the section directed by Samira Makhmalbaf is totally lacking in violent visual referents and is a ruminative, even philosophical episode about the different value systems which apply in the West and Afghanistan where the classroom of children she confronts with her camera are oblivious to the momentous events in the US – events which are about to change their lives forever. Even when told about them, the children cannot quite grasp their importance. While on one hand we encounter the vast distance between the Afghan children and the Western world, the film also directs our gaze to how very little the West knows and understands Afghanistan at the very point when it is about to destroy it, as a preamble to the destruction of Iraq. (p. 29)

Bresheeth's commentary on the film astutely draws attention to Makhmalbaf's agonistic treatment of the connections between obliviousness, wilful ignorance, education, and the need to re-evaluate conventionally accepted and widely practiced modes of remembrance pedagogy in the wake of the attacks.

A case in point from the film that demonstrates these complex connections would be the scene in which, at the behest of their teacher,

the children strain to look at the chimney outside their classroom in order to glean an (albeit imprecise) understanding of what the concept of a "tower" entails, and subsequently what the World Trade Center towers in New York might have looked like before they were destroyed. This scene depicts the teacher's brisk and barely accommodating transmission of facts about the attacks, *despite* and *regardless of* her keen awareness of her students' ill-equipped comprehension and glaringly lacking contextualization of metropolitan life and culture. Additionally, this scene poignantly conveys the extent to which pedagogical practices and methods shape, inform, and even determine how specific subpopulations living in areas far removed from 9/11's epicenter are at times coerced to understand, interact with, and relate to the central concerns and preoccupations of the dominant global majority: all while setting aside their own, more immediate concerns and preoccupations.

Taking a cue from Bresheeth's analysis, Makhmalbaf's film offers a subtle—though no less poignant—criticism of precisely this kind of remembrance practice that is more destructive and disturbing than the oblivious nature of the Afghan children's reaction to the attacks. Makhmalbaf attributes to those in "the West" the tendency to de-contextualize spectacular crises like 9/11, in a manner that renders such events without history and hence, unrelated to larger systemic concerns (like widespread poverty) that currently debilitate other parts of the world. When interviewed about the rationale behind the making of her film, Makhmalbaf says that:

[a] lot of people talk about the Sep[tember] 11 incident but few people attribute these happenings to the distance that exists between the developed and underdeveloped world. The poor are drowning in their poverty and the fortunate ones are in the depths of their great fortunes. No one thinks that this distance, the distance between this warm

climate and that cold climate might create a heavy storm.

(2002, parag. 7)

Hence, the film is the director's attempt at making this conceptual and historical connection between the terroristic event of the September 11 attacks and the global living conditions that shaped, informed and essentially gave rise to the spectacular violence—"the heavy storm"—of 9/11. Makhmalbaf is critical of the Western world not because its inhabitants are unwittingly oblivious or unintentionally ignorant, but rather because its inhabitants are, according to her, (always already) too self-assured about what constitutes and dictates the boundaries of public discourse, as well as too certain about what needs or ought to be "known" and "taught" about 9/11. This mentality troubles Makhmalbaf because it persists even and especially when the complexity of the event of 9/11 points to the fact that the event itself, with its lingering traumatic aftermaths and incalculable legacies, calls for a rigorous and self-reflective reassessment of "whether we are prepared to address 9/11 in accord with the familiar terms and categories... or whether they are even adequate to the task" (Rockmore and Margolis, 2005, p. 3).

After the traumatism of 9/11, if we are no longer assured of the validity of our conceptual frameworks for understanding and apprehending the world around us and managing our diverse relationships with one another, then we cannot be so quick to police what is and is not deemed "legitimate" forms of knowledge, modes of education, and manners of relationality and sociality pertaining to the attacks. Rockmore and Margolis (2005) go on to acknowledge that beyond the philosophical uncertainties we face in our post-9/11 world,

[t]he impasse extends to other domains. All of our ready conceptual assurances are confounded by 9/11.¹ The assumption that we have captured the world in our theories has been stalemated by the world itself... We cannot diagnose the events of 9/11 by any simple

application of the usual tools. They defy our sense of legible order, and we cannot say when our categories will adjust again. (p. 3)

To emphasize, Rockmore and Margolis say that "[w]e cannot diagnose the events of 9/11 by any simple application of the usual tools": and yet, this is the very thing that Makhmalbaf's teacher seems guilty of doing in the film. Her traditional approach of educating her students about 9/11 culminates in the closing scene, in which she instructs each child to stand and quietly observe a moment of silence while staring at a rough, industrial approximation of now-collapsed office towers, beneath which died thousands of individuals whose culture and relatively more comfortable lifestyles prove strange and alien to these diasporic and impoverished students eking out subsistence living as refugees in Iran.

