

# ON THE TABLE: JON RUBIN AND HABIB SOROSH



A Dinner, a Film, and a Book

MIT List Visual  
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## **A Dinner, a Film, and a Book**

I was born into a poor family in a small village of Afghanistan and grew up in the cradle of poverty. I was always fascinated by cinema and for the price of my lunch I often bought movies on DVD, and this left me hungry for many days and nights. Hunger is a common language in Afghanistan; almost everyone understands its meaning. Because there were few sources and little information about cinema in Afghanistan most of my films were hard to come by. Each DVD I purchased has a beautiful and sometimes sad story. For me, the value of these films is not only in their content but in the effort it took to get them.

I have written and directed many films and plays in Afghanistan that were critical of the Taliban's ideology. So when U.S. forces pulled out of Afghanistan in August of 2021 and the Taliban filled the void, I quickly had to burn all of my documents. I set fire to unpublished books of poetry, my family photo albums, my artistic documents, and even my DVD collection. I had laboriously amassed hundreds of films over the past 14 years and these works had served as my primary teaching material as a member of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Kabul University. It may seem inconsequential but this collection was my identity. But when you feel death close by, you are willing to destroy even your identity.

Now, I want to find my identity again.

To this end, Jon Rubin and I are working on a book project that re-collects all of my lost DVDs and tells the unique stories of how I originally acquired each one. Our contribution to *On the Table* is the beginning of this project.

Below is a recommendation for an evening that includes a simple set of Afghan dishes that we serve when we have guests, three movies from my lost collection that I invite you to choose from to watch during your meal and an invitation to help us with our book.

**Habibullah Sorosh**

## **A Dinner**

### STARTER

#### **Chai Tea, Chocolates, and Dried Fruits**

When guests come to our house, we first serve them with green, black, or saffron teas, along with chocolate, dried fruits, and nuts such as almonds and pistachios. In daily life we drink tea with chocolate before the meal and do not eat dried fruits because it is very expensive.

### DINNER

#### **Qabuli Palaw, Fruit Salad, Veggie Salad Naan, and Chai Tea with Sugar**

All these dishes are served at once, with our guests sitting on pillows atop a carpet. Qabuli Palaw is a traditional rice dish with cumin, raisins, and turmeric. We serve the palaw with beef dumplings or mutton. We also serve a veggie salad with chopped onion, cucumber, tomatoes, pepper, coriander, lemon, and garlic; a fruit salad with apples, grapefruit, and oranges; chapati bread; and for a drink we include chai tea with sugar, colas and mineral water. In our daily life we would only eat this meal once a month. Most days we eat simple meals that might include bread, beans, potatoes, rice, vegetables, eggs, chickpeas, lentils, and chicken.

### DESSERT

#### **Chai Tea and Saffron with Chocolates**

## **A Film**

Habib has selected three films from his lost collection that we invite you to choose from to watch during your meal. Each film is accompanied by a recollection of how it has uniquely impacted Habib's life.

### ***Osama***

Directed by Siddiq Barmak  
2003

In 2006 I was a second semester student at Kabul University, living in a dormitory. One night a friend told me about the film *Osama*, and although I had not seen the movie, I felt I knew this story from my own life. Perhaps, it was because I identified with the main character, who has to change her identity to make a living for her family under the Taliban's rule. *Osama* is the story of an innocent girl who has to masquerade as a boy because of the heavy burden of inequality and religious extremism. It is a story of fear. The script is based on a series of painful and real events that all the people of Afghanistan have witnessed and felt.

I asked all my friends if they had this film, but no one did. As I was born into a poor family in a village far from Kabul, I had no extra money to buy anything besides food and I was starting to obsess about how I could acquire the film. One day I decided that instead of going to university I would go to Kote Sangi, a public square where workers came to find work. My plan was to wait for someone who needed a worker, and then I would use my salary to buy *Osama*.

When I got to the square, I saw about 300 people waiting to have someone take them to work. Whenever a car arrived, the workers crowded in, everyone trying to get work. I also joined these workers and ran to every car that came along, saying loudly, "Do you need a worker, Uncle? I will take less pay than the others."

Several cars came and took the physically strong workers. I was worried that no one would ever pick me because I was so physically

weak. After five hours of waiting, a Corolla came and all the workers ran towards it. A handsome man got out of the car and stared at the workers. His eyes met mine. He approached me and said, "Are you a worker?" I said, in a trembling voice, "Yes." He said, "Get in the car." We drove to the wealthy area of Khair Khana and when we arrived at his luxurious and modern house he guided me inside. As is tradition, he offered me bread, and as opposed to the poor quality government bread I was used to at school, this was fresh paraki naan, the exact kind my mother would make. It reminded me of her and how much I missed her. As I did not have the bus fare to go back to my village, I had not seen my mother for seven months.

