

ONE.TWO.ONE

By Mania Akbari

IRAN 2011

79 minutes

Directed by:
Producer:

MANIA AKBARI
MANIA AKBARI



Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but when society applies inordinate pressure on women in this regard (East and West similarly, although in completely different ways), then identity is equated with something that is destined to perish. It is on this difference between inner and outer beauty that Mania Akbari's feature, One.Two.One (2011), focuses. Ava is a young, attractive Iranian woman whose face has been disfigured as the result of an accident. Part of her healing process will be as much about accepting herself anew, as coming to terms with the prejudices and stigmatization her disfigurement provokes in her society. Structured as a series of sketches that have one, two or at most three characters in them, Ava's healing is depicted as both physical (a visit to a beauty clinic) and psychological (visits to a psychiatrist and a fortune teller). Just as powerful as the pressure of maintaining a certain standard of femininity and beauty in the Middle East – characters confide their concerns regarding Ava's future – are the constraints of actually concealing this beauty. What was important for Akbari was to offer another image of beauty by getting very close to the skin. 'For me the skin is one of the most profound parts of the human anatomy. When you get close to somebody's skin you actually get close to that person. You can deduce everything about that person from their skin. In my society the idea of beauty has become a bit damaged, and the protagonist is a manifestation of this'. In Akbari's film, this hide-and-seek with regard to the female face – in this case, a damaged one – is explored by means of camera angles framing and fragmenting the protagonist's face. She is either filmed sideways revealing the undamaged part of her face, or from the front, with an eye-patch covering the healing wound. Clearly, making yourself look beautiful does not equate to feeling beautiful; and the protagonist's ordeal with physical disfigurement is obviously reminiscent of Akbari's own struggle with the destructive repercussions of breast cancer. Rhythm is key in Akbari's work, modulating and structuring everything, especially in One.Two.One. This is most obviously conveyed by the palindrome in the title itself, which literally reflects Ava's movement between lovers (one young, the other more mature) as she recovers her self-confidence; but most effectively by the dialogue, why is as musical as a lullaby. The cadence of the words and sentences – regardless of our in/ability to understand Farsi – creates mesmerizing aural patterns. by Mar Diestro Dopide