In her discussion of 9/11, the teacher attempts to impose a pre-established and well-rehearsed lesson plan that revolves around American victimization at the hands of foreign "rogue" individuals. As well, her class lesson echoes the fear of the United States' military wrath, as expressed at the beginning of the film by the men at the well, who do not appear on-camera but whose voices clearly convey the urgency of building a bomb shelter for the camp as protection from American military might. In doing so, she consequently legitimizes and normalizes the idea that impoverished and war-torn countries such as Afghanistan have little sovereign agency and minimal means of substantial resistance against the hegemonic influence of world superpowers like the United States. What the teacher in Makhmalbaf's film does is conduct herself in front of her class *as if* the event of 9/11 is just like any other mundane event that is manageable in its teachability. Despite the urgency of her tone in intimating to her students that 9/11 has the capacity to have significant impacts on a global scale, her lesson begins, unfolds, and ends just like most other lessons: she introduces the topic, outlines the boundaries of the discourse under study through the facilitation of a

class discussion, and reinforces the main points of her lesson through a hands-on, practical task (the observation of a moment of silence at the foot of the chimney) that requires the active involvement of each student.

The teacher's pedagogy forecloses the difficult knowledge that 9/11 presents to both her students and herself as educator. She wilfully ignores the challenges and obstacles that teaching 9/11 palpably presents, such as the need to contextualize and historicize the attacks in relation to the students' living conditions in Iran. As well, the teacher takes little heed of the children's seemingly random conversations, which are preoccupied with stories of death and suffering. But in fact, it is through these obstacles and distractions, which supposedly derail the teaching of the lesson, that we glean the physical manifestations of difficult knowledge. For Britzman (1998), these interfering "forces" that "seem to come back at education as interruptions, as unruly students, as irrelevant questions, and as controversial knowledge in need of containment" are indicative of "the difficult knowledge held in curriculum, where we ask students to engage with difficult knowledge about life and death without acknowledging the war within and without thinking about how pedagogical idealizations might coarsen the psyche's capacity to respond" (p. 133). Thus, in the teacher's desire to complete her *task* of teaching about 9/11, she dismisses her students' behaviour as inappropriate or excessive. The teacher in effect fails to cultivate a hospitable attitude towards encounters with forms of difficult knowledge that threaten her students' normalized or routinized ways of understanding themselves and the world around them. In this way, Makhmalbaf's teacher succeeds in achieving only a kind of tableau of teaching because in her lesson delivery she significantly fails to consider education "as a frontier concept: something between the teacher and the student, something yet to become" (p. 4).

Makhmalbaf offers justification for the teacher's questionable pedagogical approach to 9/11. Though outwardly stern, the teacher's

comportment in front of her class in fact betrays both her apprehension regarding the potential aftermaths of 9/11 as well as her resignation in regards to the plight and fate of her fellow Afghan refugees. How and why is this so? As the film's director, Makhmalbaf (2002) says:

I wanted to express the threats that an eastern girl faces because of an incident that takes place in the West. I wanted to say that an eastern girl might not have seen New York and those towers and might not even have a clue about life in that geographical location. Yet she is forced to be anxious about the globalization process and such an incident might even change the course of her life. Actually the storm that has been created by the West through globalization might destroy the easterners. I wanted to show how the destruction of two towers in a western city could cause the destruction of many cities in non-western countries. I wanted to show how people who have had no role in the destruction of those two towers and even did not know that they exist could become homeless and bereft of everything as a result of this incident. (parag. 9)

For Makhmalbaf, 9/11 unsettles and creates anxiety in the teacher because she is cognizant of the troubling geopolitical situation in which she and her fellow Afghan refugees in Iran find themselves. "[S]he is *forced* to be anxious about the globalization process" (my emphasis), Makhmalbaf says about the teacher in her film. From this brief comment the director indicates that it is not so much that the teacher seems to be consoled by the idea that passing along factual information will "stop atomic bombs" from demolishing their homes better than mud-bricks ever could. Rather, it is the teacher's own anxiety regarding her future and the future of her community that compels her to undertake an attempt—feeble and problematic as it is—to make sense of the event of

9/11, and to make out of the event an object of knowledge; this, to dispel her own feelings of uncertainty regarding the potential aftermaths of the attacks. In the words of Britzman (1998):