The man yelled loudly to his young children, "Come, Nilab, Susan, and Muhammad." His children came.

I looked at the man and said, "Sir, can you guide me as to what I should do?" The man stared at me for a bit and then said, "Stand up." I stood. The man turned to his children and said, "Look carefully. This boy is very young and handsome, but, if you do not study, your destiny will be like his."

Yes! I was a symbol of laziness and illiteracy for his children.

I felt my throat squeeze with hatred, and I could not hold back my tears. I cried. His wife came to me and raised my head and said: "Do not cry dear. If you studied, you would not live like this now. You could become an engineer or doctor."

When I felt the motherly caress of that woman, I remembered my own mother, who always said pridefully to everyone that would listen, "My dear son, Habib: from the first grade until now he always got the first position at school."

In the midst of crying and sobbing, I said, "I got the first position in school, and now I am the first position in my class at university." They were so upset to hear this that they gave me 300 Afghani on the spot, which is one day's salary for a worker. I said, "I did not do anything. I do not deserve a salary." But the man hugged me and gave me the money anyway.

I left his house, and went to the DVD store and bought the film *Osama*.

## ***Battleship Potemkin***

Directed by Sergei Eisenstein  
1925

In 2007, as a sophomore at Kabul University, we had a three-month workshop with the Iranian artist Arash Absalan. He was especially interested in Russian classic cinema and spent hours teaching us about the structure and value of Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film, *Battleship Potemkin*.

The film tells the story of the revolt that broke out in 1905 among the sailors of the Battleship Potemkin, and how they rebelled against the degrading way they were being treated by their officers. When the insurgents in the film get support from the people of Odessa, the port where the battleship is moored, the czarist police move in, resulting in the famous "steps scene" that depicts the massacre. *Battleship Potemkin* is suggestive of a historical reconstruction, but is in reality a revolutionary propaganda statement that does not worry too much about the facts. For instance, (spoiler alert) the happy ending in the film, with the Potemkin setting off a chain reaction of mutinying ship crews, is completely a-historical; in reality, the mutiny was quelled.

I became very interested in learning as much as possible about Eisenstein's cinematic thinking, but there was no credible library or facilities I could use to find out more. Arash taught us how to use the Internet to make downloads, but there were over 4,000 students in my dormitory, and there were only four desktop computers connected to the Internet.

In order to be able to use the computer we had to register and you were only allowed to access it for one hour. I waited for days until it was my turn to use the computer so I could download the film *Battleship Potemkin*. After 23 days, I managed to get behind the computer with a friend, and we quickly went to the Internet to search for the film, but either the download would be too slow or the power would go out before the hour was over.

One day Arash sent me an email saying that he would be returning to Kabul soon. I asked him if he could bring me the DVD of *Battleship Potemkin*, and I counted the months until he arrived. When Arash finally arrived in Kabul, I went to his room with great joy, and he

presented me with the film, along with a few films by Andrei Tarkovsky and two novels by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

In the end, it had taken several months to finally get a copy of the film. I watched it and read the books over and over and became fascinated by classic Russian cinema and literature. This changed the course of my education and led me to continue my studies in Kazakhstan where I received a Masters in Russian and Kazakh literature and cinema.

## ***The Godfather***

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola  
1972

On October 28th, 2007, I was so caught up in life's problems that I even forgot it was my own birthday until my very close friend, Rahmat Nasiri, called to remind me and invite me to dinner. Rahmat was my best friend since childhood and we were so close that once a week, no matter how busy we were, we would meet and talk for hours.

Because I was living in poverty, I had not celebrated my birthday for three years. It was not so much because I lacked funds, but because my birthday was not valuable to me. I sometimes blamed my parents for giving birth to me. I sometimes wished I was not in this cruel world. Between to be and not to be, I thought.

That night at Rahmat's house, with many friends in attendance, I celebrated my birthday. My friends each gave me gifts, but Rahmat's gift stands out among these. He gave me the DVD of *The Godfather*, a film he knew I had read about, but I had never seen.

I've watched the film many times since, and always find it moving. I love the decoupage structure of the shooting and editing in the film. Take for example, the scene where the Godfather is shot on the street (hopefully, this is not a spoiler). The movement of the camera is beautifully in rhythm with the action of the character. The calmer the action, the slower the camera, the more serious the action, the more the camera moves.

There are a few lines of dialogue spoken by the Godfather, played beautifully by Marlon Brando, which have remained with me until today: "I have learned more in the streets than in any classroom."