One. Two. One



Film Review by Josh Slater-Williams | 22 Jul 2013

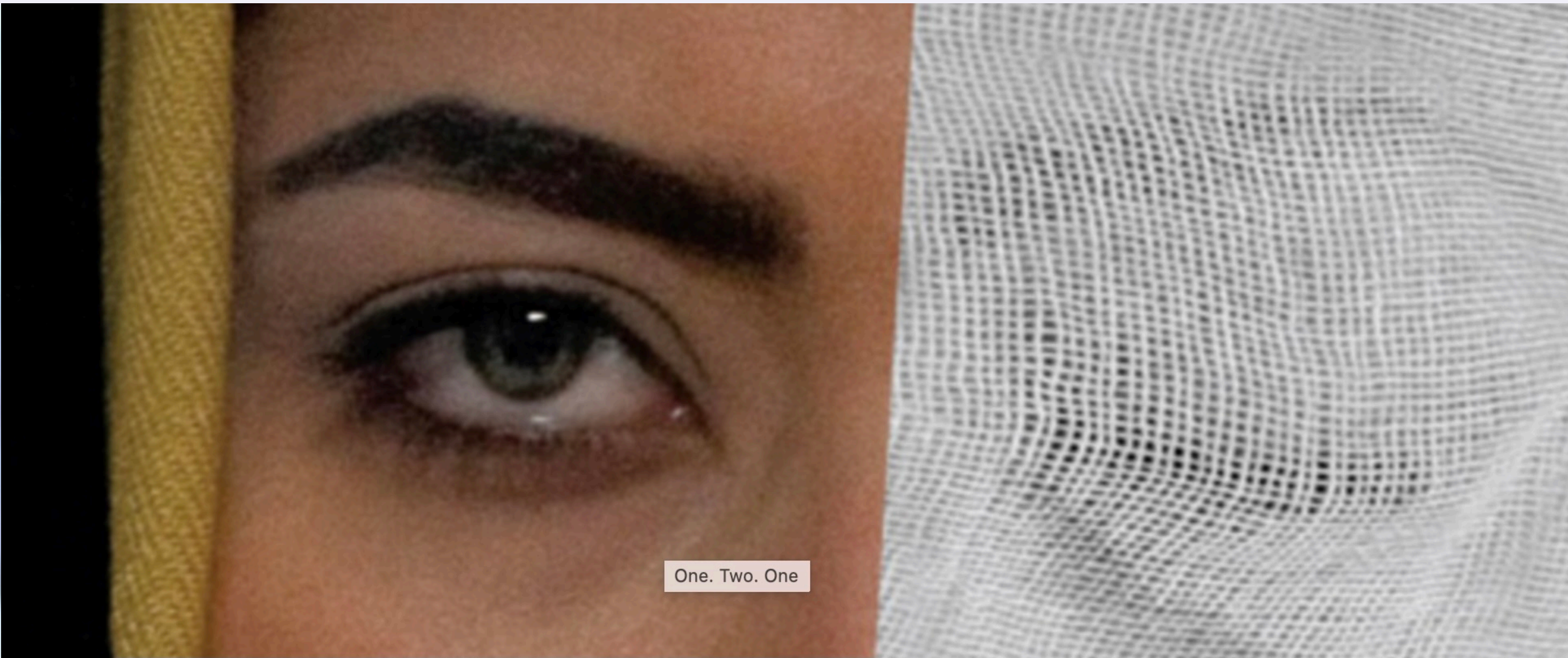


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The Skinny

ONE.TWO.ONE

In an Iranian society that places heavy emphasis on beauty regarding a woman's worth, Ava (Amiri) finds herself the victim of an acid attack to the face courtesy of a former long-term partner who does not take kindly to her interest in another man. Built around a series of extended conversations, One. Two. One documents various stages of Ava's recovery process, and gives insights into the various men involved in her life, whether she wishes them to be or not.

With scenes comprised of lengthy single takes that favour often uncomfortable close-ups, director Mania Akbari's meticulously conceived film is a suitably claustrophobic work appropriate for its lead's frustrations. Its conversation and camera rhythms have an entrancing quality that, aided by very strong, subtle performances, builds a haunting portrait of loss and renewal regarding love. The cumulative result is quietly devastating, both in terms of its characters' journeys and the wider meaning applicable to the society in which the film is set. **[Josh Slater-Williams]**



