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## The Silence (Sokhut)

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## The Silence (Sokhut)

### **Abstract**

This is a review of *Sokhut (The Silence)* (1998).

*The Silence* is the most recent film by Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf<sup>1</sup>, known for his earlier imaginative films *Gabbeh* (1996) and *A Moment of Innocence* (aka *The Bread and the Vase*, 1996). Set in Tajikistan, *The Silence* conveys a sense of the mysterious and miraculous that defies the limits of its narrative. The underlying miracle in the story is the way the protagonist, a 10-year-old blind boy named Khorshid (Tahmineh Normativa), survives. In this narrative full of ellipses, memories, and puzzles, the student of religion has much to learn about the impossibility of expressing spirituality on screen except through oblique means.

Through the child, we sense how sound is more than just something pleasant, or something that conveys information, but rather how it is the whole texture of life. From the pounding on the door of an irate landlord (which Khorshid says resembles the rhythm of the opening bars of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*) to the buzzing of a bee trapped in a glass (which Khorsid, with great sensitivity, can identify by genus), the delight in beautiful sounds—and the oppression of ugly sounds—becomes clearer to us, the viewers, with the ability to see what he hears.

Khorshid is easily distracted by "pretty voices" and by skillful musicians. He puts cotton, or his fingers, in his ear, but to no avail. In an interview, the director explains what inspired him to make *The Silence*: "It goes back to my childhood. My grandmother, who was very religious, said to me all the time: 'If you listen to

music, you'll go to hell.' She made me stick my fingers in my ears when we were out in the street so I wouldn't hear the music. . . . The first Western music I heard was Beethoven's *Fifth*. I was deeply affected by the splendor and strength of this piece. Since then, those four notes have been going around in my head. . . ." In several disturbing sequences, Khorshid gets off the bus before his designated stop, lured by some enchanting sound. The director does not elaborate on how this blind child manages to survive in the city and find his way here and there, although we do see some terrifying scenes where the boy is caught in torrential rain and is even half-submerged in the river. We breathe a collective sigh of relief at the rare moment when he encounters a kind stranger who puts him back on the path.

Despite his sensitivity to sound, Khorshid fails as an apprentice in a shop where traditional Persian musical instruments are made. The customers—a director of a motley children's orchestra, an amateur musician—complain that the instruments Khorshid works on are out of tune. Is it the instruments, we wonder, or the harried director himself?

Nadereh (Nadereh Abdelahyeva), a young girl who is cared for by the head of the instrument workshop, is particularly sensitive to Khorshid's world. When she loses him in a busy commercial center, with vendors everywhere plying their wares, she closes her eyes to sense the route Khorshid might have taken. This whimsical young girl dangles cherries over her ears and attaches flower petals as decorations

on her hands. When told by the boss to help Khorshid with the tuning, she instead breaks into a lovely dance with lilting hand gestures. (It was this danced sequence that the Iranian censors insisted be cut out of the film before it would be shown at the 1998 Fajr Festival in Tehran. Makshmalbaf has resolved not to show *The Silence* in Iran until that sequence is restored.)

A host of musicians people this film. Khorshid is distracted in the marketplace by that most modern of "musical instruments"—a handheld "boom box" blasting out popular music. At the other end of the musical spectrum, we hear a lone mystical singer chanting in the marketplace:

The pilgrim and the dwelling are both with me,

The wise man and the fool are with me...

The master is me,

The enchained man is also me...

Later in the film, we learn that Khorshid's father has gone off to Russia (and never returned) while his sunken-cheeked mother (Golbibi Ziadolahyeva) spends her days fishing by the river, seemingly without much result. Day by day, she exhorts Khorshid to ask his boss for an advance to ward off their eviction. Instead, the boy finds himself "conducting" a group of young metal workers to hammer on their pots in time to those opening notes of Beethoven's masterpiece. It's as if he just can't help himself when this kind of inspiration strikes.

Blindness as metaphor, and accentuated sounds—the heavy breathing of the young boy pulling a rickshaw, the rhythmic sound of the cart's wheels, a horse's hooves hitting the pavement...Nadereh is frightened by a man seated by the lake, playing music by an abandoned canon and scolding girls who don't wear a head scarf. The director sees in *The Silence* a conflict between objectivity and subjectivity, between human beings and their situation.

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<sup>1</sup> In most of his films, Makmalbaf works with non-professional actors because he finds there is less need to try to erase earlier roles that have imprinted themselves on the actor. His creative output to date includes 16 feature films, two short films, 30 screenplays, 10 plays, two essay collections, and 28 short stories. Not bad for someone who dropped out of school as an adolescent to join a clandestine revolutionary group, and was arrested and imprisoned at age 17.