



# Stray Dogs

**Director:** Marzieh Meshkini  
**Country:** Iran  
**Date:** 2007

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

Moviemakers and TV dramatists seem so reluctant to engage with our deepening and open-ended involvement in Afghanistan that it is a relief to turn to any film that engages with life there, and in a language other than the crisis-management-speak of news reporting. This is, in a way, what Iranian director Marziyeh Meshkini is doing with this movie, an art-house festival favourite made two years ago and only now getting a UK release.

Meshkini, who made the interesting *The Day I Became a Woman*, is part of the House of Makhmalbaf film group; she is married to the director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, having worked as an assistant director on some of his films. His daughter, Samira Makhmalbaf, recently made a much-admired Afghan-set film, *At Five in the Afternoon*, whose star, Agheleh Rezaei, also appears in this film. Followers of those movies will instantly recognise the house style here: the use of children; the unhurried, walking-pace action; the subtly disjointed shot-reverse-shot dialogue with its fractional mismatch of sense. Notably, there is an ambiguous approach to the west's intervention in Afghanistan itself.



Two kids in Afghanistan rescue a terrified little dog from a crowd of children who are in the grip of a mob-rage. These two children, hardly less bewildered or more oppressed than their new four-legged friend, have an awful problem: their mother (Rezaei) is in prison on an immorality charge, having remarried after believing wrongly that her first husband, a Taliban fighter, had died in action. The husband, now himself in prison under the new dispensation, bitterly approves of her punishment. The children are desperate to be reunited with their mother. Having gone to a local cinema which, rather improbably, is playing Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, they think that by getting caught stealing a bicycle they can get thrown into prison with her.

What a strange, perplexing and ultimately exasperating film it is - and how familiar these feelings will be to those, like me, who remain sympathetic but agnostic about the House of Makhmalbaf. The allusion to *Bicycle Thieves* - and that dog - has prompted some critics to see an Italian neo-realist flavour to the whole movie. I think it is a question of a single, artificial allusion, dropped into the movie from above, for the delectation of cineastes, and symptomatic of the way the movie has been nurtured on the festival circuit. Again, the dialogue has the deadpan crosstalk-effect - the result, perhaps, of finding non-professionals on location and giving them each line just before the take, then cutting together the dialogue in the edit, so that sometimes they don't seem to be quite answering each other's questions.

Then there is the political question. You can hardly escape the impression that people's lives are crushed and disrupted as a result of the US-led invasion, but also that the Taliban were an oppressive force, too. The movie, arguably, reflects this ambivalence.

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