



EDITED BY
PARVIZ JAHED

DIRECTORY OF
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IRAN

Edited by Parviz Jahed



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I was very excited to take on the responsibility of regional editor of *Directory of World Cinema: Iran*. It is a part of a major project at Intellect, covering cinema of the world from a national aspect, made with the intent of contributing to a more serious study of world cinema, and in this case, Iran. What I tried to do was compile the main framework of the whole project and to also outline the aims of the directory and its content.

The intention was to produce as much original work as possible as part of a fresh approach to writing about Iranian cinema, but a problem which arose with this was that certain films, particularly films which were made before the Iranian Islamic Revolution, were difficult to get a hold of, especially in reliable formats such as DVD, and so it was not possible for our contributors to review them, therefore I decided to reprint some reviews previously published in Iran, which have been collected from various sources. I wish to thank them for their kind permission.

It should also be noted that a large number of the original contributions were written in Farsi and had to be translated. Those with experience will know this is a time consuming process and one which is extremely challenging to get right. And I would like to thank our translators Arash Jalali and Leila Ataie for their vital work and diligence. A special thanks to Arash Jalali for the translation of most of the reviews and essays originally written in Farsi, and in particular the essay on 'Iranian New Wave Cinema' written by Saeed Aghighi.

Another limitation, being the amount of space required to contain different aspects of Iranian cinema, meant selecting films and directors which best represent the overall qualities of a national cinema, and with the aim of not missing out anything important. Further volumes will be published consecutively, containing the important cinematic trends, films, and directors left out in this volume.

With the contributions of a wide spectrum of writers, including those working inside of Iran, presenting a view of this subject from the inside, as well as a number of film students studying Iranian cinema with a new academic approach,

and a number of lecturers and film critics who have a vast level of understanding and deep knowledge of Iranian cinema and have written many essays, articles, and publications on different aspects of cinema in Iran, including Michelle Langford, Jonathan Rosenbaum and Michael Anderson. This creates a diverse and balanced view, comprising of an extraordinary range of outlooks towards the expansive world of Iranian cinema. I would like to thank all the contributors to this volume which, without their participation, could never have existed. I also wish to thank Jonathan Rosenbaum for letting me republish his insightful reviews previously published in the *Chicago Reader*, as well as allowing me to shorten them for the purposes of this book.

I am grateful to Masoud Yazdani the director of Intellect for head-starting this project and showing such enthusiasm and keenness for Iranian cinema. I would also like to thank the staff at Intellect, particularly May Yao, Jennifer Schivas and Melanie Marshall, for their invaluable support and help through the various stages, making it a truly collaborative process. And I am deeply grateful to my family: my wife Roya and my son Barbad, for their support, patience and inspiration.

And so I am optimistic that this book will serve as a helpful source, successful in filling the information gap that exists on Iranian national cinema, for research and study purposes, and also a comprehensive enough reference for those purely interested in the subject.

Parviz Jahed

INTRODUCTION

BY THE EDITOR

The Iranian constitutional revolution and modernity movement commenced close on the heels of the debut of cinema in Iran. In fact, cinema in Iran appeared in concurrence with the rise of modern thought, so much so that the fate of cinema has been somewhat linked to the historic fate of modernity. As the most influential modern media in Iran's traditional, religious, and non-democratic society, cinema was constantly denounced by clerics and religious classes on the one hand and censored and placed under immense pressure by the state and military bodies on the other.

The case of the Iranian cinema in the early days after its debut is paradoxical, since it was introduced to Iran by people who bore no affinity to this modern product of the progressive and industrial West (reference here is being made to the Qajar king and courtiers) and who, historically, are considered among the most backward and reactionary classes of the society. Upon being recommended by Intellect Books to become the editor of the *Directory of World Cinema: Iran*, I immediately accepted, for I had really noticed the gap in English publishing for a complete and thorough index of Iranian cinema, whether as a post-graduate student at the University of Westminster, writing my dissertation on the origins of the Iranian New Wave Cinema, or in my own studies and work on Iranian cinema in general.

There was a strong need for a compendium of sorts about Iranian cinema, and so this was a worthy project to be embarked on. It could be supposed that a lot of writing already exists on Iranian cinema, new Iranian cinema in particular; including journals and even books, but the majority of these pieces have been written by western critics and researchers, with Iranian writers and scholars occupying a relatively meagre ratio. In addition, a major part of English writings that exists on Iranian cinema is concerned with post-revolutionary cinema (or 'new' Iranian cinema), with only a few sources existing on pre-revolutionary

cinema which are often mistake-ridden and of little academic value. Therefore it was a necessity to publish to paint a clear picture of Iranian cinema and its development from its formation to the present day, presenting not only a chronological record of movements and specific genres and trends, but also one which logically interlinks the cinema of before and after the Revolution. A book which can be used as a reliable source of information on Iranian cinema for those interested in the subject as well as a reference for scholars and the like, with the main goal being to effectively fill an analytical and informative gap about Iranian cinema in English literature.

The main approach here is to take a look at the different genres, an element which throughout its 100 year history, Iranian cinema has taken on and abandoned its fair share of; for example the 'Jaheli' genre (roughly translated to 'ruffian') was very popular in the 1960s and 1970s but was simply non-existent after the Revolution. The main problem with this was classifying Iranian films in terms of genre, as some films can be very hard to pigeonhole, or overlap into several genres. In my view, any national cinema has its own film culture and cinematic terms which may not be found in American or European film culture or in the western film criticism. Therefore it is important to maintain a balance between the diversity of local Iranian cinema and the underlying unity of world cinema.

Despite its limitations, this manner of categorizing is the most comprehensive method to investigate the films and trends of Iranian cinema in a historical and social context. This kind of approach also helps in presenting the many international influences (such as the cinema of Hollywood or Indian films) on Iranian cinema, and how they have helped in shaping these generic conventions. The approach also highlights how certain genres have formed, changed, or disappeared all together in accordance with the periodic, political alterations that occurred within Iran – as seen through films made about war, or children.

Behrouz Tourani, in his remarkable essay addressed the invention of cinema in Iran from a new perspective and investigated its development despite all the obstacles and restrictions on its way. It deserves to be noted that there are words in Iranian film culture which may refer to a specific film genre (such as Jaheli Film which literally means a film based on a 'ruffian') or a trend of filmmaking such as Film Farsi. Although a translation of the word is stated, I aim to explain its true definition in my essay on the pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema. I have focused on Film Farsi, a cinematic term referring to Iranian mainstream cinema during the 1960s and 1970s, differentiating it from Iranian art films.

That was the dominant form of cinema in Iran at the time and followed a very simple formula similar to that of the popular cinema of India and Egypt. The

Iranian cinema of today is at its peak due to the appearance of some outstanding new talents of the like of Mohsen Makhmalabaf, Abbas Kiarostami, Abolfazl Jalili, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Jafar Panahi and Bahman Ghobadi, allowing them to receive wider attention internationally and a greater level of critical acclaim.

But the international success of Iranian cinema in recent years is not a new matter; rather it goes back to the early 1960s when films made by Ebrahim Golestan, Farrokh Ghaffari, Fereydoun Rahnama, Feroz Farrokhzad, Daruish Mehrjui and Bahram Bayzaie won top international prizes. Films such as *Khesht-va- Ayeneh/The Brick and The Mirror* (Ebrahim Golestan, 1964), *Gaav/The Cow* (Daruish Mehrjui, 1969), *Yek Atash/A Fire* (Ebrahim Golestan, 1961), *Khaneh Siah Ast/The House is Black* (Feroz Farrokhzad, 1962), and *Shab-e Ghuzi/The Night of the Hunchback* (Farrokh Ghaffari, 1964) made a name for Iranian cinema on the international scene.

I addressed the origins of the modern Iranian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s in my essay on the forerunners of the New Wave movement in Iran. It was a period during which a number of intellectual filmmakers, such as Ebrahim Golestan, Farrokh Ghaffari and Fereydoun Rahnama, started making films with a modern artistic approach. In his essay, Saeed Aghighi continues from where I left off, discussing the formation of the New Wave in Iranian cinema, which led to some of the best art films to be produced between 1968 and 1978.

It was supposed that, the new regime that came to power after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, would be damaging to Iranian cinema to such an extent that cinema and filmmaking would be completely wiped out in Iran; but cinema survived thanks to Ayatollah Khomeini's 'fatwa' which recognized its existence and suggested that it should be converted to an Islamic cinema more associated with morality and Islamic values. Khomeini also regarded Mehrjui's New Wave film *The Cow* as the sample of a pure and decent kind of cinema which should be followed by other filmmakers.

At the point of realizing the potential of cinema, the new authorities decided to use it to their own advantage, rather than to simply dismiss or proclaim it to be 'haram' like the fundamentalist clerics during the early years of the twentieth century. Soon after, there was a considerable change in the art and cultural atmosphere at the time, and new censorship regulations imposed on Iranian filmmakers highly restricted them from approaching sex, violence, romantic love, or even portraying women without hijab (the Islamic dress code) in their films.

But some intelligent Iranian filmmakers managed to cope with the new regulations in their own way by avoiding transparency and directness in the

regulations in their own way by avoiding transparency and directness in the depiction of women and love stories, instead resorting to metaphorical, allegorical and symbolic meaning in their films. Restrictions over the portrayal of women, social and political criticism, and other sensitive issues in Iranian cinema, led to the formation of a specific genre: cinema of children which is the focus of Fatemeh Hosseini-Shakib's essay, about a series of films that were successful both internally and externally, highly acclaimed outside Iran because of their humanistic and poetic qualities depicting the difficult lives of Iranian children deprived of education and welfare and struggling for a new and better life. In her essay, Fatemeh Shakib takes a 'pathological' stance as an ironical allegory for Iranian children cinema. Her approach is to provide a historical overview of Iranian children cinema as a matter of course, but also to propose a 'symptomatic' reading of the more contemporary stage of it. The early films of Panahi, Kiarostami, Ghobadi, Jalili and Majidi, all fit within this genre.

The nationalization of cinema in Iran, allowed the government to take control over the filmmaking process from the first proposal to screening. With the financial support of the Farabi Cinema Foundation, a governmental organization, and thanks to the restrictions and banning of imported films, mainly American films, Iran's domestic film industry received a great advantage allowing it to grow immensely. Despite the heavy censorship regulations and whereas most of film productions in Iran are superficial but popular melodramas, comedies, thrillers and teenager romances, there are still a fair number of art films being made that deal with socio-political issues in Iran and received the most prestigious awards from international film festivals.

In his essay 'Post-Revolutionary Art Cinema in Iran', Adam Bingham explores this most acclaimed trend in Iranian cinema and its various moods of filmmaking, from Abbas Kiarostami to Asghar Farhadi and Bahman Ghobadi. Adam Bingham cross-examines the points made by Michelle Langford in her essay addressing cultural diversity and the politics of location and language in Iranian cinema. By observing the works of filmmakers such as Ghobadi, Jalili, Bayzai and Majid Majidi within the theoretical framework of cultural identity, she contemplates how these filmmakers have attempted to take up a range of questions concerning cultural identity through the use of location and language in their films.

In his essay on Iranian war films, Hamid Reza Sadr investigates the creation of a new genre in Iranian cinema made in the aftermath of the eight year Iran-Iraq war, which branches out into subgenres (for example war melodrama, or war comedies) and goes on to directly influence all other genres and popular filmmaking styles in general. Mohammad Khatami's unexpected presidential

election win in 1996, opened the social and political atmosphere for filmmaking in Iran and led to films like Tahmineh Milani's *Do Zan (Two Women)* (1998) or Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Zir-e Pust-e Shahr (Under the Skin of the City)* (2001) being produced.

Some of the major films – especially melodramas – made during this period are the subject of Taraneh Dadar's essay on post-revolutionary melodrama, which concentrates on films that addressed gender and family issues and the themes of love and youth problems.

She examines the genre in a chronological order, highlighting predominant themes in each era, from the very beginning of the Revolution to after Khatami's era, and some popular films such as Rasoul Sadr-Ameli's *Dokhtari ba kafsh-haye katani (The Girl in Sneakers)* (1999) and *Man Taraneh, Panzdah Sal Daram (I, Taraneh, Am 15 Years Old)* (2002). Some of the films that she addresses as successful melodrama would also fit into the art film category which is discussed by Adam Bingham in his essay.

This volume makes no promises to cover every aspect of Iranian cinema or to completely address all queries that a reader might face, but to hopefully shed some much needed light on the dark corners of Iranian cinema, and provide an insight into its workings. And in order to achieve these goals it was necessary to uncover all trends within Iranian cinema by tracing it back to its very beginning. In fact, it was necessary for a re-reading of the history of Iranian cinema in order to understand all of the changes and developments that were made from a new perspective.

Parviz Jahed



About Elly, Cinema Mayak.

FILM OF THE YEAR

About Elly

Dar Bareye Elly

Studio/Distributor: Simaye Mehr

Director: Asghar Farhadi

Producers: Mahmoud Razavi

Asghar Farhadi **Screenwriter:** Asghar Farhadi

Cinematographer: Hossein Jafarian **Editor:** Hayedeh Safiyari **Duration:** 119 minutes

Genre: Drama

Cast: Golshifteh Farahani Taraneh Alidousti Mani Haghighi

Merila Zarei

Peyman Moadi

Shahab Hosseini **Year:** 2009

Synopsis

The film tells the story of a group of young university friends from Teheran who take a three-day break at a Caspian beach resort in the north of Iran. Ahmad is back in Iran after many years living in Germany, where he had recently got divorced, and his best friend Sepideh is attempting to set him up with Elly, her daughter's nursery school teacher. The friends, realizing why Sepideh has invited Elly, pay her particular attention and laud her qualities. On the second day an incident occurs which leads to Elly's disappearance. The joyful

atmosphere evaporates as the friends try to understand how and why she disappeared. The friends become judgmental and try to find fault with Elly's character. The group's opinion of Elly veers away from that of the first day, until at last the truth is out.

Critique

Apart from some of Dariush Mehrjui and Tahmineh Milanie's films, Asghar Farhadi's *Silver Bear* and Tribeca-winning film *About Elly*, are a rare example of Iranian films that show the modern face of Iran and some aspects of its educated middle-class life to a western audience, making it a relative departure from the normal subjects of an Iranian art film. The young, educated and middle-class travellers in the film are somewhat of an unknown demographic to a western audience, and are more commonly portrayed in popular Iranian films, as art films tend to present the more 'exotic' lifestyles of the lower and working class. On the other hand the film's use of features such as the roving camera, overlapping dialogues, and its thinly veiled plot has a *cinema-vérité* style that almost echoes that of Robert Altman and John Cassavetes, something that is not commonly seen in Iranian cinema. Another fine example of this style is *Rachael Getting Married* (Jonathan Demme, 2009) which opened the '65th Venice International Film Festival'.