One. Two. One

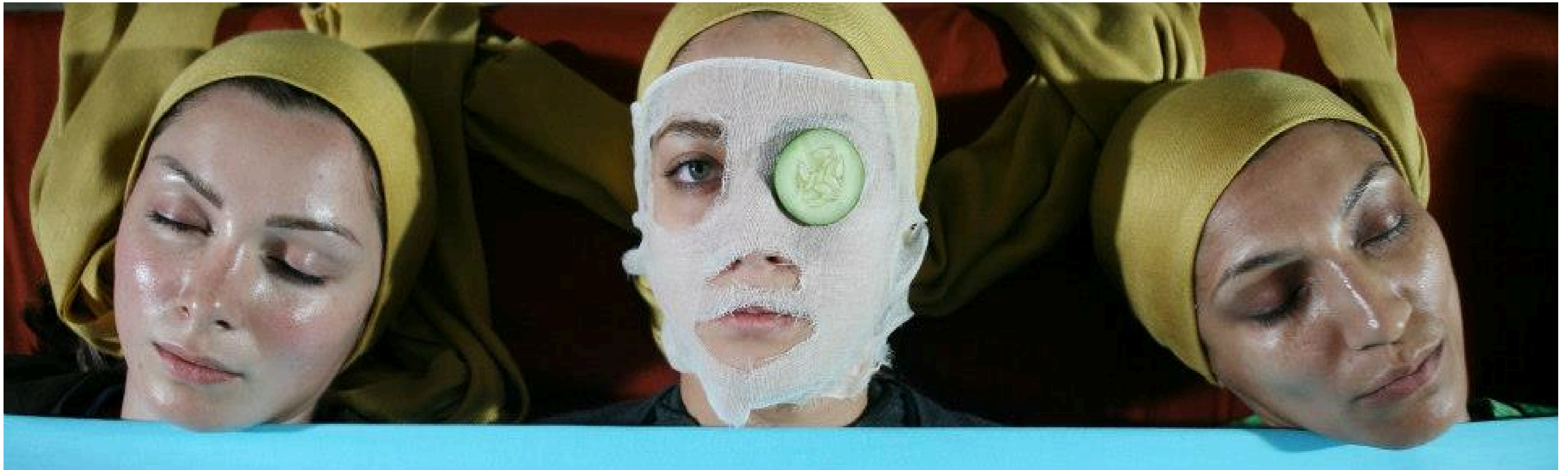


Starring: Neda Amiri, Hassan Majooni,
Payam Dehkordi, Bahareh Rahnema,
Ashkan Mehri, Roya Javidnia
Cameraman: Shahriyar Asadi





The film takes on an intimate, real-life feel thanks Akbari's mastery of the minutiae of body language and human interaction



L W Yates hails a nuanced sketch of a young Iranian woman masterfully constructed in Mania Akbari's One. Two. One

One. Two. One, Mania Akbari's 2011 feature, has been re-released after a difficult birth that included the banning of the film in her native Iran, a country famously hostile to forward thinking artists and those seeking to make overt social commentary. In Akbari's own words, filmmaking in Iran is like "open heart surgery...your life is in danger every second". By Western standards, the film is fairly tame and certainly not one that is going to be slapped with a Certificate 15, let alone banned. It raises some interesting questions about women's rights and society as a whole. Ava (Neda Amiri) is a university student in Tehran. As the film opens, we see one of Ava's eyes gazing out blankly from beneath a face pack at a well-to-do beauty salon, the other hidden by a judicious slice of cucumber. Women chatter about plastic surgeons and face cream while Ava mulls over current beau Mani and former fiancé Rahim (Hassan Majouni), the man who threw acid into her face in revenge for seeing her with a new man. Over the course of the film, we see the complex relationships between the main characters played out over a series of tight dialogues: Rahim, now in prison for the acid attack, laments to a friend that Ava will not forgive him. Mani tells a friend that he "doesn't want to fight" over her. A fan whirrs in the background as the fortune-teller reads Ava's future. An almost identical fan whirrs through one of the most telling scenes in the film, when Ava, tearful and bandaged, explains her dreams to her psychiatrist. She dreams of snakes, of feeling "heavy like a pregnant woman", of wearing clothes so tight that her flesh is exposed and a veil so small that her hair is uncovered. Dreams, perhaps, but these images are deliberate in their deployment here: Ava's internal dialogue echoes the feelings of confinement and inherent culpability pushed onto her by the outside world. One of the most potent things about One. Two. One is not however the fear, the oppression or the societal mores portrayed in the first half of the film, themes that dominate so many critiques of Akbari's work. It is, rather, the way in which Ava picks herself up, rejects Mani's attempt at reconciliation and finds new love – in an unexpected place, but firmly on her own terms and while making jokes about her ordeal on the way. One. Two. One takes on an intimate, real-life feel, thanks to the apparent exclusive use of long takes and Akbari's mastery of the minutiae of body language and human interaction, whether this is through two strangers making eye contact for the first time or a hand gyrating menacingly at the end of a plaster-covered arm. The lighting, too, is beautiful: goopy and artificial, an unavoidable remnant of filming on the hoof. Style aside, the film asks as many questions as it answers: is the oppression of women the work of men of all society, including women? It is interesting that while Rahim rants about his ownership of Ava, the only other human being he mentions is his mother: "She told me Ava was mine." But how should we view Rahim's mother, who presumably came of age at around the time of the revolution? Is she a stalwart of "the way things were"? An excuse for Rahim to behave violently towards Ava? Or merely a woman acting in the best interest, social or psychological, of her son? The truth is further muddled when we think more generally about women's rights in Iran, where the 1979 revolution had wide-ranging, and certainly not entirely negative, effects for women. In pre-revolutionary Iran, women's rights groups had been increasingly influential, with Iranian women gaining the right to vote years before their counterparts in Switzerland and Portugal. Between the genesis of the movement in the early 20th century and the time of the revolution, women had gained the right to equality in marriage and divorce, abortion and wages.

