

## ANOTHER SOHRAB

A NOTE ON MAANI PETGAR'S *STATION TO STATION* AND FARHAD VARAHRAM'S *STATION*  
(FILM MONTHLY, NO. 222, 1998)

This is the first time I feel obligated to write about someone after that person's death. A Sohrab (1) I've never seen, but believe I know everything about, due to his first three films and our numerous mutual friends. Everything happened in my own little world, towards the end of the Shah's reign, on a summer afternoon; a time when *A Simple Event* was featured in a single screening in Niavaran Cultural Center. In a way, through cinema, I was once again cast into life; a life which was both familiar and unfamiliar. Later on, before the revolution Moulin Rouge Cinema featured *Still Life* for one week. There were no more than ten or twenty people in the theater and quite a few left after awhile. I have not yet seen *A Simple Event* again, but I did see *Still Life* for the second time last year on video. Even though there had been a twenty some year gap between the two viewings, sometimes I could still sense how certain scenes begin or end. This was a strange experience for me, because I didn't think I could recall so much of *Still Life*. This reminded me of one of Cohen's songs, which goes: "I can't forget, but I don't remember what!" As far as I remember, I had experienced this only once before and that was when I saw Antonioni's *Blow up* for the second time after fifteen years. I realized then that the first screening was formed in my unconscious and viewing the film for the second time, made me aware of this reality. Of course, we cannot see a film twice and have the exact same experience. Every time we see our favorite film, we feel something different. What I mean by the unconscious effects of Shahid Sales' first two films in my mind is not that his films are the same as before after all these years. The years in which I saw those films for the first time, were rather dull years for me, but we must have a knack for staying alive in the dulllest moments of our lives, yet for Sohrab "being alive" was difficult; for most of his life he "stayed alive".

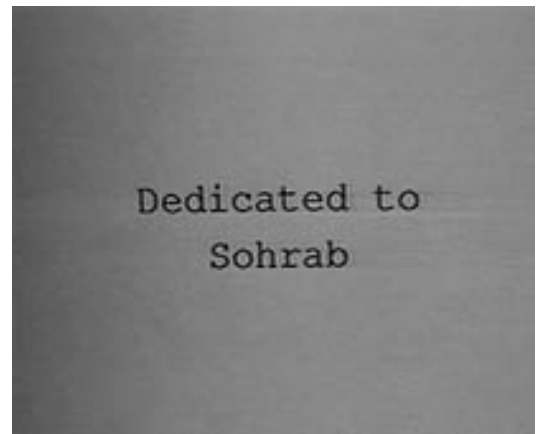
Five years ago, I became aware once again of how *Still Life* had affected my unconscious and that was the time that I intended to describe my short film to an Iranian friend in Australia. A train driver, whose personal life is isolated and repetitious, is shown through a static camera, but while he is working, he is supposed to be moving. When I told him the story he reminded me of *Still Life*. Until then I had never realized that *Station to Station* was so heavily influenced by *Still Life*, even though to film the driver's point of view, I had gone through several hundred kilometers of Sydney's railways. Once aware of this point, I became rather fussier about this ten-minute experimental film, to the extent that the completion of the film took rather long time, leaving me with ten hours of rushes. I wanted my film to be so eminent on its own small scale that I could dedicate it to Shahid Sales. About nineteen months being involved in making this simple film, resulted in having the original death scene in the story, but changing the treatment of the scene from the black pessimistic moods of the time of the shoot, to the white optimism of the film's editing time. So I ended up with a gray film.

A film requires credits, which is a good place to dedicate the film to Shahid Sales, but how many people really know him in Australia? And I'm not even sure if they remember him in other parts of the world. Talking about him to my non-Iranian friends, in the midst of saying his name, Sohrab Shahid Sales, they'd say "What?" So I decided to forget about his last name and just write "Dedicated to Sohrab". The second festival screening of *Station to Station* happened to be at Soureh Festival in Iran- 1995. While watching it in Isfahan along with few other viewers, when the dedication to Sohrab appeared, it suddenly occurred to me that the viewers may think I had meant Sohrab Sepehri! (2) There is no doubt in my mind on the significance of Sohrab Sepehri, but still I had meant another Sohrab. This name similarity made me think that as a matter of fact, these two Sohrabs have much in common, yet so many differences. While making the film, in changing the treatment of the train driver's death, I had come closer to the other Sohrab. Sepehri had started in blackness and reached whiteness and then died, but Shahid Sales had gone from blackness to an even deeper blackness but yet stayed alive.

He was an exception, not because he views the world as dull and empty; he was an exception because he had the courage and the ability to express his thoughts and feelings through cinema and did it well, otherwise we all have, at a point in our lives, noticed that life is routine and dull and will do so again and again. But as ordinary people, we keep ourselves occupied by searching for new toys, but maybe Sohrab took life too seriously and didn't believe in games, but yet he stayed alive...

One day I don't know who and where in the world said this to someone and I happened to overhear it. He said, "I don't know why life is so relentless that it kills the people who love it but keeps alive those who are tired of it". Without the intent to make this an absolute issue, I compared this aphorism with a few of my favorite directors and came to the conclusion that apparently there is some truth in it. Bresson, Bergman, and Woody Allen are living on, whereas Fellini and Ozu died prematurely. But how come Shahid Sales wasn't so lucky to even live a longer life and suffer to a greater extent?! And that, at a time when, a little too late, the pain of forgetting him and his cinema was ebbing and also a time when the success of modern Iranian cinema was dealing with his share, he left us alone!

I had heard that after the tribute to him in the Locarno Film Festival, he may come to our very own Asre Jadid Cinema (3) for the screening of *A Simple Event*. I was dying to show him Station to Station. From what I'd heard, the only sure thing about him was that his behavior or words were quite unpredictable. I was afraid that if he saw the film, he'd come down on it pretty hard. He may not like it at all; especially since the film, towards the end, develops a very fast pace and the music (contrary to his own films) plays a very important role...but I thought that having a discussion with him or even getting sworn at, would be rather fun.



However, I could not be sure what reaction he'd have towards a Sohrab whose Shahid Sales was dropped? Wasn't what I had done offensive? "Dedicated to Sohrab", Sohrab what? Could I have said to him: I'm truly devoted to you, sir, but they just don't remember you...

A simple event was about to occur for him to be remembered again, but too bad he died in a strange land, a strange land not because he was not in Iran, (4) but because life was a strange land for him and it wasn't simple at all, but if only it was! Because life isn't really all that still and this is probably not my last note of sorrow on the death of a forgotten Iranian artist, but if only it could have been...

1- Sohrab Shahid Saales: Filmmaker.

2-Sohrab Sepehri, the most popular modern poet, (along with Forough Farrokhzad). His poetry is influenced by East Asian mysticism and Zen.

3- Asre Jadid (Modern Times) cinema is an art house theater, which is located close to Tehran's University and there fore is very popular among the students.

4-Wherever I am, I shall be/ the sky is mine/ the window, the thought, the air, the love, the earth. are mine/ who cares if at times/ the mushrooms of a (foreign) strange land, shall grow? (By Sohrab