The cast of the film, who are mostly professional actors in Iranian cinema, tended to underplay their roles and the camera almost never closes in on their faces, picturing them often in long or medium shot. Even Elly, the main character of the film, is rarely the point of focus of the camera's attention and is often seen in a crowd or in the margins of the frame. This technique is reminiscent of the unique style of John Cassavetes, which Farhadi skilfully employs in this film.

About Elly concerns itself with issues of moral behavior, lies and gender relations, rather than aiming to convey political messages, as in films like *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (Bahman Ghobadi) and *Women Without Men* (Shirin Neshat). All three films were screened at the 'London Film Festival' in 2009. It is about the most simplistic yet the most significant attitudes within today's Iranian society, which is presented without frills or exaggeration. Farhadi's directing and the way the cast performs is so subtle that it becomes unnoticeable. He showed this remarkable storytelling and directing technique in his previous film *Cha-harshanbe-soori/Fireworks Wednesday* (2006). From the very first sequence, the viewer is put alongside the actors and accompanies them on this hellish journey, the kind that starts with laughter and ends in tears.

The first shot of the film, taken from inside a charity contribution box, invites the audience into the dark world that lies therein, and the thin strip of light which seeps into the darkness of the box metaphorically ties in with the rest of the plot and foreshadows the tragedy to come. The film starts with a comedic and buoyant vibe with games, jokes, banter, and vulgar male dancing (the women in the film do not join in the dance, preferring to watch their husbands instead) but suddenly develops a bitter and disturbing tone when one of the boys (Arash) drowns in the sea and Elly vanishes.

Elly's character (played by Taraneh Alidousti) is vastly different to the rest of the group. She is a sweet, shy, and reticent nursery school teacher, and the subject of Sepideh's matchmaking game (she was persuaded onboard by the insistence and excessive pleading of Sepideh). She is often reluctant to join in with the joviality of the group and is close to going home. Her character is not revealed explicitly. Farhadi made her mysterious and ambiguous by avoiding giving information about her background and motives. This ambiguity results in an immense level of suspense which climaxes with Elly's sudden disappearance.

The main approach of the film is the pathology of individual attitudes among the middle-class educated people in Iran. The film thematically concentrates on lies and pre-judgements. Most of the people in the group lie to each other without any specific reason. Even Elly, who is seen as more of a decent and innocent girl, asks her mother over the phone to lie about the happenings of their trip to the north. Sepideh, played beautifully by Golshifteh Farahani (*Body of Lies*), makes the situation more complicated by lying about Elly's identity from the start, but she develops self-awareness when she realizes how great a negative affect her lying had on Elly's life. *About Elly* shows how simple lies and pre-judgments about others can have important consequences and can even ruin lives. Lying is bound with the souls of the film's characters to an extent that we do not even believe that Alireza is Elly's fiancé. Therefore when he goes to the morgue to identify the corps of a drowned woman we are in doubt that he is telling the truth when he confirms that the woman is Elly, or he is another liar that tries to get rid of the whole mess.

Despite the similarity of *About Elly's* plot with *L'avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni), it is more a Hitchcockian film using Elly's disappearance as a McGuffin in order to reach a more dramatic climax in the film. From this point of view, *About Elly* is a psychological social drama with a crime thriller's suspense, but Farhadi knowingly avoids the excitement of a crime thriller and instead concentrates on the ethical and psychological effects of Elly's disappearance on the members of the group. He did not, for example, show the involvement of the local police in tracking down the reason for Elly's

disappearance. Instead Farhadi gives Elly's companions the opportunity to judge Elly's personality, and speculate as to the cause of her disappearance and consequently reveal their own personal traits and moral weaknesses. With its intelligent, precise directing and the commendable acting effort of its cast, *About Elly* is without a doubt one of the pre-eminent Iranian films made in recent years.

Parviz Jahed



Talaye Sorkh, Jafar Panahi Film Productions.

INDEPENDENT CINEMA AND CENSORSHIP IN IRAN

INTERVIEW WITH JAFAR PANAHI

This interview was conducted with Jafar Panahi, before the occurrence of his condemnation by the Iranian government – as a result of which he has been placed under heavy restrictions by the Iranian authorities. Jafar Panahi is one of the most celebrated Iranian film-makers around the world. He has gained recognition from film theorists and critics worldwide and received numerous awards including the ‘Golden Lion’ at the ‘Venice Film Festival’ for his film *Dayereh/The Circle* in 2000 and the ‘Silver Bear’ at the ‘Berlin Film Festival’ for his *Offside* in 2006. In 2011 his film, titled *This is Not a Film* received the ‘Carrosse d’Or’ from the ‘Cannes Film Festival’.

As well as his body of work, his creative contribution to Iranian cinema is notable and includes pioneering efforts in multilayer narrative and parallel storytelling. With a style heavily focused on the depiction social realism criticism, his approach has never been tolerated by the Iranian censorship and caused problems for his films. On 20 December 2010, Jafar Panahi was handed a six-year jail sentence and a twenty-year ban on making or directing any movies, writing screenplays, giving any form of interview with Iranian or foreign media, as well as leaving the country. All of which led to much media attention and outcries from the public and international film community.

I met with Mr Panahi in his apartment in Tehran on a wintry day in 2008 during the ‘Fajr Film Festival’, an event in which his films were – more often than not – prevented from being screened due to allegations of inappropriately political or subversive content. In our interview, which has remained unpublished until now, Jafar talks bluntly and makes frank criticisms of the policies imposed by the Iranian government on film-making and the restriction

which he and fellow filmmakers are now facing in Iran.

You were recently part of the jury at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, can you tell us about the event, were there any films that caught your interest?

The Rotterdam festival is rather more like a 'souk' for films than an event that places importance on the competition aspect in the vein of Berlin or Cannes [film festivals]. But they do have a section for competition between the top films, and I was the head of the jury and we would grant three prizes of equal value, two of which were given to films from East Asia and one or two European films. While I have been to various festivals throughout the world, I can determine that Rotterdam is in the same league as the Toronto festival, for example, it's a market for film people where different fields of the cinema try to get in and watch the films and inevitably choose which films they wished to buy and invest in.

Were there any films from Iran in the line-up?

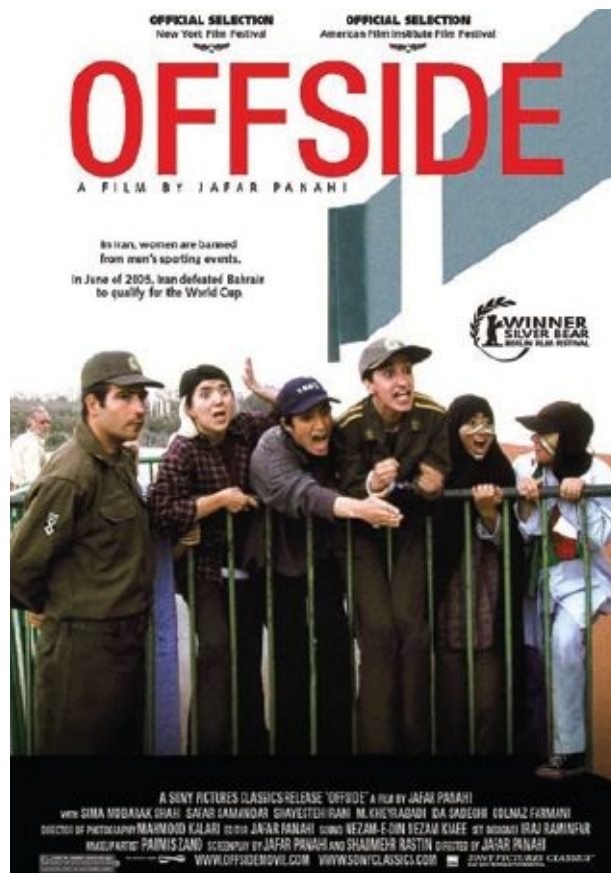
There were one or two in the more minor categories. But in the category I was judging, there was nothing from Iran.

There seemed to be a time when every festival featured a film from Iran, but recently the presence of Iranian cinema has become somewhat faded, don't you agree?

That's the inevitable case in every country; you could look at the current of national cinema in Japan or Mexico for example and they might have a golden age and then, at another time there might be a downturn. Just this year Majid Majidi's film (*Avaze Gonjeshk-ha/Song of Sparrows* [2008]) was shown at Berlin and won the 'Silver Bear' for Best Actor and I am sure that we will have a representative from our country at Cannes.

We shouldn't regard this as something alarming, as would those who are opposed to cinema in Iran, and want to celebrate the early death of Iranian cinema. It is currently very clear to everyone that Iranian cinema is facing a downturn, but it's only noticeable more recently, in the past there was little expected from Iranian cinema, it had its modest attraction, whereas recently a lot more is expected from Iranian cinema and these expectations are growing every day, and the cinema must try to do something to overcome these setbacks, and I'm sure it will be able to shake it off and continue to rise. And of course the situation of the film industry and the decline can't stray too far away from internal matters, whether political or economical they have a substantial effect,

and Iranian cinema is interlinked with and reliant on such factors.



Recently Iranian film-makers wrote a letter in protest of the Iranian government's policy towards cinema. I believe you are one of those who signed the letter and you were in protest of the words of Mr Jamal Shorjeh (an extremist film-maker) against Iranian independent film-makers.

When I was in Rotterdam, I was informed that such events had occurred in Iran and I looked it up on the Internet and found that a petition had been formed and I added my signature to it, and when I returned [to Iran] I became better informed of the goings on and heard that they had withdrawn Bahman Farmanara's film from participation at the 'Fajr Film Festival', which did not come as a surprise.

This goes back to two years ago when Mr Saffar Harandi, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in his initial interviews in regards to cinema said something like: we must supervise a film project from beginning to end, from the screenplay to production. And then I remember at that moment I wrote an article and did an interview, which were published in *Shargh* [newspaper] at the time, pointing out that with this way of thinking about our cinema is going to worsen every day. And I can't comprehend how someone else could keep track

of the thoughts, or an idea of a scriptwriter or director, when it is something that may come to you at any moment on the street or in your home or in your bed, how would they be able to monitor what you're thinking and how you're going to develop your ideas? And this way of thinking inevitably leads to, like it has this year, for example the way they are using the Fajr Film Festival to account for how uncooperative film-makers, are and how they can best quench the defiance they will face from independent film-makers and such.

Mr Harandi (the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance) has given his own description of what he expects of Iranian cinema, the 'permissible' cinema (Cinema-ye Mobaah) as he called it, something that could cause no transgression or benefit, no advantage nor disadvantage, and it mustn't have a critical outlook towards anything, and the audience should be left with nothing to think about when leaving the cinema. They would want a cinema that is consistently neutral, that has the static effect of nothingness. This is a template which is suggested by Mr Harandi, and any film which deviates from this, however slightly, will cause offence to them. And we can see their way of thinking through the people who have spoken on their behalf.

But on the other hand we hear slogans about the idea of a 'national cinema', a worthwhile cinema with a national or religious serving and one which is meaningful in this sense.

Well the notion of a national cinema is a different discussion. They would never use the adjective 'national' unless it was for the purpose of mass deception – we would see time and time again, they would label a cinema to be [anti-Iranian]. Their understanding of cinema is not something that I would approve of as the definition of a 'national' cinema. When we look at football we don't have a national team, we have a team that represents the Islamic Republic, the Parliament of the Islamic Republic or Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcaster [Seda va Sima-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami], or anything else of the like.

But the only thing they were unable to stick this adjective to, was 'cinema'... it doesn't even roll off the tongue. So their only understanding of it is something that is aligned to the ideologies of, and one that is in service of, the regime. I have been unable to provide a sufficient description, other than something seen through the prism of ideology in service of the regime and its goals. If you make a film that doesn't correspond to this type of viewpoint, or even their current description of it, then an event like this would occur.

What is in your opinion the most critical problem with the Fajr Film Festival?

The Fajr festival is in actuality, one of the most politically orientated festivals in

the world. We don't see any other event which is so utterly governed by the political will and expression in the same way, where the influence exerted is the ultimate factor when it comes to anything. The judgement panel is interlinked with the method that they use to select films, which is through politically driven decisions; everything about the selection is thus motivated. I was only a member of jury once in Iran, and that was seven to eight years ago at the 'Isfahan International Festival of Films for Children and Young Adults'. I only accepted to be juror on the condition that there would be no involvement on [the censors'] part, and in the jury panel there wouldn't be anyone else present, just the jurors. And it was so that I became part of the jury, and on the last day when we were coming to a decision, one of the authorities came in and I told him that 'until you leave the room we won't commence' and so he left the room, after that I was not offered to be a juror again.

They want to decide for themselves who deserves the awards given there as opposed to basing their opinion on the film's merits, if the film doesn't cohere to their way of thinking then it must be boycotted. Just this year we had the jury being shuffled and changed, films are put in an unimportant category or not included in the festival at all, we don't see anything of the like in other festivals. And so neither is the selection committee esteemed, nor are [the censor's] own opinions; which are prone to being changed whenever they feel like it. So in another festival if someone has been chosen to rank the films, they've been chosen as the jurors, no one but them is in charge of making such decisions, their judgements aren't to be supervised or changed to suit the government's, or anyone else's, inclinations.

What do you think constitutes as the deciding factor for the selection of the jury at the Fajr Film Festival?

Well there are some things that must be in accordance to their ideologies and such, but really there is no single individual able to have a complete influence, even if someone such as Mr Jamal Shorjeh supports a certain film it may still not be included in the final selection, because he is not the decision maker. They cannot tolerate the slightest notion of independence, but they do place people in this position for trivial and decorative purposes, so their opinions are not worth anything. From this point of view it is the most political festival in the world, designed to serve the single ideology and the will of the Ershad (The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance). For example, I saw the film *We Only Live Twice* by Behnam Behzadi and I liked it very much, yet because they didn't think it adhered to their purposes then it wasn't to be included in the main running of the festival but rather put in a side category. We see this happening all the time.

What are your opinions about the International aspect to the [Fajr] festival?

But there is still a lot of keenness from foreigners to attend the Fajr Film Festival and this enthusiasm stems from the position and significance of Iranian cinema in the world circuit. Many would like to be the ‘discoverer’ of the latest new films and they always retain hope for Iranian cinema, and also when they see that a film is not included in the selection they would try to get access to it, via bootleg... whatever, and that’s what happened with my film *The Circle*. I had a poor quality VHS copy to show but it was accepted, and it was the Venice Film Festival which chose to screen it and in a sense they ‘discovered’ it. What they do come for is the domestic [Iranian] films, what’s going on domestically is the only genuine appeal for them. The international aspect of it shouldn’t be taken seriously; it’s there for the sake of inclusion.