The legacy of these early Iranian feminists lives on today, with the majority of university students (and a huge 70% of science and engineering students) being women. Despite this, women make up only around 15% of Iran's workforce, one of the lowest proportions in the world. Women are not allowed to hold public sector jobs above the municipal level, and are notable by their absence in more skilled jobs. In 2012, proposals were made by 36 universities to either segregate students by gender or to bar women from studying a number of subjects, although this seems to have been publicly opposed by the Ministry of Education following widespread protests and has not been implemented at the time of going to press. Many of the more specific rights granted to women under the Shah were revoked following the revolution. Mandatory veiling was re-introduced, the minimum age for marriage was lowered to 13 and gender equality in legal disputes was also removed, with testimony from a woman considered to be worth half of that of a man. Contemporary campaigners for women's rights also face significant obstacles, with many of those contributing to the One Million Signatures campaign (a petition-based movement opposing legal discrimination against women) reporting having been assaulted or arrested while campaigning. In 2008, four women received jail sentences for their part in the campaign. Media coverage of women's issues is all but absent: the only Iranian women's magazine was closed down in 2008 on account of it being a "threat to the psychological well-being of the society". And so we return to Ava and to Rahim's mother, two women a generation apart with one thing in common: they are women in the real world, with real families and real relationships. They get hungry and bored and have to just do the best they can with what they have, whichever society they find themselves in. And here is crux of this film, the one question that defines the work, especially in the context of Akbari's struggle to complete it: who is the dangerous woman (and to whom): the one who encourages her son's ownership of other human beings, or she who dares to say "no"?



A woman's face is no simple thing: It faces outward, it reflects something of the gaze that is aimed at it, it covers itself, it gets reconstructed. This is one message of this disarmingly, deceptively simple film, which takes the form of a series of dialogues, brilliantly played by a sizable cast and directed with a magnificent sense of rhythm, light and movement. It is dialogue in the best sense: a cascade of confidences, truth after truth plainly uttered and directed at the camera, whose role is simply to place itself before the scenes from which these truths emerge, as if reality were just there and had to be captured, needing no intervention. The narrative complexity of One.Two.One arises from the interplay among the various episodes (all centering on the story of a beautiful woman who has been disfigured in an accident), the various points of view they involve and the gaps among them; and further layers of complexity await within each episode, as it unfolds at the pace of the movement of the camera, which lets in only a little at a time of this woman's reality that is at once so candid and so private.
By Chris Fujiwara : About One.Two.One





*{Economic Measures is a new,
regular column celebrating those
facial and bodily gestures in film
that say a lot with a little.}*







The twelfth and antepenultimate scene in Mania Akbari's *One, Two, One* (2011) takes place in a telecabin carriage ascending Mount Tochal, just outside Tehran. It begins with Ava (Neda Amiri) recounting to a date (Payam Dehkordi) an amusing incident that occurred days previously. Telling it, she stutters, looks away from her date and talks more quickly and assertively, with fewer breaths, as if to regain control of both the anecdote and herself. All of this happens in an instant. Ava punctuates the end of her anecdote by rolling her eyes, acknowledging its silliness, to settle back from its melodrama and to return the watchful gaze of her date. After she has finished her story, Ava's date informs her that she has some lipstick on her teeth. She wipes it off. "Is it gone?" she asks. "Yep," he replies. She purses her lips and smiles, suspending that fleeting moment in which a woman realises she is the object of a man's gentle scrutiny, and looks away with something resembling a coy laugh. The hand on which she has propped her head moves in a gesture that is at once unconscious and self-conscious, a defence mechanism against the unflinching attention she is receiving. Ava's fingers come across her neck to form a kind of shield. Her chin rests on the back of her hand. A finger dares to twitch – or is it a self-caress? Feeling less open to would-be advances, she moves her entire head back to face the man sitting in intimate proximity across from her, to confront him, test him, return his intensity by eyeing him direct. In what is perhaps an instinctive need to regain poise and power, she spots a stray hair on his bald head, and returns a favour by lifting it and blowing it from her own hand. All of this unfolds within a fixed frame and in the space of half of minute. It's gently, harmoniously, relatably erotic. It captures that nervous energy of a first or second date so well. Here are two people whose interest in one another might primarily be physical but whose connection has a palpable electricity that goes beyond lust – that excitement one feels at the onset of a new companionship. Such excitement is twofold. It is not merely about finding someone new, but also about challenging and renewing oneself – and, here, one's sense of self, for Ava has, we know, recently recovered from an acid attack by her jealous husband. In these moments, Amiri embodies the extraordinary courage and trust a woman must sustain in a society whose primary criterion of judgement is aesthetic beauty. When she licks and sucks the lipstick from her teeth, she averts the spotlight in embarrassed acknowledgement that she is being looked at, admired, desired, analysed – in a word, "othered". She doesn't dislike it, but experience has taught her caution. She must give little away, must not reciprocate too much. This is flirting, that process by which otherwise innocent gestures become charged with possibilities, in which that fine line between ambiguity and clarity seems both to widen and to disappear. Flirting creates a veil of innocence to retreat behind at the same time as it creates an expanse of new terrain to chart. Neda Amiri might problematise *One, Two, One*'s apparent argument against the value placed by society upon physical beauty by being arguably the most beautiful actress alive. This is not her fault. As demonstrated in this and other scenes, however, her skill as a performer transcends the formal limitations of Akbari's film and occasionally elevates its more mannered and irritating aspects to the stuff of brilliance. Self-conscious, exposed, explorative, fearless, Amiri demands and commands respect simply by embracing that terrifying concept of making a mistake or losing control. It's no wonder her date is enraptured.