“A man who doesn’t spend time with his family can never be a real man.” He seems to speak about a simple philosophy for how to live in a difficult world.

The film also presents what happens to women when they are either the pretext for men’s fights or the victims of men’s short-lived greed. In this way, the world of the Mafia reminded me of the sexist tyranny under the Taliban rule.

This film became one of the most authoritative sources in my teaching of cinema at Kabul University and always held a special place in my heart as it was given to me as a gift by one of my best friends, who is no longer alive.

Rahmat was a Computer Science Professor at the American University in Kabul. Ten years after he gave me *The Godfather* he was killed in a suicide attack by the Taliban in Kabul.

He was a friend in good days and bad, and we shared many beautiful moments together. It may be very bitter, but I’m glad *The Godfather* reminds me of that birthday party and one of my life’s best friends.



## **A Book**

We are working on a book that re-collects all of Habib's lost DVDs and tells the stories of how each film functioned as a portal into his life and teaching in Afghanistan. We invite you to help rebuild his collection by sending us one of the DVDs from the list below (we recognize that most folks don't use DVDs anymore, so hopefully you might have some lying around). For each DVD that we are sent, Habib will respond with a personal email containing the story of that film's relationship to his life. Feel free to also send us your own thoughts on the film.

**Mail your DVD to:**

**Habib Sorosh and Jon Rubin  
School of Art, Carnegie Mellon University  
5000 Forbes Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213**

**hsorosh@andrew.cmu.edu  
jonrubin@cmu.edu**

*12*

*3 IDIOTS*

*12 Angry Men*

*12 Years a Slave*

*16 Days in Afghanistan*

*2001: A Space Odyssey*

*6.5 Per Meter*

*A Beautiful Mind*

*A Few Cubic Meters of Love*

*A Letter to the President*

*A Man for All Seasons*

*A Separation*

*A Star Is Born*

*A Trip To The Moon*

*About Elly*

*Airlift*

*Alexia*

*Alison*

*All About Eve*

*Almost Famous*

*American Beauty*

*An American in Paris*

*An Apple from Paradise*

*Anand*

*Andhadhun*

*Annie Hall*

*Arman Shahr (Utopia)*

*Around the World in 80 Days*

*Baahubali: The Beginning*

*Baduk*

*Baghban*

*Bajrangi Bhaijaan*

Bala  
Baran  
Barfi  
Battleship Potemkin  
Beanpole  
Best films  
Birdman  
Black Friday  
Black Kite  
Bladerunner  
Boyhood  
Braveheart  
Breakfast at Tiffany's  
Breathe: Into the Shadows  
Brick And Mirror  
Brief Encounter  
Brother  
Butterfly Swimming  
Buzkashi Boys  
Canis  
Cargo 200  
Casablanca  
Children of Heaven  
Cigarettes & Coffee  
Citizen Kane  
City Lights  
Cleopatra  
Close to Eden  
Code 8  
Come and See  
Crash  
Cutting Moments  
Dances with Wolves  
Dead Man's Bluff  
Deewar  
Dehkada ha Bidar Maishawand  
Dial M for Murder  
Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge  
Django Unchained  
Drishyam  
Earth and Ashes  
Eisenstein's Mexican Project  
Eternal Sunshine  
of the Spotless Mind  
Everyday  
Faceless  
Fight Club  
Forrest Gump  
Frankenweenie  
From Here to Eternity  
From Russia with Love  
FTL  
Game Over  
Gangs of Wasseypur  
Get Out  
Gigi  
Gladiator  
Gold  
Goldfinger  
Gone with the Wind  
Goodfellas  
Gosford Park  
Grand Hotel  
Greed  
Green Book  
Guide  
Hamlet  
Hard to be a God  
Hawa, Maryam, Aisha  
He Took His Skin Off For Me  
Hell and Back Again  
Her  
Hichki  
Hindi Medium  
Hipsters  
How Green Was My Valley  
I Am Here  
I Am You  
If Anything Happens I Love You  
In the Heat of the Night  
Inception  
Intolerance

*Ishq Va Dostee*  
*Ivan the Terrible*  
*Ivan the Terrible, Part II*  
*Ivan's Childhood*  
*Juno*  
*Just Like My Son*  
*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*  
*Kabuli Kid*  
*Kandahar*  
*Kesari*  
*Killer*  
*Kramer vs. Kramer*  
*Kyz-Zhibek*  
*L'amour Existe*  
*La Jetee*  
*LAGAAN*  
*Laila Majnoon*  
*Lawrence of Arabia*  
*Leila*  
*Leviathan*  
*Little Miss Sunshine*  
*Lord of the Rings:*  
    *Fellowship of the Ring*  
*Lord of the Rings:*  
    *Return of the King*  
*Lost in Translation*  
*Lust Stories*  
*Made in Heaven*  
*Made Public*  
*Man with a Movie Camera*  
*Manchester by The Sea*  
*Mangol*  
*Mary Poppins*  
*Melodrama Sacramental*  
*Mermaid*  
*Midnight Cowboy*  
*Midnight in Paris*  
*Midnight Traveler*  
*Milk*  
*Million Dollar Baby*  
*Mina Walking*