Close Up, Institute of Intellectual Development.



Would you consider the way that films are chosen for screening in the Fajr Festival to correspond with the manner in which films are distributed on a national scale? It’s very difficult to determine any parallels because they constantly change the way they do things. Nothing is for certain and there’s a sense of it all being done on the spot and it can change by the day. A film they screen at Fajr might be prevented from distribution after that, or the other way

around if a film is seen to have problems, but a person comes up in defence of the film it'll get the go ahead. There's no way of pre-emptively knowing what course a film will take. And if they were forced to decide from and include films made throughout the year, it would all depend on the prevailing opinion and events happening in the government and when the film gets made, they might pick up something they hadn't before.

There was once a time when you had to consider a film's screening at Fajr as a gateway to that film being released at other cinemas... but now it's become so very different there's no way of telling what the censors... will think of your film and how it will change from one minute to the next... [The censors] are programmed to think so constrictively. When a film is being given the go over, it must be in keeping with every authority's point of view, and it becomes condensed to the point that there is no such thing as cinema; until a notion of cinema with 'no advantage nor disadvantage' is achieved. But then it reaches a point when this is no longer a definition of 'acceptable' cinema, and the methods and ideals are changed around once more and advantage and disadvantage mean something different.

Most of your films have been prevented from distribution in Iran, what is your personal experience in regards to the censorship mechanism present in Iran?

I follow a strict principle not to accept a single frame from my film being taken out or being moved about, as you are not aware of this it leads to problems. Naturally, we cannot have this expectation of everyone in the industry; there are only a few people who adhere to this refusal. I personally won't allow for it, while I'm making a film I just pour everything into it and put no thought into whether they're going to allow its release, the only thing that goes into it is whether I want to make such a film, and whether I am pleased with the result. And after this process is complete I then put these considerations into thought about how it will be distributed or what the film critics are going to think. So it's rare that I give thought to the prevailing tastes of others, I refuse to allow for a single frame to be moved about for the reason that is that it could lead to the bigger problem of you having to subconsciously censor yourself.

For example, say that I've put in the effort and waited for the right moment to capture a shot – and eventually the censors cut that bit out – I wouldn't have done that if I was inclined to think, 'Well look, what's the point of me putting all of the effort in if I know that it would be removed, or there's a chance that it could be'. They put pressure on the film-maker during the film-making process, and after production is over, they force you to censor yourself and during these

stages they effectively remove sense of ownership; it is no longer the film that you wanted to make. I've given no consideration to this way of thinking. Because it is just as damaging to your film-making as it is to the individual film.

What is the censorship's problem with your film-making?

That's the thing, I don't know, because I'm never given a convincing response. I make it with the aim of having the film shown in Iran, but I don't abide by the idea of self censorship because that is the eventual aim of [the censors'] work, it's what they want for us – to reach the point of censoring yourself. But while making a film I reiterate to myself 'this film is going to get shown', to motivate myself to make my film. I try to keep to my convictions and while deep down I know and realize that, for example, if I was to make a film about a [subject], I really focus on it thinking of it as my duty and artistic need. Not what problem the censors might have with it or what they'll think about it in the end. I must satisfy this artistic need and I don't intend to stop just because it might be boycotted. If I focus on a film I will carry on through with it till the end, not abandon it and move on.

Regardless, there is a system of rigorous control and you are required at various stages to comply and be put under control, for example, you need to have a permission slip before you can begin shooting a film... How do you operate clearly when there is this issue and it is one which has remained constantly present throughout [the history of] Iranian cinema?

It is no doubt a persistent problem, and you need to find a way to make your films. As you say it always has been like this. I mean even looking at [the Iranian director] Sohrab Shahid-Saless' experience when he wanted to make his first feature film *A Simple Event* (1973). He was given some negative film to make a short film but he managed to save the negative to make a feature film by getting the shots in one take [as opposed to multiple]. So in a way he circumvents the system in place. And this is consistently the case for Iranian film-makers. There are times when it seems unfeasible to be able to make a film, you can't imagine that it would work... but then you realize that something can be done and there are ways around such obstacles. Whether after or before the revolution, when most of our energy goes into thinking of ways to make it happen, countering the constrictions and hindrances in place, I maintain that 80 per cent of the effort that goes into making the film is there, it's just using your ingenuity to work around such problems. This is what must be done if you wish to follow such pursuits [in Iran], and everyone has their own ways in which to do this, different from another's methods.

How far do you abide and give consideration to the red tape and the absolute taboos that persist within Iranian cinema?

Never. When I was making *The Circle*, in Iranian cinema there had never been a prostitute as a character in a film, so naturally I would think not to include it, but it had to be there – at the end of the film – otherwise it wouldn't have been complete. They told me to take out 18 minutes from *The Circle* but I didn't accept. I don't intend on following what they have allowed for us to do and what not to do, just because they might allow something and not allow something else doesn't mean that you must only feature the aspects which they've permitted and not include others. We aren't trying to change our films to make them fit the tastes of those in charge, or that of the critics, the domestic audience, the foreign audience, we want them to accept our films based on their own tastes. So there's no red tape in this approach to cinema making.

Despite all of this, how much do you censor yourself?

Never. If I believe in something and I choose to make it, I will put my all into making it happen, unless it was physically impossible, such as if I couldn't secure a budget for it. In the past three years I kept coming up with ideas and projects which I immediately scrapped because I thought 'this isn't my film'. When I decided to make *The Circle*, everybody told me not to make it. I was under a severe pressure and it took me nine months to attain the permission to make it. And finally I made it because I had to make it. There is no influence on me and I never compromise. Once I told the authorities that if you do not let me make films, I will make a film anyway with a person in a room and the consequences would be a problematic for you.

Was there any idea at all that you ever liked to make but you abandoned because of the censorship?

No, never. I made six films and they were those that I wanted to make, if I was not allowed to make a film I would persevere until I could make it... it's never happened that I've abandoned a film I intended to make, up to this point. With *Offside*, I was told by the authorities to shorten my previous film in order to be allowed to make it. It was impossible. So how I would go about making such a film is that first, I had to make it with a video camera because its regulations are much easier. Second, I didn't let anyone know that it was me that was making the film. For example, I tried to make people think that someone else was making the film and I was the consultant.

What about permission slips? There were films that were refused because of

just that – they didn't have the permission slips to make a film in the first place.

That's where the 80 per cent comes in, you have to look around until you find the right way to do it. But if there is a film that requires a big production and there's absolutely no way of obtaining the slip, then there's nothing you can do. But that just goes to show how resourceful the independent film-makers in Iran have to be. And this also goes to show that independent films are the best of any kind in Iran, because they don't require the makers to give leeway to others under any circumstance – they're purely in it to make their own film.

An independent film requires an independent producer, is there such a notion in Iranian cinema?

No. The reason that I produce my own films is that [the censors] try to put pressure on producers, and as a producer he/she would have more than one film in the running and they would threaten him/her – prevent his/her other films from being released – if one is problematic for them. So he/she would choose to sacrifice that film. Or if I was to use an unknown producer and the film failed to be a success, then it would be very damaging for that person, and I couldn't live with that. I wouldn't want anyone else to be my accomplice to a 'misdemeanour', because that would lead to more problems for the both of us. It is so that in Iranian films the producer credit is often accredited to the director or an unknown.

Although the foreign audience is familiar with your cinema as most of your films have had effective foreign distribution, the domestic audience on the other hand have not been able to see your films. Wouldn't it have been better if the film you had made got its release and was seen by the Iranian audience?

If this was a few years ago, I would have agreed with you, but now it's become different, if someone wants to see my film they are able to, maybe not in the cinema... if we consider *Offside*, I had planned for the film to get its release one month before the World Cup tournament started – and it did precisely that; it never got the release I wanted but, people did see it, everyone had a DVD copy. It was impossible to get in the way of it being seen. They would have to put all their effort into preventing it being made in the first place.

But the piracy of films is seen to have negative consequences for the film industry, is that not the case for you?

Well that's irrefutably the case, but for a film which wouldn't get any other

source of distribution it can be beneficial; to get the censors to think ‘well, it’s going to be seen eventually’. The people who [are responsible for the pirate releases] don’t put thought into whether it would cause financial damage to the film industry, they think of their own purposes and that’s how these films get their release.

What about your opinion on the defectiveness of Khane Cinema (the Iranian Alliance of Motion Picture Guilds), in protection of film-makers from an issue such as piracy, I seem to remember that you had made criticisms of the institution in your letter.

Within a system where everything is regulated and all cultural activities require surveillance by the government, these bodies become meaningless and lose all value. Khane Cinema (House of Cinema) is linked to and reliant on Ershad (The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance), so it is not an independent guild for members of the film industry. Their only pride is their ability to secure insurance for a film, and when it comes to real issues it comes up short. I continuously brought this up and talked to people at Khane Cinema about the issue but to no avail, I wrote a letter to the manager of Khane Cinema, stating that until you are able to separate yourself from other authoritative bodies, I refuse to be involved in any of your activities.

Consider this: at the gala held by Khane Cinema, I tried to have the film *Offside* screened, yet no one, not even those who were members of the guild were allowed to see it, only the jurors had access to it. And I wrote to them stating that if this is the case, that I am not allowed to display my work among my own guild members, then I have been reduced to an irreverent member of the guild, and this could have adverse consequences for Khane Cinema... and until it can divide itself from the government and its bodies and secure independence, it’s an ineffective film institution.

Have you made any efforts to get your previous films such as *The Circle* or *Offside* released?

I doubt anyone has tried as hard as I have to get the films released. I’ve tried everything, except to have my film shortened – which I refuse on principle – I have tried anything else.

What are your intentions for your next project?

I can’t elaborate, just to say that I intend to make a film about the people who have been affected by war – of whom I have been among in real life. I will adopt the humanitarian approach to war and to the people affected by war, now returning to their homes

returning to their homes.

It seems like it would be a large-scale project requiring at least some sort of cooperation from the state...

Yes, although you shouldn't consider it as a war film, with shooting and violence etc... It will still require some provisions and facilities which are hard to get... a train for example. I don't want to set it against a specific setting and location. It is a general view of the consequences of war, and war is all over the world and affects people from every part of the world.

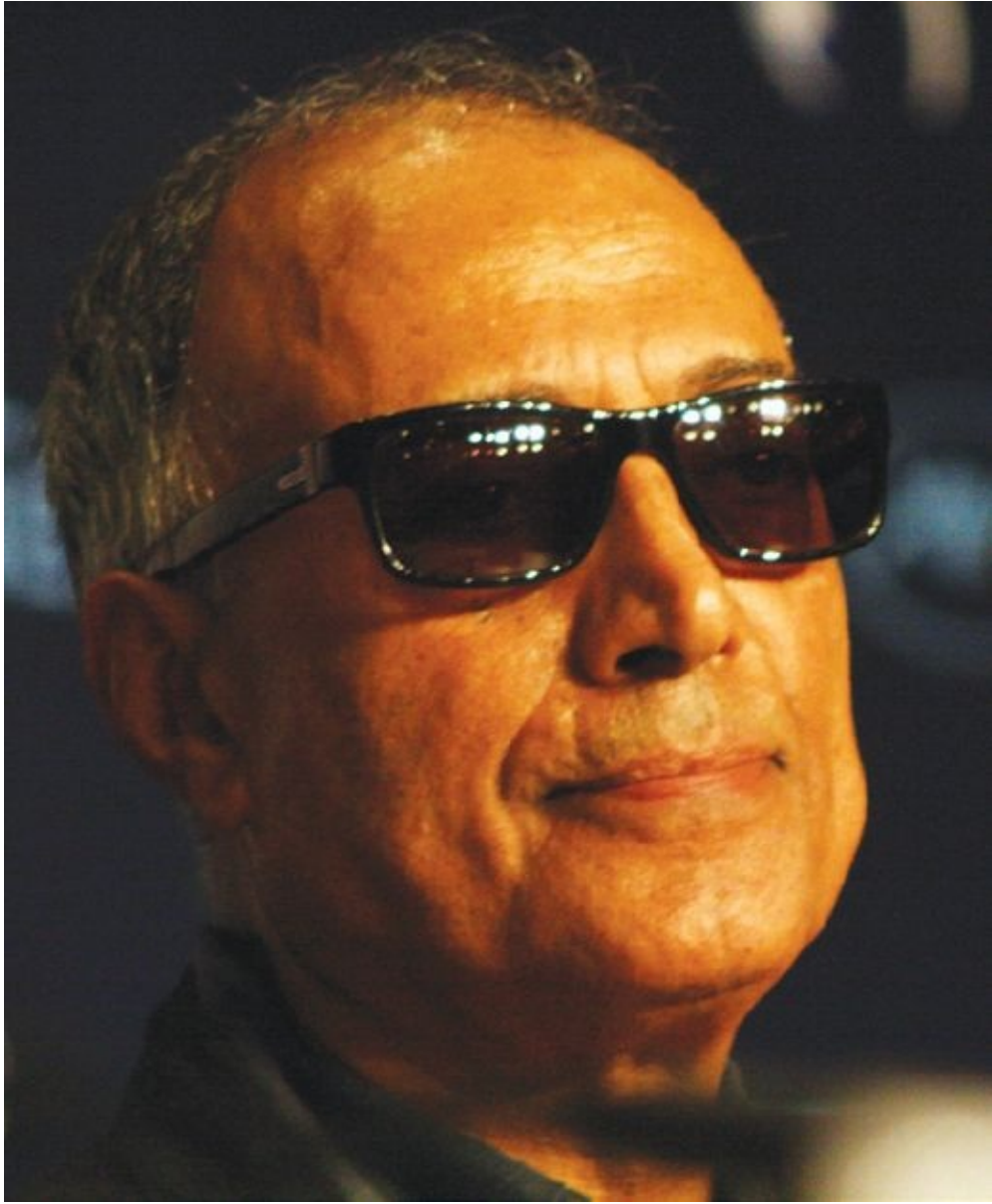
What are your predictions about Iranian cinema in the years to come?

So long as someone such as 'Mr Saffar Harandi' is in place, day by day it will become worse, they will not cease until they achieve their goals so we have wait and see how much of an effect they will have, and if they have an unlikely change of heart or opinion. Like I said, currently, an event like the Fajr Film Festival is an experiment to determine the extent to which they can constrict film-makers and how they are able to further constrict in the future. And I suspect that it will remain as such in the foreseeable future.

With these considerations, is there a possibility that you may one day choose to leave the country and make your films outside of Iran?