We are back to the question of how students respond to the teacher's affect that is pedagogy and of how the teacher responds to the students' affect that is learning. It is this sort of transferential relation, one that suggests the ambivalence of learning from and learning about, that education must engage. For what the children "pick up" and think with their own heads are the grown ups' affective response to the difficulties of war and their precarious attempt to make from aggression and social breakdown a moral lesson. Children notice and learn from the nervousness, anxiety, restlessness, and ambivalence of parents and adults, the symptoms of our own pedagogy. Essentially children are engaging not with the adult's rational explanations, but with their failures, in the very places where the adult strategies break down. (p. 126)

Therefore, the teacher's "failure" to effectively engage her students' understanding of the event of 9/11 should not be regarded as the collapse of education, or the utter futility of education to foster the kind of teaching and learning that far exceeds rote memorization and mere information transmission. Rather, the pedagogical "failure" depicted in the film is what actually opens up the possibilities and opportunities for viewers to re-evaluate the continued relevance and viability of the educational practices they have taken for granted as the standards and norms of teaching and learning.

As I have stated previously, Makhmalbaf's film dramatizes an instance of potential failure in the realm of teaching and learning. It is through the film's embodiment of education in the figure of the detached, matter-of-fact, and rational teacher who does not *quite* succeed

in substantially engaging her students, that the film haunts the praxis of 9/11 remembrance pedagogy with some of its disavowed shortcomings. These shortcomings are, namely, the tendency to put more emphasis on "learning about" 9/11 as opposed to "learning from" the event and responding to its myriad legacies, and the frequent evacuation of localized and personalized contexts from discussions and engagements having to do with collective historical traumas. Indeed, as Felicity Colman (2006) observes in her analysis of *God, Construction and Destruction*, "[i]n trying to convey the uncertainty of the continuation of their life at that moment after the event, the teacher struggles with the limitations of her pedagogic practice and her students' knowledge and biographical consciousness" (par. 9). The film presents a sobering portrait of how the blanket imposition of established and widely accepted knowledge transmission practices threatens the transformative aspects of 9/11 remembrance pedagogy. It also suggests that we read pedagogy as a symptom of the anxious times in which it operates and fails.

The significance of art in education and public remembrance

The film concludes with a long-shot view of the entire class looking at the kiln's chimney, purportedly deep in solemn thought regarding 9/11. This protracted parting shot of the entire class squinting up at the smoke-spewing chimney—the only symbolic reference to 9/11's visual iconography in the film—leaves the viewer wondering whether the students ever do manage to meet the objectives of the day's lesson to the satisfaction of their teacher. Furthermore, by the end of Makhmalbaf's film, one cannot help but think back to the teacher's earlier privileging of education over and above brick shelters as the best deterrent for the kind of suffering that comes as a result of international acts of aggression. If not bricks, then what is it about education that can stop atomic bombs?

In light of this filmic portrayal of the ways in which teaching and learning come with no absolute guarantees of success or failure, does the teacher's tellingly anxious delivery of factual knowledge about the attacks—through what can only be described as, at best, the tactic of “consciousness or awareness raising” or, at worst, mere “information transmission”—represent also the deep and penetrating ways that both curriculum and pedagogy are affected by difficult knowledge, and the anxiety in this relationship?

Often, in the context of 9/11 public remembrance, visual art in its various forms has been generally associated with three things: photographs of the ruins of New York City, visually appealing narrative texts that reference the attacks, and “brick and mortar” memorial structures. Myriad photographs of the ruins of New York City in the aftermath of 9/11 are what mostly constitute the event's documentary archive of images. For example, James Nachtwey's iconic photographs of Lower Manhattan, a compilation of which appeared in an issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2002), provide a diverse sampling of this archive. At the same time, visually appealing narrative texts that reference the attacks have taken up the task of either challenging or reinforcing state-sanctioned accounts of 9/11. I am reminded of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) and the graphic novel adaptation of *The 9/11 Commission Report* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón (2006), respectively. Lastly, “brick and mortar” memorial structures, such as architect Michael Arad's “Reflecting Absence” design for the National September 11 memorial site in Manhattan, often evoke a vast range of public reactions to the ways in which traumatic histories are visually and architecturally represented on the landscape. For instance, the selection and construction of Arad's design were rife with debates over such issues as the “sentimentality” versus “solemnity” of public memorials, as well as the extent to which a national memorial can express patriotism

while at the same time evoke more diverse and open-ended interpretations from both local and international visitors.

