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Killing the Eunuch KHAN

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Killing the Eunuch KHAN

Abstract

This is a film review of *Killing the Eunuch KHAN* (2022), directed by Abed Abest.

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Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



Killing the Eunuch KHAN (2022), dir. Abed Abest

Iranian filmmaker Abed Abest's *Killing the Eunuch KHAN* opens with this verbatim preamble (in blood red) on the screen: "The serial killer uses the victims to kill victims / and kills the victims using the victims /and..."—then the film proceeds. Alas, the genre-specific baggage that comes with referencing a serial killer and his victims, along with the film's serial killer-related log line, mistakenly hoodwinked this viewer regarding what to expect and how even to "read" the film while watching.

Abest's dramatic feature belongs to the realm of avant-garde art cinema, with its story transpiring in a pseudo-reality: a world part complex dream, part abstract fable, and so also part-intellectual exercise. Comprising a city that only a handful of Iranians appear to inhabit, its central setting is a residence upon which a bomb during the 1980s Iran-Iraq War erroneously lands, killing the two young sisters inside. (Initially, we see them gathering circular mirrored discs which they arrange around a room to create globules of

reflected sunlight, with swift glimpses outdoors of a woman in an azure burka.) When the sisters' father (Vahid Rad) reaches home, he finds his eldest daughter dead—with blood having seeped from the walls, flooded the room, then cascaded like a scarlet carpet down the spiraling staircase. Eventually, the blood will find its way out the front entrance and pour into a massive hole—the consequence of another bomb. Once full to its brim, that hole will glisten like an open wound—a literal bloodbath into which other bodies will be dumped. Indeed, blood in this film roils, races, and sometimes monstrosly devours, as if possessing a consciousness of its own. Is that because the blood is a symbolic reflection of the victimization produced by war? Or is it indicative of the men who, like Eunuch Khan (Ebrahim Azizi), mastermind war's deployment for their own fiendish purposes?

Clearly, we are not in a conventional plot-driven, serial killer milieu, but a universe that leans toward abstract expressionism—not to mention, the fluid temporality of Alain Resnais. After all, that father's story crisscrosses in time and space—and sound—with the stories of several others connected to that villa (including that woman in the azure burka), thereby suggesting the ugly accretions of violence that are generated by war.

Killing the Eunuch KHAN moves slowly, reveling in its own imagery. Often Abest deploys his long static takes with such lingering quietude that he is directing us to contemplate their resplendence—or, at the least, to watch deeply enough to pick up on and puzzle over disconnections between the dots: Why are the sisters, when first seen, descending in an elevator that appears to be in Khan's office headquarters? Why, after the bombing, does the father deposit the youngest girl in Khan's car? And why does their house now look distinctly different, more a weathered European-style villa than the initial brick house with sere lawn?

And Abest's imagery really *can* be that resplendent—from painterly shots of the two sisters in Persian-carpeted rooms (with the fine lines and ethereal light reminiscent of a Vermeer) to striking visuals that conjure Abest's own background as an architect—the way a spiraling concrete staircase, for instance, down which blood flows, will end up resembling a crimson Nautilus shell. Sometimes these are juxtaposed with intense jerky camera sequences, such as of the father trying to dig into the stony ground to bury his daughter, or Khan walking through the streets of the city, its planter strips churning with blood, with edgy violin string riffs or electronic music acoustically heightening the tension. Somewhat too often, though, the camera will track characters walking—and walking—and walking—in ways that often feel unmotivated and, so, unnecessarily long. These slow down the narrative rather than provide us entry into the characters' conditions or a greater understanding of their urban environment.

More problematic for this viewer, though, is the unintended dissonance or uneasiness, at least, of the *way* the blood pours so copiously in *Killing the Eunuch KHAN*. With every shot so meticulously executed, so preciously crafted, without nary a metaphorical hair out of place, ultimately the film's fastidiousness undercuts the horror, the symbolic atrocities that the film is supposed to represent. Somewhat paradoxically, then, Abest's own aesthetically staged prowess is what impedes its greater ethical and political message.