There are film-makers, such as Sohrab Shahid Saless or Amir Naderi, who started here and built their foundations and reputations in Iran, and once they left Iran it seems that they have lost their nous for good cinema. There is that, and there is also personal preference. It has been suggested to me that I go to LA and make a film about Iranians there, and it had backing from large companies so financially speaking it would've been a fruitful project. But I have no familiarity with that place and even if I stay there for a few months it will only give me a basic understanding; I can't make a film outside of the country, and I have no real incentive to do so. It depends on how you approach things and you ideas when it comes to making cinema. I regard fame and money to be the derivative of producing good works and I don't actively aim to chase them for the sake of it. I find no reason to do so now, but if at some point it becomes a necessity for me then that's what I'd be willing to do. I will try to pursue my career in this geography, but with a humanitarian and worldwide perspective.

Parviz Jahed



Abbas Kiarostami, photographed by Parviz Jahed.

DIRECTORS

ABBAS KIAROSTAMI

Director Abbas Kiarostami's festival-circuit, breakthrough docudrama *Nema-ye Nazdik/Close-Up* (1990) opens with a reporter and two police officers hiring a taxi to take them to the current location of Mohsen Makhmalbaf impersonator, Hossain Sabzian. With the journalist seated on the passenger side beside the driver and the officers in the rear, Kiarostami alternates between frontal, static framings of the left and right sides of the automobile, with the reporter explaining Sabzian's alleged crime to the driver. Arriving at the gated Ahankhah family home where the impoverished Sabzian has insinuated himself as the lauded director, Kiarostami's camera remains outside the walls with the driver, as Sabzian is arrested offscreen. We watch as the middle-aged cabbie kicks a discarded aerosol can down the modestly sloping road, with Kiarostami's telephoto lens following its uneven path. Following the reporter's subsequent search for a tape recorder wherein he communicates with the Ahankhah's non-visible neighbours over their intercoms, the journalist strikes the same aerosol can that now sits at the bottom of the slope.

Though, as Tony Rains (2001: 300) points out, *Close-Up's* urban setting and [...] incorporation of both real and fake documentary sequences place it slightly outside the main current of his work', the film's opening passage nonetheless epitomizes the director's art. Even this section's introduction of fictitious documentary footage, though by no means normative for either the director's fictional or non-fictional works, succeeds in revealing one of Kiarostami's principle preoccupations: the shifting fictional status of film images. The director certainly pursues a very similar strategy in his following two features, *Zendegi va digar hich.../Life, and Nothing More...* (1992) and *Zire darakhatan zeyton/Through the Olive Trees* (1994). In the former, Kiarostami treats the journey of an unnamed film director and his son to locate the child stars of

Kiarostami's *Khane-ye doust kodjast?/Where is the Friend's House?* (1987), after the cataclysmic Manjil-Rudbar earthquake that took the lives of tens of thousands of Iranians in June 1990. Having the extra-textual knowledge of the earthquake and that Kiarostami himself was the director of the film that is referenced throughout *Life, and Nothing More...*, we assume that this later picture's journey is not only modelled on Kiarostami's own search for the children, but that *Life, and Nothing More...*'s narrative depicts the contingency of this expedition. We are led to assume that the filmmaker-protagonist's trip is consubstantial with Kiarostami's, that we are watching a non-fictional work that only masquerades as narrative fiction.

However, the director's subsequent *Through the Olive Trees* leads us to question the assumed reality of *Life, and Nothing More...* In its depiction of the making of a film in the aftermath of the same earthquake, utilizing the same rural locations and some of the same actors – in sum, a film is being made out of the *Life, and Nothing More...* conceit – *Through the Olive Trees* encourages us to think retroactively of what was left out of *Life, and Nothing More...*, what was erased. In the 1994 film, we see and continuously hear the meta-film's crew, and witness multiple retakes of a scene after Hossein repeatedly flubs a line. In this way, Kiarostami discloses the scaffolding of his art, commensurate with much modernist film practice (perhaps best exemplified by the works of Jean-Luc Godard), highlighting the labour involved in producing the seemingly artless *Life, and Nothing More...* Likewise, *Through the Olive Trees* helps us to unravel *Life, and Nothing More...*'s complex ontological status: rather than the non-fiction passing as fiction that its subject suggests, *Life, and Nothing More...* is fiction pretending to be non-fiction pretending to be fiction. *Through the Olive Trees* shows that *Life, and Nothing More...* is in fact art, not life.

By comparison, *Close-Up* considers the division between life and art through its investigation of Sabzian's motives and the implications of his impersonation of Makhmalbaf. *Through the Olive Trees* examines the same theme spatially via its construction of a *mise en scène* that delineates on-camera space from off. This formal strategy emerges most conspicuously during the aforesaid repeated takes, where the viewer becomes aware progressively of the off-camera spaces behind the camera and above its field of view, thanks to a series of cutaways articulating these adjacent spaces housing the crew and an actress who remains mostly out-of-view for the scene. As such, Kiarostami acknowledges a world beyond the representational capacity of his art, a space that characteristically remains unseen in conventional cinema; in this way, he produces an art that is more than the sum of what we see and hear. Kiarostami's cinema, and this is (for this writer) its

greatest formal accomplishment, continually makes us aware of the space beyond the frame, of the unseen.

Through the Olive Trees' noted reliance on multiple representations of the same event links that film to the director's pre-Close-Up corpus. In his structuralist-oriented pedagogical shorts, *Dow Rahehal Baraye yek Massaleh/Two Solutions for One Problem* (1975) and *Be Tartib ya Bedoun-e Tartib/Orderly or Disorderly* (1981), Kiarostami comically reruns the same scenario with his human subjects behaving in conflicting ways, thus producing more and less desirable results. (The fine *Orderly or Disorderly* also provides an early example of Kiarostami's destabilization of the categories of contingency and control in its representation of a motorist illegally running a red light during one of the 'orderly' segments. More paradigmatically, the reporter's narratively punctuating kicking of the aerosol can in *Close-Up* invites us to reconsider whether the presumably contingent, similar act of the taxi driver is scripted.) In the director's medium-length, non-fiction *Hamshahri/Fellow Citizen* (1983), we are presented with the daily tasks of a traffic officer as he listens to an unending string of excuses – mostly from motorists who remain offscreen – and makes countless exceptions. In this regard, Kiarostami builds his critique of Iranian legalism on banal repetition. Similarly, the director's non-fiction *Mashgh-e Shab/Homework* (1989) depicts institutional inadequacy, namely of the educational system in theocratic Iranian society, through a series of student interviews that further extends his aesthetic of repetition.

Homework moreover exemplifies Kiarostami's pre-1990s corpus in its emphasis on the lives and problems of children. After helping to establish Kanoon (Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults) in 1969, Kiarostami made his directorial debut in 1970 with the child-centered short *Nan va Koutcheh/The Bread and the Alley*, before turning to longer-form filmmaking for the first time with *Mossafer/The Traveller* (1974). With *The Traveller*, the director's protagonist again is a pre-pubescent boy, who in this case pretends to photograph adults in order to earn money – a trademark Kiarostami act of deception. Kiarostami's full-length debut came three years later with *Gozaresh/The Report* (1977), his first film to treat social issues explicitly (with Shohreh Aghdashloo in another prominent childhood role). Following another decade of shorts made for Kanoon, including *Man ham mitounam/So Can I* (1975) and *Dandan Dard/Toothache* (1983), the latter of which presents a darkly comic lesson in dental hygiene (thanks to its signature use of off-camera sound), Kiarostami released what would become his first major success in the West, and the first film in his 'Koker trilogy', *Where is the*

Friend's House? Here, Kiarostami presents a child (Babek Ahmadpour) in his search for a classmate whose failure to remember his homework notebook will mean expulsion from school. The child protagonist disobeys his parents and later suffers adult apathy as he traverses the rural landscape surrounding his home village of Koker. *Where is the Friend's House?* is characteristic thusly of both the childhood subjects that defined the director's work prior to *Close-Up* and of the rural landscapes that predominated after his 1990 film.

The emphasis on rural landscapes is one of the defining features of the director's 1990s idiom, which begins in earnest with the second of the director's 'Koker trilogy', *Life, and Nothing More...*, and particularly, with a scene 35 minutes into the narrative. In the midst of the director-protagonist and son's drive across the steep mountain roads, shot from above, they stop for a pedestrian traveller carrying a porcelain toilet. After he sits in the passenger seat of the car, the film director recommences driving; we hear their conversation – at a volume that would assume a position within the vehicle – from a series of viewpoints that remain outside the automobile, at varying angles (eye-level to bird's eye) and distances (full to extreme long) from the hatchback. Consequently, we are invited to imagine the speakers talking to one another inside the automobile, even though we are only able to see the actors in profile from a very great distance. We are, in other words, encouraged to complete the space that is largely removed from view, to 'fill in the blanks' (Rosenbaum 1998). This strategy becomes even clearer in *Ta'm e guilass/Taste of Cherry* (1997) and *Bad ma ra khahad bord/The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), where the director opts for even longer, cosmic framings of his still audible protagonists' vehicles moving through rural, mountainous landscapes. (Both films, though especially *Taste of Cherry*, also feature frequent close-ups, most of which are shot within moving automobiles; no less than the extreme long shot, the close-up is fundamental to Kiarostami's directorial craft.) Collectively, it is in these moments that Kiarostami's 'unfinished cinema', as the director himself called it, crystallizes (Kiarostami 1998).

So too in the concluding passages of *Life, and Nothing More...*, *Through the Olive Trees*, and the penultimate section of *Taste of Cherry*. In each of these, unlike the affirmative, freeze-frame resolutions of *Where is the Friend's House?* and *Close-Up*, the spectator is required to finish the narrative his or herself. In *Life, and Nothing More...* the unfinished narrative preserves the question of whether or not the film director finds Babek and Ahmad Ahmadpour; in *Through the Olive Trees*, Kiarostami leaves it up to his viewers to decide whether Tahereh consents to marry Hossein; and in *Taste of Cherry*, the

narrative refuses to answer whether Mr Badii kills himself. However, by offering a digital video coda, scored with Louis Armstrong's 'St. James Infirmary' (1928), Kiarostami effectively hints at an optimistic resolution to *Taste of Cherry*; indeed, he similarly tips his hand, so to speak, with his kinetic finales – paired with uplifting classical scoring – to his two prior films. In *Through the Olive Trees* in particular, we are compelled to believe that Hossein wins his beloved as he rushes back towards us in extraordinarily long final framing. For this writer, *Through the Olive Trees* conclusion qualifies not only as one of the glories of Kiarostami's humanist cinema, but of the medium as a whole. It is a moment that illustrates how deeply felt the director's cinema can be, how humane and emotionally moving. (A second, more extra-textual moment of supreme warmth comes in the sudden, unexpected appearance of the Ahmadpour's carrying potted plants. For the patient viewer, Kiarostami answers *Life, and Nothing More...*'s most pressing question.)

Kiarostami's invitation to his viewers to complete his work finds its fullest expression both visually and thematically in the director's final film of the 1990s, *The Wind Will Carry Us*. Here, Kiarostami systemically excludes characters from ever appearing on screen, whether it is the century-old woman whose imminent death the filmmakers have arrived to capture, or even the director's crew who are often heard but not seen. The protagonist further receives numerous phone calls from his urban acquaintances, who likewise remain offscreen, and in their case inaudible; with each call, due to the area's poor cellular reception, the lead is required to drive to the top of a hill in order to communicate. This plot point permits Kiarostami to insert his signature distant mobile-framings of vehicles traversing rural landscapes, and also to develop the repetition theme that structured his pedagogical shorts. Hence, *The Wind Will Carry Us* serves as a summation for the director's film art.

Ultimately, it is those persons who remain off screen that are most thematically significant in the aforesaid passages. Throughout *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Kiarostami references a world that remains invisible, and frequently inaudible to his spectators, though never less than real. Kiarostami accordingly creates a presence without presence in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, an immaterial reality that he leaves to his viewers to interpret. If the three previous features invite us to answer questions regarding narrative resolution, *The Wind Will Carry Us* presents a much larger area of inquiry: the existence of the soul. With *Taste of Cherry*, *The Wind Will Carry Us* marks Kiarostami's pursuit of a spiritual film art, and one that follows the logic of poetry that the latter film includes in quotation (the film in fact takes its name from poet/filmmaker

Forugh Farrokhzad's eponymous verse). Consequently, *The Wind Will Carry Us* also represents one of the director's most materially eminent works: the sights and especially the sounds of the enveloping natural world are everywhere present in this landscape-dominated work. In this respect, Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* and his 1990s corpus as a whole can be said to fulfill André Bazin's realist film program.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, no filmmaker's critical stature exceeded Abbas Kiarostami's on the international art film and festival circuits. The year 2000 was particularly significant for the director, due not only to his selections as the 1990s 'most outstanding' filmmaker by the Cinémathèque Ontario (Canada) and the decade's 'best' director by *Film Comment* magazine (United States), but also for the three major works produced by his former assistant directors, Bahman Ghobadi's *Zamani barayé masti asbha/A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), Jafar Panahi's *Dayereh/The Circle* (2000) and Hassan Yektapanah's *Djomeh* (2000). Considered together, the works of these three, along with those of former collaborators Ebrahim Forouzesh (Kiarostami scripted the director's *Kelid/The Key* [1987]) and Mohammad-Ali Talebi (Kiarostami also provided the screenplay for Talebi's *Beed-o baad/Willow and Wind* [1999]), crew members Kiumars Pourahmad (*Nan o she'r/Bread and Poetry* [1994]) and son (*Safari be Diare Mosafer/Journey to the Land of the Traveler* [1993]), and directors with considerable affinities such as Rafi Pitts (*Zemestan/It's Winter* [2006]), constitute a school of filmmaking for which Kiarostami is both the pivotal figure and the most frequent source of inspiration. Among the above, Panahi's work has come closest to matching the high artistic achievement and international renown of Kiarostami's, beginning with the former's Kiarostami-scripted, child-centered *Badkonake sefid/The White Balloon* (1995). Kiarostami also provided Panahi with a second screenplay for the exceptional *Talaye sorkh/Crimson Gold* (2003), a socially conscious work inspired by Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959). In this last film, as in *The Circle* and *Offside* (2006), Panahi maintains a documentary specificity similar to that of the master's, while also creating off-camera spaces that attain a robustness comparable to Kiarostami's work of the 1990s.

Considering, then, both the critical status of his 1990s corpus, and the influence that it exerted, it is notable that Kiarostami's work in the 2000s diverged from the aforesaid aesthetic, towards a cinema reliant on the artistic possibilities of the then still nascent digital medium. In his first feature of the new century, shot on consumer-grade digital video, Kiarostami returned to a documentary format and an emphasis on childhood subjects for the first time in

more than a decade (excluding his screenplays for other directors), with his treatment of the Ugandan AIDS crisis, *ABC Africa* (2001). The director's fictional follow-up, *Ten* (2002), likewise introduced a social consciousness through its examination of the struggles of women in contemporary Iranian society, as depicted through a series of taxi rides marked off with black and white numbers counting down from ten to one. Kiarostami films his female driver, her occasionally present son – who provides Kiarostami with another characteristically precocious, pre-teen male protagonist – and her passengers (in the front seat and back) through a series of alternating left and right, frontal (DV) framings. In this respect, *Ten* returns not only to the setting of *Close-Up*'s opening passage, but to its aesthetic as well. *Ten* in fact is very much a film of close-ups.