By Michael Pattison



The reservoir of thought and creativity for artists and film-makers the world over is everything they know, or indeed, do not know about themselves. They transform to images everything that already lives within them, together with all they acquire and absorb. To survive, and to sustain their artistic and intellectual path, artists work hard, and deal with themselves and their inner essence in different ways. They work hard to keep alive the entity that lives within them, namely their creativity, which certainly needs care and attention. It is precisely this concept of creativity which forms the most important part of the world of an artist. But when there is fear, anxiety and external restrictions, it is not possible to have this creativity. This is because up to a point, these fears, anxieties and worries may bring about a state of internal flux for you, and you may be able to engage in creativity within that particular milieu. However, after you reach a certain point along the route, these fears and anxieties will act as a major blockade. This is because, after all, the soul and spirit of a creative person cannot co-exist with false fears. Unfortunately, in my geographical expanse and land, which is known as Iran, my endeavours to create and produce always faced severe bans and restrictions. I was never granted a production licence or indeed screening permit for any of my films. Nonetheless, I had to continue working so that I, and my art, would survive. I could not surrender to the sanctions and restrictions. Surrender was a kind of death for me. Different film-makers have different points of view, behaviours and conducts. There are film-makers in Iran who produce films with official permits, and they continue working in that system. Unfortunately, however, I was never one of them, and I was always deprived of that opportunity. This was intensely painful for me. After all, all film-makers have a dream and aspiration to have their works viewed on the cinema screens of the land of their birth, by an audience coming from the same place, and in a language which has taught them the vocabulary of life. Sadly, for me, this never materialized.

I did not view and approach cinema in the strict sense of cinema. Instead, I was an explorer who was keen to dissect life on the silver screen, perhaps to arrive at an alternative meaning for this sorrowful and seemingly pointless march towards death, moving closer with each passing day. I always faced plenty of restrictions and obstacles, and of course, my gender was a significant contributing factor too. As time went by, making films in Iran just kept becoming more and more difficult, and as the evidence shows, many film-makers were threatened, and some were even thrown in jail. I do not believe that arts should merely be a political cry, or should always be infused with a political vision. But I do believe that it is in fact invariably politics which ruthlessly permeates and contaminates the arts, and creates a political definition out of both the artists and the arts. This is precisely where the artists feel great pain and become vulnerable to harm and hurt. To escape this state of contamination, I left Iran, with grief and sorrow, despite all my love and fascination for that geographical expanse. I came to London and continued working on my last film, which I had been producing clandestinely. I edited and finished that film in London.

Today, an artist is a creature without a homeland, and must therefore think with a global consciousness and language.

by Mania Akbari