*Mirror*  
*Moonlight*  
*Mother India*  
*Mughal-e-Azam*  
*Mutiny on the Bounty*  
*My Fair Lady*  
*My Good Hans*  
*My Joy*  
*My Name Is Khan*  
*Naysayer*  
*New ray*  
*Newton*  
*No Country for Old Men*  
*No Woman*  
*Nomad: The Warrior*  
*Nomadland*  
*Not out*  
*Notorious*  
*October (Ten Days that Shook  
    the World)*  
*Oh My God*  
*Old and New*  
*On the Waterfront*  
*Once Upon A Time In The West*  
*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*  
*Opium War*  
*Orange Days*  
*Osama*  
*Out of Africa*  
*Padmavat*  
*Panipat*  
*Paradise*  
*Parasite*  
*Parting*  
*Patton*  
*Pesn o Manshuk*  
*Piku*  
*Pink*  
*PK*  
*Platoon*  
*Prisoner of the Mountains*

*Promising Young Woman*  
*Psycho*  
*Pulp Fiction*  
*Pure Repentance*  
*Que Viva Mexico*  
*Queen*  
*Raazi*  
*Raees*  
*Raiders of the Lost Ark*  
*Rain Man*  
*Ratsasan*  
*Rear Window*  
*ReMoved*  
*Rona, Azim's Mother*  
*Russian Ark*  
*Saboore Sarbaz*  
*SANGAM*  
*Sardar*  
*Schindler's List*  
*Science Of Love*  
*Sentimental Romance*  
*Sex & Philosophy*  
*Shawshank Redemption*  
*Sholay*  
*Silent Souls*  
*Singin' in the Rain*  
*Six Men Getting Sick (Six Times)*  
*Six Shooter*  
*Slumdog Millionaire*  
*Solaris*  
*Spotlight*  
*Stalker*  
*Star Wars: The Empire*  
*Strikes Back*  
*Sultan*  
*Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*  
*Super 30*  
*Swades*  
*Talaash*  
*Talk to Her*  
*Talvar*  
*Taste Of Cherry*  
*Taxi Driver*  
*The Afghan Alphabet*  
*The Apartment*  
*The Big Shave*  
*The Black Tulip*  
*The Boy Mir*  
*The Color of Paradise*  
*The Color of Pomegranates*  
*The Cranes are Flying*  
*The Dark Knight*  
*The Deer Hunter*  
*The Departed*  
*The English Patient*  
*The Fall of Otrar*  
*The Final Call*  
*The French Connection*  
*The Gardener*  
*The Giant Buddahs*  
*The Godfather*  
*The Godfather: Part II*  
*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*  
*The Grape of Wrath*  
*The Great Ziegfel*  
*The Greatest Show on Earth*  
*The Horde*  
*The Hurt Locker*  
*The Irony of Fate*  
*The King's Speech*  
*The Kite Runner*  
*The Land of Oz*  
*The Life of Emile Zola*  
*The Lost Weekend*  
*The Lunchbox*  
*The Man Who Knew Too Much*  
*The Neighbors' Window*  
*The Night of the Hunter*  
*The Nostalgist*  
*The Old Man*  
*The Orphanage*  
*The Patience Stone*

*The President*  
*The Sacrifice*  
*The Salesman*  
*The Searchers*  
*The Shape of Water*  
*The Shop Around the Corner*  
*The Silence of the Lambs*  
*The Smiling Man*  
*The Sound of Music*  
*The Steamroller and the Violin*  
*The Sun*  
*The Wizard of Oz*  
*There Will Be No Leave Today*  
*Three Idiots*  
*Thunder Over Mexico*  
*Time of Love*  
*Titanic*  
*To Be or Not to Be*  
*To Kill a Mockingbird*  
*Tramwaj*  
*Tulpan*  
*Tumbbad*  
*Un Chien Andalou*  
*Une Femme Coquette*  
*Unforgiven*  
*Up On The Roof*  
*Veer-Zaara*  
*Vertigo*  
*Voyage in Time*  
*Wajma (An Afghan Love Story)*  
*War and Peace*  
*West Side Story*  
*What Tomorrow Brings*  
*Wings*  
*Wolf and Sheep*  
*Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani*  
*You Can't Take It with You*