Where *Ten* differs from the majority of Kiarostami's preceding efforts is in the directness with which it treats Iran's social ills. Of course, while much of this remains typically hidden from view, as for instance with the unrepentant prostitute who sits in the engulfing nocturnal shadows of the back seat (though we do eventually see her climbing into a john's car in the recesses of the frame), the very fact of Kiarostami's treatment of this subject makes it stand out from his better known 1990s efforts. Moreover, *Ten* also departs from its predecessors for its militancy, revealed in the shaved head of one of the taxi driver's passengers, which she discloses by removing her white scarf. Uncharacteristically for a director who pursues the possibilities of off-camera representation as far as any artist in the medium's history, *Ten*'s most dramatic revelation appears unequivocally on screen.

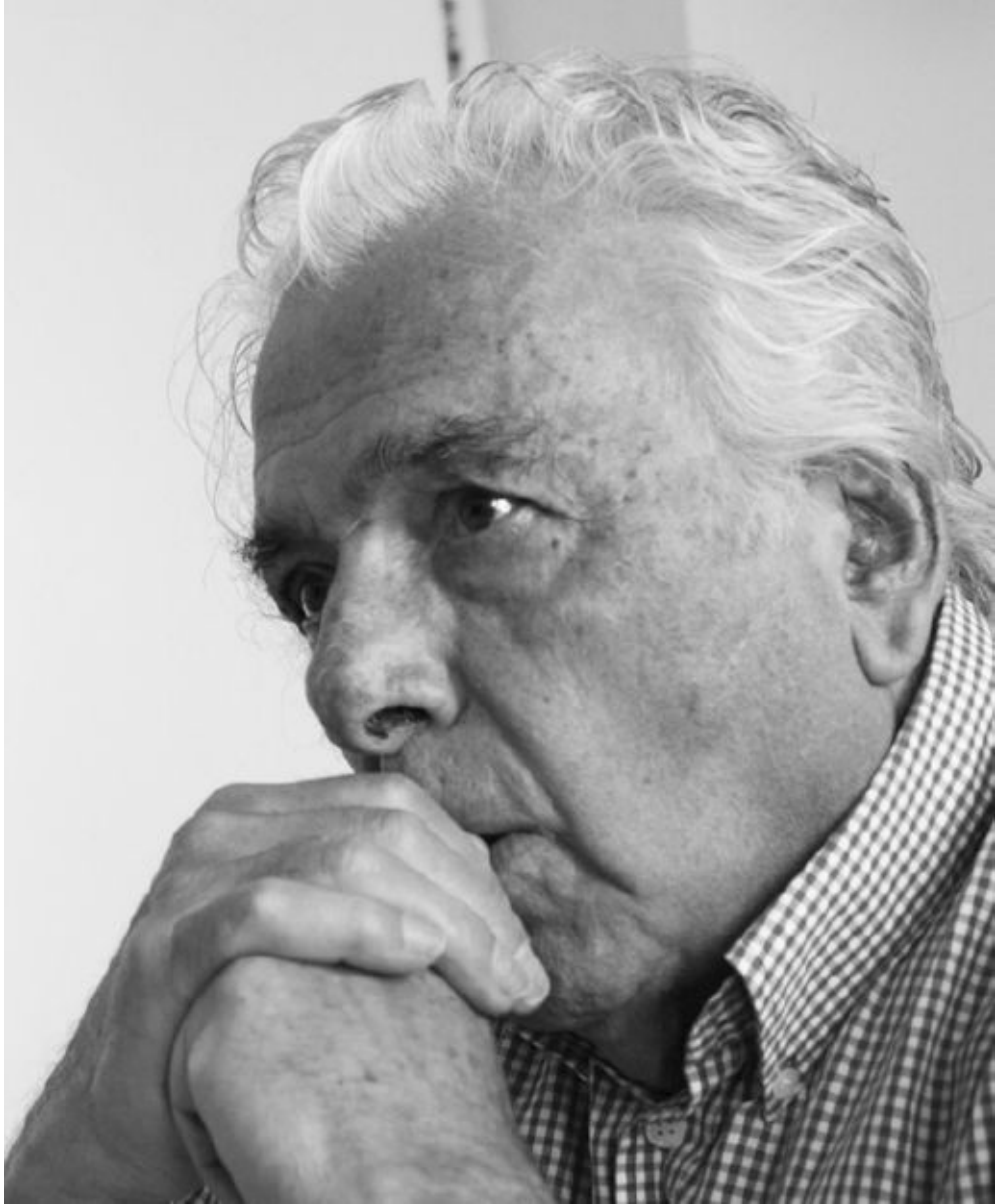
In the years since *Ten*, Kiarostami's work has increasingly moved out of the cinema and into the gallery, while also pursuing other avenues in the visual arts (including still photography). Among his cinematic works of this period, *Five Dedicated to Ozu* (2003), the most extreme of his landscape films, ostensibly presents five static, long sequence-shots depicting various seascapes filmed from the shore – though characteristic for Kiarostami, he manipulates the last of these 'takes' through a series of edits that he hides from the viewer. Utilizing a strategy similar to James Benning's structuralist work of the same period, Kiarostami's five segments retrain the film's viewers to experience movement within the frame as they would dramatic events in traditional narrative cinema. The director's *Shirin* (2008), on the other hand, returns to the subject of off-camera space as it presents an offscreen film's projection from beginning to end, while we as spectators view a series of women reacting to the film that we hear but never see. It is in this sense another narrative of excessive repetition; of

female faces (following *Ten*); and most significantly for the director's corpus, of a vivid offscreen space forged through the exacting use of off-camera sound – a visually absent presence.

Michael J Anderson

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Ebrahim Golestan, photographed by Parviz Jahed.

DIRECTORS

EBRAHIM GOLESTAN

While Ebrahim Golestan generally refuses to be pigeonholed, he can be best recognized as a veteran Iranian filmmaker, writer and ex-political activist. His impact and widespread influence on Iranian filmmakers and writers is undeniable, described by Abbas Milani as ‘the quintessential artist of his generation’.

As an intellectual who has, in equal parts, been influenced by western culture and rooted firmly within the realms of Iranian wisdom and cultural copiousness, he has always tried to go his own way and maintain his independence while still trying to benefit from the gains of commercial success as well as attaining government support during the Shah’s regime. He used these advantages to pursue his artistic goals in a viable and successful manner.

Though his cinematic career was not prolific, spanning over only two feature-length films (*Khesht Va Ayeneh/The Brick and The Mirror* [1963] and *Asrare Ganje Dareye Genie/The Secret of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley* [1972]) and a few documentaries, he has a unique position in the history of Iranian cinema for his modern and progressive approach. Golestan is celebrated not only for his literary works (short stories and Persian translations of American literature) but for his outstanding documentary films including, *Moj, Marjan, Khara/Wave, Coral and Stone* (1962), *Tapehaye Marlik/The Hills of Marlik* (1965) and *Yek Atash/A Fire* (1961). He has had a significant influence on Iranian writers, filmmakers and intellectuals, and can be regarded as one of the most prominent figures in Iran’s cultural and intellectual sphere.

Born in Shiraz in 1922, his father was the publisher of a local newspaper called *Golestan*. He was a student of law at the University of Tehran but left his studies unfinished and began to write short stories in 1949, publishing his first collection of stories ‘Azar Maahe Akhare Payeez’/‘November, the End of Fall’

in the same year. He was a member and an active figure of Iran's Toodeh Party (a legal communist party that was active in Iran until 1953) and published a series of articles in the newspapers *Mardom* and *Rahbar*, the official publications of that party. He was initially in charge of the foreign section of *Rahbar* and then he became its chief editor. After that he went to Mazandaran (a province in the north of Iran) and took charge of the Toodeh Party in the region.

After a while, he stopped his political activities and separated himself from Toodeh Party (around 1946), engaging himself exclusively in literary and artistic activities. He was first to translate the works of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Ivan Turgenev and Bernard Shaw, and introduced them to Iranian readers. Golestan has been always praised for his beautiful and poetic prose. He was very much influenced by Ernest Hemingway in story writing – although it is something he strenuously denies – and accordingly, established a style of writing not present in Iranian fiction literature beforehand. The conscious inclusion of assertiveness, multifaceted characterization, and a focus on their actions are elements that seeps into his fiction films as well.

The particular position of Golestan and his prominent standing among Iranian intellectuals and his guiding and directing role in literature and cinema was the main differential element between Golestan and other writers and filmmakers of his time. Much of Golestan's filmography consists of short industrial documentaries commissioned by the Iran Oil Company and similar entities, including *A Fire*, which shows the efforts of workers to extinguish an oil-well fire in the south of Iran. The establishment of Golestan Film Unit (Studio Golestan) can be considered a turning point in the history of Iran's documentary filmmaking. When Iran's oil industry became nationalized, Golestan was making newsreels for the American NBC and CBC networks. At the same time he pursued his cooperation with Iran Oil Company. It was during these times that the US-British led *coup d'état* against Dr Mosaddeq (the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953) was happening and resulted in his being overthrown. Golestan was filming these events as they occurred using reversal film and sent them abroad by aeroplanes.

Later he was transferred to the Iran Oil Consortium and he managed the bureau of film and photography. In 1957 Golestan went to the south of Iran to film oil discoveries and he composed a documentary from the footage he had taken, entitled *Az Ghatreh ta Darya/From Drop to Sea* which was his first serious documentary film. The film received favourable attention from the officials of the Consortium and it was the beginning of his documentary filmmaking career and the first stage of the establishment of the Golestan Film

Unit (Studio Golestan).

In an interview with the author, he said about the formation of the Golestan Film Unit:

At this time (1958), [the Iran Oil Company] intended to establish a film department. I also wanted to leave the Iran Oil Company and I resigned but they asked me to make another film for them. I signed a contract with the Consortium independently to produce a documentary film about Khark Island and the oil pipeline from Aghajari to Khark. According to this contract, the Consortium undertook the task of providing us with equipment and accessories in instalments and would deduct these instalments from my income over three years. I then purchased a piece of land and built a place at the studio and gradually settled my accounts with the Consortium.

Golestan's first series of documentaries for the Iran Oil Consortium, titled 'Chehsm Andaz'/'Perspective' was a report on current affairs and events, mainly in connection with issues regarding oil and the activities of British workers in Iran. 'Cheshm Andaz' was produced in six parts between the years 1957 and 1962 and the collection is regarded as the first genuine documentary films of Iranian cinema. Subsequently, Golestan made the documentary *A Fire* which was an exciting narrated piece about the containment process of a fire in the oil wells of Ahwaz; one of the biggest fires of the history of oil extraction hitherto, which took 65 days to extinguish. *A Fire* was welcomed and praised by viewers and film critics, gaining much credit for Golestan's filmmaking talents. Rahmat Mazaheri, the film critic of *Honar va Cinama/Art and Cinema* magazine wrote of it:

In recent years, many have dreamed of saving Farsi cinema. Fortunately, much earlier than we anticipated, Golestan put an end to our wait by making *Yek Atash*. *Yek Atash* is more than a documentary. Considering its stunning editing, it elevates the film from merely an educational piece about fires in oil wells. Ebrahim Golestan and Forough Farrokhzad have created a pure work of art out of the blazes of fire.

Golestan himself introduces the film in a short note sent from abroad to a film journal in Tehran:

Now *Yek Atash* is away from me and my friends and I, who made it, don't think about it anymore. Good or bad, it is over [...]. We made it as an

experience. Shahrokh Golestan had not shot a film to that date and Forough Farrokhzad had not done any editing. We knew that our pictures are about a fascinating event and we wanted not to depend on this advantage. Many oil wells had caught fire and many films had been made based on these fires, we however, wanted to create another mood and atmosphere. That is why it took us so long to make it. Now, watching the rainbow extended over the Adriatic is more pleasant than any prize or reward.

Golestan's documentary films were the first Iranian films to receive international acclaim. *Khaneh Siah Ast/The House is Black* (Forough Farrokhzad, 1962) a Golestan Film production, won the 1963 grand prize for documentary films at the 'Oberhausen Film Festival' in West Germany. *A Fire* was praised at the 'Venice Film Festival' in 1961 by the jury, and *The Hills of Marlik*, was the winner of the St Marco Lion prize in 1964. Afterwards, Golestan made some more documentary films in collaboration with his filmmaking team in the Golestan Film Unit including: *Wave, Coral and Stone, Aab va Garma/Water and Heat* (1962), *Sepid va Siah/Black and White* (1962), *Ma Adamim/We are Human* (1962), *The Hills of Marlik* and *Ganjinehaye Gohar/The Treasures of Gems*. Among them *Wave, Coral and Stone* and *The Hills of Marlik* are of most significance.

The most important characteristic of Golestan's documentaries is their poetic style which is conveyed through the tempo and rhythm of the images and a flowing narration spoken by Golestan himself. This was in line with the general perception of Iranian film critics of the time about Golestan's documentaries, giving Golestan a unique position in the history of Iranian cinema as the founder of 'real' documentary cinema in Iran. But Golestan's feature films (*The Brick and The Mirror* and *The Secret of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley*) did not receive a positive reaction from Iranian film critics in the same vein. Yet by the assessment of critics such as Jonathan Rosenbaum and the French critic Jean Douchet, the film was triumphant and effective in its artistic expression. As a result of which, they would think highly of Golestan in comparison to other Iranian contemporaries.

At that time, Golestan himself wrote for the *Honar va Cinama* publication, writing notes on his own work and the works of his colleagues at the Golestan Film Unit. Golestan's next documentary film *The Hills of Marlik*, was a poetic documentary about the archeological excavations in Marlik area of Iran. The film features a poetic tone and philosophical expression about life, civilization and cultural heritage. In an interview he stated that he did not intend to make a report on the archeological findings in Marlik or to produce coverage of

historical facts, but rather create an abstract expression. In his own words:

Marlik isn't a lecture on archeology. I wanted to make cinema [...] the cinema that I aim to create is different from a series of pictures used to illustrate a concept. [...] of course I want the spectator to understand my work, but if he doesn't it doesn't mean that the work is incomprehensible. If he doesn't comprehend it, we should help him to understand, not to change the work [...]. Art derives from righteousness. It is righteousness which is important not complexity.