Unlike these artistic responses to 9/11, Makhmalbaf's film dwells primarily upon the challenges and legacies that the traumatic history of 9/11 presents to education. In particular, the film is preoccupied with the question of how to think about failure and success in education, when the subject of what is to be taught and learned forever remains (because it is constitutively) bound to interminable loss and inconsolable traumatism. In essence, Makhmalbaf's film becomes a poignant embodiment of what the philosopher Jacques Derrida (1986) observes in relation to his own work on mourning, memory, and interiorization. He writes that the incomplete or "aborted interiorization [of the lost loved one or object] is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us" (p. 35). Derrida adds that this failed interiorization is a productive phenomenon that demonstrates the ways in which, in a counter-intuitive manner, "*success fails*" and "*failure succeeds*" (p. 35, emphasis his).

In the context of the film, the teacher's failure to succeed in *unproblematically* teaching 9/11 to her students is, oddly, a kind of 'victory' for educators in general and those engaging in 9/11 remembrance pedagogy in particular. This is the case because the film's vivid portrayal of the failure of our readily available tools and methods for teaching about 9/11 and its legacies is what activates the thinking about and the implementation of alternative ways of teaching—that is, teaching otherwise—about 9/11. On the other hand, had the teacher completely succeeded in delivering her lesson on 9/11—that is, had her students understood with little to no difficulty what she was teaching them about the attacks, then what would have been absorbed, lost, and perhaps even nullified? More than likely it would have been the very alterity of the Afghan children's life experiences and value systems as

individuals, whose lives are not immersed in the preoccupations of Western culture because they exist elsewhere (far removed from, and *not* ensconced in the assumed society or audience to which most governments and global media pander).

The film's rehearsal of educational failure productively reminds educators that 9/11 remembrance pedagogy is, in its very constitution, a constant and constantly fallible work in progress. Further, the very portrayal of pedagogical failure depicted in Makhmalbaf's film is itself an instance of 9/11 remembrance pedagogy that ironically succeeds in responsibly addressing the legacy of the attacks. This "success in failure" is brought about largely by the film's self-identification as an artistic work. Unlike educators whose initial tendencies, according to Britzman (1998), would be to disavow rather than "love a knowledge that knows no mastery" (p. 61), artists "gesture to their own constructedness and frailties, troubling the space between representation and the real, the wish and the need" (p. 60). As well, "[t]hey are interested in the mistakes, the accidents, the detours, and the unintelligibilities of identities" (p. 60).

Makhmalbaf's film certainly embodies this artistic capacity by drawing attention to the frailties and resistances to difficult knowledge on the part of both the students and the educator. Her film refuses to allow 9/11 to become a benign and easily transmissible object of knowledge and instruction. As a result of the proliferation of institutional practices that refuse, in the words of Britzman, "to engage the difficulties the arts offer" (p. 61), it is imperative now more than ever for 9/11 remembrance pedagogy to "tolerate the arts even as the arts must necessarily exceed the intolerances of education" (p. 61).

In *God, Construction and Destruction*, what Bresheeth (2010) sees as "[t]he centrality of education" (p. 29) in Makhmalbaf's directorial *oeuvre* implies more than the need to fulfill the mandate of circulating and thereby reproducing established knowledge and forms of knowing about

9/11. Viewers are faced with the responsibility of learning *from* the teacher’s failed lesson, instead of merely learning *about* it. In fact, the film points to the interminable but necessary work of re-evaluating not only the practices, but also the very objectives, future-oriented hopes, and (often occluded) anxieties of remembrance pedagogy in a post-9/11 world. In essence, Makhmalbaf’s film *is* an encounter with the difficult knowledge that students and educators have inherited in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Notes

¹ Interestingly enough, the claim put forward by Rockmore and Margolis in their discussion of 9/11’s impact on Western philosophy is telling and admittedly problematic here, in that it implies that 9/11 disrupted what before were uncontested, universalized “conceptual assurances” and philosophical “theories” about the world. There are schools of thought that would take serious issue with this Western-centric claim. More specifically, from the standpoint of postcolonial theory (which has long challenged and sought to dismantle the idea that Western forms of knowledge are universal and objective), this claim would be criticized for repressing difference and multiplicities and forcefully subscribing to the homogeneity of “Western Knowledge” in the name of exercising mastery over resistant ambiguities encountered in daily lived experience. Postcolonial theory, then, embraces difficult knowledge because it partakes in “[t]he unmasking of power structures” (Viruru, 2005, p. 15) and also challenges the “ideas of linear progress and development, objectivity, universality and totalisation” (p. 14)—all of which are foundational ideas in Western education.

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