Golestan made only two feature films, and the first of these, *The Brick and The Mirror*, was regarded as a masterpiece by many film critics including Jonathan Rosenbaum. It is a black and white film that concerns a Tehran taxi driver (Zakaria Hashemi) who finds a weeping infant in the back of his car just after giving a lift to a mysterious veiled woman (Forough Farrokhzad). His effort to get rid of this unwanted baby is the starting point of his journey into the darkness of Tehran and its odd inhabitants. The film was a harmonious combination of social-realism and expressionism. In fact *The Brick and The Mirror* was the beginning of an intellectual and artistic movement in Iranian cinema, an alternative cinema to Film Farsi, the popular and mainstream form of cinema in pre-revolutionary Iran. It is considered as the very first spark of Iran's New Wave Cinema along with films such as *Jonoub-e Shahr/The South of the City*, *Shab-e Ghuzi/The Night of the Hunchback* (1964) (both directed by Farrokh Ghaffari) and *Siavash dar Takht-e-Jamshid/Siyavash in Persepolis* (Fereydoon Rahnama).

The interaction between cinema and literature is most evident in Golestan's striking film *The Brick and The Mirror* which is most likely a reflection of his unique narrative style and storytelling. As a story writer acquainted with the modern narrative structure, whether in story writing or script writing, Golestan employed modern techniques of storytelling in the narrative form, and it was a controversial film in some respects. There was a slogan in an advertisement for the film which was published in *Keyhan* newspaper on 25 January 1965: 'A film that may upset you or even force you to leave the cinema, but it will make you contemplate'. The structure of *The Brick and The Mirror* is divided into several parts. Apart from the main narrative, there are also sub-narratives within the film which were until that point, completely unseen and controversial subjects for Iranian cinema at the time. With his modern narrative approach and by abandoning the classic form of storytelling, Golestan created a huge severance from the old principles of Iranian popular cinema and furthered the simplistic

approach of the family melodrama, which was the main popular genre in Iranian cinema in the 1960s.

In *The Brick and The Mirror*, Golestan tried to take his camera among real people and real places. The realistic look of the film; expressing the details of the everyday lives of the people in the streets, and Golestan's poetic view, later had a deep impact on the filmmaking style of the realism-focused film movement in Iran. While the film was a metaphorical picture of the crisis filled, stagnant and fearful society of Iran after the military coup, it is at the same time a criticism of the intellectual atmosphere of the 1960s – intellectuals who were busy having boring, redundant, and useless discussions in cafes without paying any heed to what went on around them and without feeling any responsibility. But due to its controversial cinematic structure and its somehow complicated expression that made comprehension difficult for spectators used to the simple cinema of Film Farsi, it did not find many addresses. It was also disparaged by the film critics and cinematic writers of that time, who mockingly referred to it as having 'some intellectual gestures'. Shamim Bahar, a well known film critic wrote:

Khesht va Ayeneh is a bad film, with all the shortcomings and artistic pretences which can be seen in most of the primary films of an average filmmaker. It hasn't the power to do what it aims to do. It is full of long, extra, boring minutes and futile mistakes and explaining the obvious, while *Khesht va Ayeneh* is an experience, it's an unsuccessful one.

Parviz Davaee, another well known film critic of the time also attacked the film and called it 'a waste of money, time and energy [...]. Mr Golestan you can't make films for people'. In *The Brick and The Mirror*, Golestan avoided all the clichés and conventions of Film Farsi and its familiar attractions such as sex, violence, dancing and singing. The only dancing and singing scene of the film holds no resemblance to the typical singing and dancing of a Film Farsi. The dancer is always in long shot in the background, and Golestan's camera never shows her in the foreground. In this way Golestan defamiliarizes a stereotypical element of Film Farsi. In fact, in *The Brick and The Mirror* Golestan succeeded in presenting his thoughts and ideas in cinematic form, and combined his documentary style with his poetic and literary mentality: 'Why should we follow rules, especially externally imposed rules? Why shouldn't we impose our own rules?'

The dialogues and monologues contain subjective and philosophical concepts, which apart from their poetic essence, did not adapt to the usual and day-to-day

talk of ordinary people. Taji Ahmadi and Zakaria Hashemi's performances are sincere and transparent, and Soleyman Minassian's black-and-white widescreen cinematography renders a poetic and highly evocative aesthetic. *The Brick and The Mirror* was not well received either by film critics nor the ordinary spectators at its time of release, but it left an impact on the filmmakers of the next generation of Iranian filmmakers, such as Nasser Taghvaei in *Aramesh dar Hozoor-e Digaran/Tranquility in the Presence of Others* (1970), Arbi Ovanessian in *Cheshmeh/The Spring* (1972), Hajir Dariush in *Bita*, and Sohrab Shahid Sales in *Tabiat-e Bijaan/Inanimate Nature*.

Ten years later Ebrahim Golestan made his second fiction, and last cinematic film, *The Secret of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley*. The film is about a poor and humble peasant who becomes rich and corrupt after discovering a cache of antique jewels in a cavern beneath his farm. It is a metaphorical and satirical film in the shape of a simple comedy, and with its use of a famous and popular Iranian-cinema cast, it criticized attempts made to modernize society by the Shah. If we were to disregard its metaphorical qualities and political agenda, it would be hard to believe that it was made by the same director as *The Brick and The Mirror*. The edge of Golestan's criticism is so sharp in this film that led to the confiscation of the film and his arrest. The ban placed on the film did not allow it to take its natural course of release, and the level of its impact was clearly determined.

Golestan was disillusioned with working in Iran and decided to go into self-imposed exile. He shot down his studio and sold it, and migrated to the United Kingdom in 1975. While he has been residing in his manor near Bolney in Sussex, he has maintained his connection to and relation with today's cultural and cinematic flows in Iran, and every once in a while writes essays on the past and present of Iranian cinema and the aesthetics of modern painting and poetry that are sporadically published in various sources – and, as a result of his direct manner and his general resentment of particular aspects of artistic and intellectual movements, these articles are often the cause much debate.

Despite his remaining partially active within the sphere, he has not produced a film since his exile. The last fictional piece to be released by him, the novel *Khoroos/The Rooster* was first published in the United States in 1995 and in Iran in 2006 – only to be banned quickly thereafter. All of his films and books are banned in Iran officially, but they are available to his vast fans thanks to Iran's culturally unique and intellectually driven black market. During his period in exile he would rarely grant an audience, whether to his fans or journalists. His reclusiveness and reluctance to see journalists and researchers naturally lead to a

parable, and he is thought of as an elusive and mysterious figure. When the author conducted a lengthy interview with Mr Golestan and published it with his permission in 2005, in a way, the floodgates opened and this highly important figure was brought to a wider audience. This led to many consecutive interviews and he became deservedly more celebrated.

Parviz Jahed

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DIRECTORS

JAFAR PANAHI

Jafar Panahi was born in 1960 in Mianeh, East Azerbaijan, Iran. He grew up in Mianeh and Tehran in the same labyrinth of alleys he captures in *Badkonake sefid/The White Balloon* (1995) and *Dayereh/The Circle* (2000). His formative years coincided with the 1970s, during which the intense cultural activities supported by such cultural institutions as the Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) and the Centre for the Preservation and Propagation of Iranian Music, had created a positive ambiance for the growth of Iranian performing arts and cinema. Panahi's father, a house painter, who loved cinema, had decided that going to cinema was not good for his son. Thus, though he sometimes managed to sneak into cinemas, the fear of being caught by his father restricted his exposure to melodramatic Iranian, Indian, and Hollywood films regularly shown in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinemas. This restriction, however, proved a blessing in disguise. Panahi, who had already in 1970 written a story and won the first prize in a children's literary competition, began to frequent the IIDCYA, where he could see the films of leading Iranian and non-Iranian directors for free. This early exposure to art films by such directors as Vittorio De Sica, Abbas Kiarostami and Bahram Beyzaie, who reflected on the ordinary life of average people, reformed his vision. He particularly liked Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and Kiarostami's *Nan va Koutcheh/The Bread and the Alley* (1970) and *Mossafer/The Traveller* (1974) (Dönmez-Collin 2006).

During the late 1970s, he developed a passion for photography and filmmaking. He shot brief pieces on 8 mm camera, acted in one film, and worked as assistant director in another. Having survived the experience of the 1978–79 Revolution, Panahi was drafted into the army in the early 1980s and served at the front where he also made a documentary about an Iraqi raid on an

Iranian Kurdish town, which was later broadcast by Iranian National Television. After his military service, Panahi joined the College of Cinema and Television where he trained his mind by exposing himself to the vast archive of films by such leading directors as Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Ingmar Bergmann, Luis Buñuel and Vittorio De Sica. As a student, he also made a few documentaries for the Iranian national television.

In 1990, Panahi worked as assistant director for Kambozia Partovi's *The Fish*. The experience prepared him for directing his first short feature, *The Friend* (1992), which celebrated Kiarostami's *The Bread and the Alley*. Then in 1994 when he was working as assistant director for Kiarostami's *Zire darakhatan zeyton/Through the Olive Trees*, Kiarostami wrote the script of *The White Balloon* for him, which he turned into a world renowned film the next year. Having enjoyed his unexpected but well deserved success, Panahi went on to make *The Mirror* (1997), *The Circle*, *Talaye sorkh/Crimson Gold* (2003) and *Offside* (2006) which created a new form of realism that won him numerous awards in international film festivals and established him as one of the greatest filmmakers of the Iranian New Wave.

Neo-realism: Iranian style

In the chaos of contradictory writings that attempt to pigeonhole the New Wave of Iranian cinema, including Panahi's works, one can detect two major tendencies. Some critics extol the poetic qualities and the 'humanitarian' treatment of subjects in Iranian cinema and analyze its innovative stylistic features by comparing it to Italian Neo-realism and the French New Wave. Others degrade it as timid, simplistic and apolitical, and describe its best features not as creative reformulations of cinematic techniques, developed to challenge Islamic restrictions, but as mere reactions to them. In his review of *The White Balloon*, for instance, Simon Louvish describes the film as belonging to a genre he calls 'low-intensity third-world neo-realism', in which 'children, being pre-political, are an obvious subject in a country where art is tightly controlled by the government and subject to the strictures of an Islamic State' producing films that 'as in Cold War Soviet cinema, filmmakers take refuge in a broadly based humanism, which highlights the daily solidarity of ordinary people while being able to comment obliquely on persistent social problems' (Rosenbaum 1996). In his haste to brush the achievement of the child centred films of Iranian cinema away as a timid reactionary movement against censorship, the writer takes up a few real issues of Iranian cinema and reaches distorted conclusions, using such terms as 'Cold War Soviet cinema', 'take refuge', 'humanism', and 'solidarity' without ever contextualizing them in the everyday realities of Iran. The approach

is so crude that one may wonder if he has totally neglected Panahi's dispersed realism of sounds and images that turn the film into a performance on life.

If we have to describe Panahi's cinema in terms familiar for a western audience, the best we can do is to talk about Panahi as a true child of the Iranian New Wave, which has affinities with the poetic realism of Bergmann and Italian neo-realism and takes French New Wave to a new level. In his films the plot becomes a centripetal force for a multiplicity of centrifugal elements that hover in circles around it, a locus of negotiation for dispersed sounds and images that register humanity while provoking a meta-filmic tension between the immediate documentation of reality and the premeditated, concentrated, heightened, and formalized verisimilitude of fictional realism. The history of the production of this Iranian form of poetic neo-realism goes back to the 1960s. Yet it was because of the restrictions imposed on Iranian life and cinema during the 1980s that it resurfaced with a new emphasis on cleansing the spectators' eyes of their dogmatic social, cultural and cinematic gazes.

The form has affinities with traditional Iranian painting where perspective is of secondary importance and marginal objects are at times as important as what is expected to be in the foreground. It also has similarities with indigenous *ta'ziyeh* passion plays, where self-reflexive comments and actions are to remind the audience of the artificiality of the impersonation of the saints and villains, and the amateur nature of the performance allows the interference of the actors' life experience and identity with their actions on the stage. Within this form, the comments and behaviour of the people surrounding the circular stage are vital to the performance. The protagonists function as mirrors of humanity which society is to use to reform its essence. As in *The Circle*, each set of events flows into the next and unlikely saints appear one after the other on the stage to be victimized by villains.

Though in his later films Panahi became more critical of the contemporary Iranian situation, and even his first film is not void of his social concerns. Yet his critique is more reflected in his form which is designed to attract attention to what is not shown. In other words, even at this early stage, Panahi manages to produce a writerly text (Barth 1974), with foregrounded gaps that the spectators are to fill with their indefinite interpretations. The most important gap in *The White Balloon* is, of course, the gap reflected in the title. The white balloon of the title is only to be seen in the hand of the balloon selling Afghan boy in the last shot of the film. Panahi invites the spectators to reread the whole narrative of the film by offering a fix that is to captivate their memory as they are leaving the theatre. Like his later films, he also focuses on the crowded streets of Tehran and

portrays child and teenage protagonists who act rather than just see. Thus he creates a tension between his films and Kiarostami's village films, and the post-war European films, which, according to Giles Deleuze, offered new perspectives to cinema through the 'dispersive and lacunary reality' (Deleuze 1992) of disconnected spaces and the gaze of children who were unable to react and change the things that they observed (Deleuze 1994).

Little girls and young women have a central place in Panahi's films. Thus the problems his protagonists face are at times because they are female. This becomes particularly apparent in *The Circle* and *Offside* where the fact of their gender deprives the protagonists of a series of things that men easily enjoy – watching a snake charmer, smoking in public, hiring a hotel room, buying a bus ticket, walking in the streets at night, watching a football match, *etc.* The emphasis on these limits produces the sense of a constant reductive social gaze that debilitates the girls' abilities to fend for themselves, a kind of overwhelming Foucaultian panopticon which is to break their resistance and turn them into 'docile bodies'.¹

The use of this panoptic gaze in Iranian cinema has precedence in Beyzaie's cinema where it also exudes a Kafkaesque sense of helplessness. Both in Panahi and in Beyzaie it functions at two levels: one is thematic and signifies surveillance in a suppressive society, the other is self-reflexive, and as in *The Mirror* foregrounds the director and his camera as exploitative gazers that distort things to suggest specific meanings or seize specific moments. In the latter function, the tendency of the camera to offer additional limits is highlighted, and it is suggested that the camera presents new forms of looking at life rather than representing life.

In Panahi's films, the limits of human existence and action and the actuality of the powerful gazes that pin life to predetermined meanings or ideologies are also suggested in the overwhelming presence of circles in *mise en scène* and camera work. This may be in his recurrent use of 360° pans, the circularity of the action or the shapes of staircases, rooms and buildings. It may also be seen in his meticulous desire to reflect the circles of Iranian ethnicities or suggest, as in *The Circle* the ceaseless endeavours and movements of a doomed circle of girls who, as in Kafka's or Beckett's works, cannot go anywhere. Yet what they all exude is a sense of ceaseless control that the characters need to challenge and confront if they are to change their lives. *The Mirror* opens with a 360° pan of a traffic intersection. The camera follows a group of lively girls leaving their school and crossing two streets on an intersection, an old man who fails to cross the next street, two porters/salesmen who do it, and then two women who cross the final

street and arrive at the school gate. Circularity of this early movement foreshadows the circularity of the later events.

The Circle begins with a small door that opens to the maternity ward of a hospital, from which a nurse announces the birth of a girl. It ends with the closing of another small door after the 360° pan of a detention cell where all the fugitives have gathered and the name of the woman who gave birth to the child is announced as a recently transferred inmate. The solidarity and the victimization of the girls who have been released, escaped prison, or permitted to have 48-hour leaves, remind one of the girls in Bergmann's *Port of Call* (1948), but Panahi's film is even less sentimental than Bergmann's. Rather than acting as reluctant saviours, the men in Panahi's films include a helpless father, brothers out to hunt their sister, a lover who left his beloved pregnant before being executed, a husband who has married a second wife, and another who does not know anything about his wife's past. The law and society also seem to be much crueller than in Bergmann's world.

Closely associated with this notion of surveillance and circles is the suggestion of violence or undefined danger that becomes inevitable if one attempts to transcend the circles. In *The White Balloon*, Raziye's brother Ali has a blackened eye and the threatening presence of the adult characters seems overwhelming. In *The Mirror*, Mina's circular journey between Republic Square and Parliament Square is filled with the impending danger of having accidents, losing her way, or confronting unwanted people while waiting in front of a coffee house. In *The Circle* the threat is crushing. Narges has a bruised eye, and the others are like the frightened inhibitors of a 'noir' horror film, cowed by a threat that is lurking in every corner. The threat may culminate in physical punishment, imprisonment or disaster. The same circle of poverty, petty crime, and impending disaster creates the ambiance of *Crimson Gold*. This sense of impending danger builds up a tension, a form of unpretentious suspense that draws the spectator from one scene to another. The destiny of Panahi's film as a tragedy or a comedy depends on whether this threat is actualized or remains impending.

This undefined threat has a sociopolitical aspect about it, that due to Panahi's suspension of information about characters becomes increasingly more powerful and universal. In *The White Balloon*, the subterranean ever bellowing father suggests a sinister, powerful absence, whose preoccupation with taking a shower enables the children to embark on their quest for buying a goldfish, a symbol of life and energy for the New Year festival. At times when in the absence of their superiors these sinister characters enter the camera frame and appear in their

human dimensions, the threat disappears. The nostalgic soldier who is reminded of his sister when he meets Raziye in *The White Balloon*, the policemen who want to make a phone call in *The Circle*, and the conscripts who stand guard against the girls in *Offside*, all change function and become human once they enter the domain of the camera in the absence of their superiors. They even come to reveal other aspects of the social problems addressed in Panahi's films and portray their own sufferings in circles that have paralyzed their lives. These can be interpreted as instances of Panahi's 'humanitarian gaze', which corroborate his insistence that his films are not political. He is not out there to attack the government by depicting its members and agents as villains, but to register the impacts of human behaviours and laws on the lives of the less privileged members of his society. Yet it may also suggest a society from which trust is disappearing, or the existence of a surveillance culture in which to avoid being punished by Orwellian 'big brothers', people allow themselves to be used as instruments of tyranny. At another more self-reflexive level, it also suggests the double edged power of the camera to regulate and change human behaviour. In *The Mirror*, the behaviour of the Lor boy, playing the conscript Alireza, is totally different off and on camera. He even takes it upon himself to inform Mina that she is being followed by the camera crew. In *Offside*, one of the conscripts says that their commander has allowed some women, who had been seen by foreign journalists, to watch the match. This emphasis on the power of the camera or armed human gaze to regulate behaviour is central to Panahi's films.

The Circle and *Offside* are most revealing in this regard. In the presence of their commanders, the soldiers are serious, unforgiving and even violent, but in their absence, they become friendly. Panahi's denial of vital information about characters helps him balance his gaze by allowing these potentially violent figures to enter the positive world of the camera and prove their humanity. Once the non-sympathetic characters reveal a few things about their personal circumstances, they are given the chance of close-ups and an audible voice that welcomes them to a domain where they are to be understood rather than judged. Yet the denial of information in the case of the central characters may also function, as in *Crimson Gold* and *The Circle*, to prohibit judgement or encourage the spectator to examine the plight of the characters objectively or to identify with them. The spectators' subconscious rush for their religiously and socially infused judging standards is stymied by this denial of information. The spectator sees the characters as human beings before being able to dehumanize them as unruly or immoral criminals who deserve to suffer. Thus Panahi suggests that it does not make any difference whether one is a veteran or a vagabond, a mother

who gave birth to a girl rather than a boy, a young woman wandering the streets, a woman whose poverty has forced her to get rid of her child, or a prostitute who is fed up with pretention. When a person fails the standards of a hypocritical, patriarchal society, she receives little help and is easily placed in the vicious circle of deprivation, crime and conviction.

Conclusion

Jafar Panahi, therefore, is an innovative director, whose films reveal the same self-reflexive elements as Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf's, yet they are more sociopolitically motivated and less philosophical than their works. His emphasis on circles in *mise en scène* and camera work and his self-reflexive attitudes towards cinema make his films a locus of encounter between Italian and French cinemas and the Iranian *ta'ziyeh* tradition. His non-realistic approach to sound editing, which introduces sounds detached from the images on the screen, and his insistence on foregrounding a multiplicity of ideas and characters create a form of dispersed realism that borrows from Iranian visual arts to create a new form of anti-realistic realism. Panahi is particularly interested in registering human behaviour and revealing the viciousness of the unjust written and unwritten laws that emboldens others to be hypocritical and victimizes the less privileged members of society. The less privileged people in Panahi's films are not mere victims. They devise ways to fend for themselves and confront the limits of their circles, but they are not always successful. That may be why their lives have to be registered by camera which, as Panahi's films suggest, has the potential to modify human behaviour, as it has already changed our understanding of time and space.

Saeed Talajooy

Note

1. For more on Michel Foucault's interpretation of Bentham's idea of panopticon, see *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (trans. Allan Sheridan) (New York: 1995), p. 195–228.

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Dariush Mehrjui, photographed by Parviz Jahed.

DIRECTORS

DARIUSH MEHRJUI

In December 1939, Dariush Mehrjui, the pre-eminent auteur of Iranian cinema, was born to an upper-middle class, art-loving family in Tehran. In childhood, he began learning music and painting and he grew through puberty under guidance of his grandmother who made a devout Muslim teenager out of him. In early youth, however the foundations of his devotion crumbled when he learned to doubt. It is then that he redirected his religiosity to a passion for philosophy. His love affair with cinema began at the age of seventeen, and motivated him through learning English. Shortly after finishing high school, he moved to California to pursue his college studies in cinema and philosophy at UCLA. Ironically, he did not graduate in cinema as he dropped out, only to graduate in philosophy. Since his early days in California he devoted himself to exporting his native culture. Dariush became the editor of an Iranian literature magazine: *Pars Review* that was published in California. While in America, Mehrjui had written a script, 'Shirin and Farhad' that he was supposed to co-produce with Hollywood in Iran – a project that never took off. Mehrjui's other scripts were also repeatedly rejected by a commercial film industry that was perhaps unable to grasp Mehrjui's impressionist vision of cinema.

Mehrjui's first opportunity to enter Iranian cinema came through Film Farsi production (popular B-movies that according to Mehrjui address the taste and grasp of children and idiots), when the script of a commercial film entitled 'James Bond in Iran' was offered to him. With this, Mehrjui was given the unique opportunity to make his first feature film, *Almas-e 33/Diamond 33* (1966), which he aimed to turn into a parody of such thrillers. Thanks to the sensation of a fresh-out-of-LA director and a fresh-out-of-LA cinematographer, this film was given a hefty film budget (over US\$200,000) that afforded him Technicolor, cinema scope and even several non-Iranian actors. However, the

film was a box-office and a critical flop – quite likely because its Film Farsi audience failed to grasp the intended comedy and the elite spectators dismissed it on the charge of its popular theme. Despite the commercial failure, Mehrjui remains grateful to the chance this film offered him to explore his filmmaking abilities. It paved the way for a groundbreaking entry into Iranian cinema for the young and inexperienced pupil of Jean Renoir, who would capture the world's attention with a sequence of acclaimed films such as *Gaav/The Cow* (1969), *Aghaye Halou/Mr Naïve* (1971) and *Postchi/The Postman* (1972).

Mehrjui's troubles with censorship in Iran began early in his career, during the Pahlavi regime, and continues until today. The expressionist images of rural poverty that *The Cow* presented contradicted the Shah's vision of modernization and the golden gates of civilization. The censors dreaded *Postchi's* criticism of disproportionate class relations and displaced modernist aspirations; and did not tolerate the social criticism of the pseudo-documentary, *Dayereh-ye Mina/The Cycle* (1974). Repeatedly prevented from filmmaking in Pahlavi's regime, his career suffered more setbacks during the cultural reforms following the Islamic Revolution. Although amongst the revolutionaries – as were most intellectuals at the time – Mehrjui did not find the post-revolutionary environment friendly to his filmic aspirations, so he migrated to France. Ironically, his award-winning *The Cow* that had put him in antagonism with the Shah regime became the factor that may have saved Iranian cinema from post-revolutionary neglect. Reportedly, Ayatollah Khomeini had seen the film on television, and was impressed by the power of film, enough to state film could play a role in the education of society. Thus, in 1983, the newly founded Farabi Cinema Foundation (a cinematic branch of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance) extended an invitation to Mehrjui to return and participate in the foundation and the 'Fajr Film Festival'.

It was only in 1985 that Mehrjui finally returned to Iran, and with the help of the Farabi Cinema Foundation made *Ejareh-Neshinha/The Tenants* (1986) – a unique social comedy in the tumultuous years of war that examined the discordant lives of different classes of citizens, occupying different floors of a crumbling apartment. Mehrjui's 'Tenants' had raised criticism from religious filmmakers. Still unconverted at that time, Mohsen Makhmalbaf had said: 'I am ready to strap a bomb to myself and blow up Mehrjui and the cinema!' Nevertheless, *The Tenants* was met with popular success, breaking the box-office records at that time. Mehrjui's next box-office hit was *Hamoun* (1990), a philosophical film for the enlightened intellectuals or the self-searching spirituals, a Felliniesque film for aesthetic connoisseurs, and a romantic drama

for the rest. After *Hamoun*, perhaps in reaction to positive responses to the character of *Hamoun's* wife (a wealthy, attractive flamboyant artist who no longer loved her husband, played by Bita Farehi), he made *Banu* (1991), the story of an upper-class middle-aged women who failed in abandoning her bourgeois background when faced with the realities of her servant's lives. *Banu* however was not as lucky as *Hamoun* as it offended the so-called proletarian sensitivities of the revolutionaries that did not allow its release. To ease his life, Mehrjui choose his next heroine to be *Sara* (1992), a poor and hard-working woman who was trying to stand on her own feet while helping her family. In describing his survival strategy in the face of censorship apparatus he states:

I have to say that all my films have been a reaction to their preceding one. First, this reaction is to censorship: how far can I go? Next, it is important to determine if a work is feasible within the limitation of determined frameworks. There have been plenty of highly worthy themes that have been abandoned because of these restrictions. During my filmmaking process and in the back of my head I am constantly concerned and influenced by censorship and the restrictions that govern the society; whether I choose a theme or not, whether I choose to turn a blind eye [...] all these four films I made about women had this in common. When *Banu* was banned, I made *Sara*. In other words, stubbornly I developed the same theme; then *Pari* got into trouble and I suffered the consequences of its censorship. [...] in making *Bemaani*, the atmosphere after 2 Khordad [When Khatami's reformist government won in a landslide election] was more relaxed, and this is why I thought I could approach this critically harsh theme about a social problem [violation of women's rights in rural tribes that led to their suicide] which was totally impossible in the past. (Page 346)

Mastering the art of surviving censorship and remaining not only authentically artistic, but also prolific and popular sets Mehrjui apart from many other prominent filmmakers of his generation. Judging from the content of his interviews, Mehrjui's films are inspired by his personal and long quest for a philosophical understanding of a human's individuality with reference to human conditions:

Philosophy saturates an individual's life, everyone constantly grapples with it. [...] Philosophy is even in cheap movies, even in children films and puppet shows. Philosophy is present [...] Philosophy may be more highlighted in my films because these films often portray an individual in a crisis, thus

highlighting notions of love, death, life, struggle and triumph [...] this is an existentialist view that defines the essence or the meaning of a story and the quality of the protagonist's interactions. (257) The individuality of a person is my main concern; and I always think about how to describe the meaning of individuality and identity in a construct that is governed by the collective values of its history. I always question 'who I am' and whether my personal experiences are entangled with the culture, the morale and the language of the society in which I live. This is why the characters of my films are unique and not a typical and accessible representative of a group or class [...] Madness is the outcome of an individual's refusal to be trapped in the collective. (179)

His inspirations might come from adaptations of Persian stories (Gholamhossein Sa'edi in *The Cow* [1969], Goli Taraghi in *Derakhte Golabi/The Pear Tree* [1998]), free adaptation of international literary works (Ibsen's *A Doll's House* [1879] in *Sara*, and Salinger's *Franny and Zoey* [1961] in *Pari*) or borrowing elements from world literature (e.g. Chekhov and Dostoyevsky in *Banu and Hamoun*) and from personal experiences and observations (e.g. *Banu, Leila* [1996], *Mom's Guest, The Tenants, Bemaani, The Cycle* and *Mix* [2000]). Mehrjui does not believe in close adaptations: 'My method is to read the story once, jot down the important points, put the book aside and start writing. I try to filter the story through my own mind; see it as I want not as it is written' (48). However, Mehrjui is not egocentric in storytelling:

I have no particular prejudice about adaptations, for me the film is what matters not the source of the topic. If a story reflects a particular thought better than my writing I will choose it. Even if I find like-minded writers, I prefer to collaborate on script writing. I am not in love with my own ideas. (47)

Past the stage of inspiration and scripts, Mehrjui's films must first navigate their way through censorship while retaining their originality and next circumvent technological limitations without compromising the qualitative formalism. Mehrjui describes his filmmaking practice as a man who walks on a wire, who depends on his skills to keep balance and move forward. (331)

Besides censorship, Mehrjui's films survive practical shortcomings without losing their stylistic and formal originality. In *Mix* (2000), a self reflexive film about a neurotic film director (played by Khosro Shakibaei) who is trying to make the deadline for submitting his film to the Fajr Film Festival, Mehrjui depicts a dark comedy about the hurdles of filmmaking in Iran. In many ways,

Mix seems like an anthology of themes and topics that had preoccupied Mehrjui's cinematic universe.

In *Mix*, my preoccupation is with the ways people work together, as well as the ways people relate to a modern society, and technology, which is one of the bases of modernity. How do we in Iran relate to 'the order of things' which is a prerequisite for a modern society; and how do these relations work in a factory, which a group of people are supposed to run? (371)

This precise discrepancy between the traditional context and modern content constitutes one of the central themes of almost all of Mehrjui's films – with the exception of *The Cow* and *Bemaani*. Mehrjui often represents the paradoxes of modern and traditional by the character of a westernized individual who acts or considers himself also 'intellectual', and finds himself at odds with or alienated from the society that surrounds him (e.g. the musician in *The Tenants*, the nephew in *The Postman*, the progressive doctor in *The Cycle*, the self-confident friend from abroad Mina in *Sara*) or as individuals who are confused between states of modernity and tradition (e.g. the west-educated orientalist Maryam in *Banu*; Asad in *Pari*; modern-living old-fashioned thinking mother-in-law of *Leila*, or the projectionist in *Mom's Guest*).

Although technical and financial limitations in Iran preclude it from competition in world markets where the box-office sale speaks first, Mehrjui does not consider them crippling, rather a positive determinant of the form and style of Iranian cinema:

Our cinema doesn't have their [America, China, Europe] technical knowledge, not their cultural content. Ours is an intellectual, impressionist and humane cinema that demands thinking and meditation. It doesn't aim just to entertain you; if it did, it would turn into the watery cinema of the past [Film Farsi] [...]. We have to stick to what we know, and hope that this starting movement [Iranian neo-realism?] has continuity and evolution. (Page 377)

This said, Mehrjui's cinema is by no means an 'Iranian neo-realist' one – even though he has experimented with that form in films such as *Alamout* (whose print is lost), *Bemaani*, and *The Cycle*. *Mise en scène* is one of the most distinguishing features of his films. Use of sound, rhythmic editing, non-linear narration, colour dissolves, extreme close-ups, continuous cuts and low-key lighting, plus motifs such as food, fabrics and still objects, give his films a recognizable texture. Mehrjui does not try to hide Bergmanian or Felliniesque

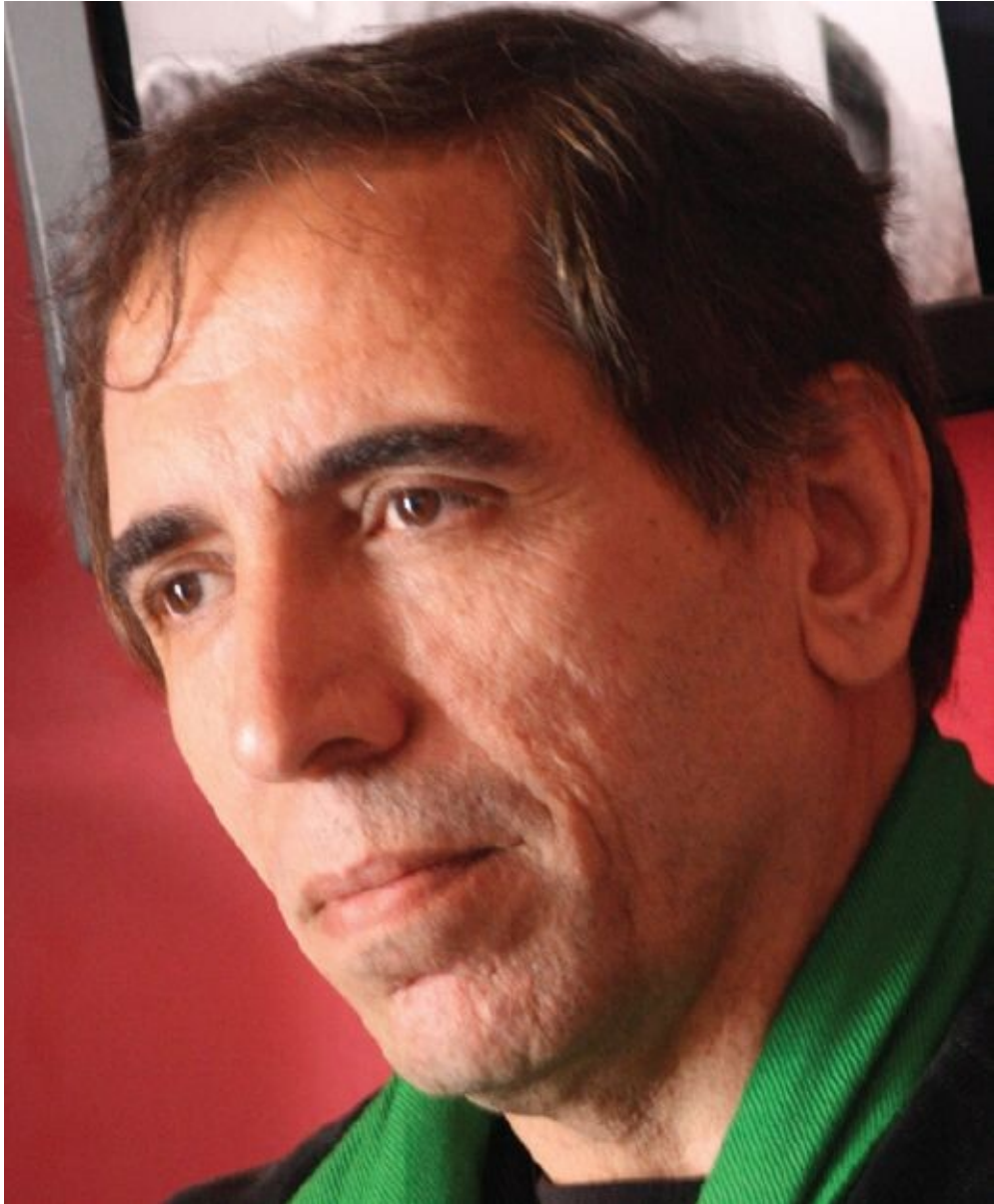
influences in his films and adapts form through the same culturally personalized filter as he adapts literary works. Some call Mehrjui a cinematographer of societal issues (because of films like *The Cow*, *The Cycle*, *The Tenants*, *Mix* and *Santouri*), women's issues (because of *Banu*, *Sara*, *Pari*, *Leila*, *Pear Tree*, *Bemaani*, and *Mums Guest*), or call him the champion of bourgeois filmmaking. Many praise his poetics and some scold his wide popularity as proof of complicity and compromise. After over forty years of filmmaking, Mehrjui is adamant that he does not make films to satisfy festivals, but to tell stories he cares about, stories about individuals who might belong to a type but who cannot be stereotyped. He might be part of the cinematic movement that portrays the issues that Iranian women, addicts, bourgeois and intellectuals have to grapple and struggle with, but ultimately he wishes to illustrate the limits of individual or collective strength.

Najmeh Khalili-Mahani

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Mohsen Makhmalbaf, photographed by Parviz Jahed.

DIRECTORS

MOHSEN MAKHMALBAF

Born in 1957 and raised in a religious, working-class background Mohsen Makhmalbaf became really acquainted with cinema in his early twenties. It is almost unbelievable that such an important director could count the films he had seen before the age of 20 with the fingers of one hand. His personal story is more or less known: raised by a single mother, working from the age of thirteen to support her, Makhmalbaf became an anti-shah militant and spent four years in prison before the prevalence of the Islamic Revolution. Being a deeply political figure, which did not hold on statically to establishment beliefs after the Islamic Revolution, Mohsen Makhmalbaf started as a writer. His course in writing was rather prolific, producing some thirty books before turning to cinema that became his primary medium. In many of his films one can recognize awe for cinema's power and influence on the people. His cinematic career could be roughly divided into three periods: the first when he was the 'protégée' of the Islamic Regime; the transitional period during which he would make films critical of Iranian society and politics; and the later, that of his self-exile. This categorization is based on the artist's political, rather than aesthetical or artistic, directorial pursuits. This is not only justified by the deeply political spirit, penetrating the whole of the director's filmography, but by the fact that the subject seems more important in his films than the style. Makhmalbaf is yet another 'auteur' without a clearly defined style. It could be suggested that aesthetically from the start he adopted a pluralism to serve his narrative purposes. Whether it is poetical symbolism or social realism his films employ, it seems that the filter defining them as Makhmalbaf's oeuvres is the artist's sensitive or polemical, and always political mood.

From the first period one can distinguish his *Boycott* (1985) as an autobiographical film about the artist's own time in prison and his experiences.

Already the portrayal of the protagonist, the director's alter ego, as a communist activist, and his torture by his supposed comrades, could be betraying a mood of questioning. In his next film *Bicycleran/The Cyclist* (1989), apart from a reference in the title of the influential film in Iranian cinema, *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), we can see for the first time Makhmalbaf's preoccupation with Afghanistan, the much troubled neighbour of Iran, and its impoverished inhabitants. This interest in Afghanistan will be fully explored during the years of his self-exile and working in Kabul. *The Cyclist* will also give to the director his first international award, the Best Feature award in the 'Hawaii International Film Festival'. His preceding film *The Peddler* (1987) was yet another social film about the working class. Already from this first period, when Makhmalbaf was still the protégée of the Islamic establishment, one could diagnose a critical stand against social injustice and misery. It was only a matter of time, from our point of view, for the artist to face the pitfalls of the new establishment, despite even his participation in the Islamic Revolution. This assumption might seem superficial and simplistic, as it relies on the axiom that rebels will be rebels even after the success of their revolution, but in this case it may be true.

A pivotal point in Makhmalbaf's career was the film *The Marriage of the Blessed* (1989). This film signals the transition in the artist's career to someone close enough to the regime to afford criticism without having his film banned. The absolute pointlessness of war, pointed out by the protagonist's traumas, and the wandering about in a Tehran 'ravaged' by social injustice and poverty, clearly communicate the artist's disappointment about the results of the Islamic Revolution. People coming from the same background as the director were fighting against the Shah's modernization project and classist society as well. What went wrong? is the question asked by Mohsen Makhmalbaf. His next film however *Nobat e Asheghi/Time of Love* (1991), shot in Turkey, was much more of a shock for the regime than the antimilitarist delirium, *The Marriage of the Blessed*. For the first time in his career Makhmalbaf decides to touch upon a taboo in Iranian society, that of female desire, by using a story of a love triangle (two men, one woman). It is not only the boldness of the subject that must have shocked the officials but the fact that it was Makhmalbaf presenting it, known for his religious upbringing and famous as a militant of the Islamic Revolution, must have been even more scandalizing. Expectably, the Islamic regime banned the film from being showed in Iranian cinemas (Hamid 2009: 8). The film provoked a major debate in the press and was shown only at the 'Fajr Film Festival'. As many critics have pointed out, Makhmalbaf was debating with his film about 'the relativity of human conditions and judgments' (Mir-Hosseini

2001: 29); and therefore his right to change his mind about the Islamic Republic among other things.

Although Makhmalbaf started as a writer, and has written the scripts for more than 35 films, in many of his films awe for the power of cinema is communicated, together with an almost narcissistic elevation of the figure of the filmmaker in Iranian society. In *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* (1992) we are being told the history of twentieth century Iran/Persia through the poetic chronicle of the evolution of Iranian cinema. This pairing of the two, in a sense elevates the importance of cinema in the cultural history of Iran. The film however that better describes the prestige and admiration surrounding the figure of the director in Iranian society is Makhmalbaf's docudrama *Salaam Cinema/Hello Cinema* (1995). On the surface this oeuvre constitutes a very intelligent meditation on the very medium of cinema and its impact on the masses. The riot that occurs while queuing for the audition, makes it seem as if the mostly working-class, amateur actors want to dynamically claim their own share in social visibility through cinema. Again the core of the film surveys Iranian society and its unsung heroes. The social agenda is never neglected by the artist, even when he crows over the powerfulness of his medium. Although the source of inspiration for *Hello Cinema* seems evident, Abbas Kiarostami's *Nema-ye Nazdik/Close-Up* (1990), Kiarostami's oeuvre seems more grounded, and only superficially exultation for the power of cinema as a medium.

Undoubtedly, one of Makhmalbaf's main preoccupations expressed in his cinema is the position of women in Iranian society. In his eyes women 'in Iranian society are victimized twice [...] first because everyone suffers under this government [...] second women suffer because of the patriarchal or male-chauvinist culture of Iran (West 2009: 12). And if his leaning towards the problems of the working class comes from and is justified by his own background – working class and deeply political – the artist's interest in women's issues must be seen as sensitivity to the figure of the most populous 'other' in Iranian society. We should not also forget that he was raised by a single mother and indicative of his sexual politics is the scene in *Once upon a Time, Cinema*, where in the mirror which symbolizes the truth of cinema appears a woman. In a way Makhmalbaf underlines who, from now on, should be the focus of Iranian filmmaking: the neglected, up to that point, Iranian women. Indeed female heroines hold a very nostalgic role in the director's filmography. In *Gabbeh* (1996) he proposes the natural colourfulness of life, nature, and profound Iran as an alternative to the austere, dressed in black, and essentially lifeless model of womanhood marketed by the Islamic regime. And like most

artists in the same position, with the state absolutely controlling the making and distribution of films, Makhmalbaf employs symbolism and the power of his cinematography, in order to unfold meaning.

But again later, when working outside of Iran, women still remained his 'favourite' subject. *Kandahar* (2001) is an epic of female solidarity in a country, Afghanistan, destroyed by war and political instability. On a symbolic level the story – an Afghan woman returning to her homeland after many years in Canada, in order to save her sister – points out western responsibility over what is happening in the world; and of course it depicts again how difficult it is to be a woman in the Middle East. Also his Turkish *Time of Love*, as already mentioned, constitutes a very bold depiction of female desire. Furthermore, Makhmalbaf's dogma of feminine emancipation expands in his own life. By promoting the cinematic careers of his wife and two daughters, all three are directors with his daughter Samira being the most famous, the artist helps the new generation of women filmmakers coming out of the Middle East. Of course, the 'family business' could be a source of justified criticism. Nonetheless, Makhmalbaf is rightfully seen as one of the few male feminist filmmakers of Iran, whose intention is not to raise consciousness as he admits, but to make people braver and act on issues that they are already aware of (West 2009: 15). Although Makhmalbaf's career has not been monothematic, the position of women in Islamic society has been central in his sociopolitical agenda.

His opposition to the Islamic regime – initially a moderate criticism, and then an open rupture – made working abroad almost a necessity. We should not forget however his early interest expressed for Afghanistan in the 1980s. Makhmalbaf from the late 1990s and on, has been working in the neighbouring Persian-speaking countries, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, revitalizing these countries' dormant cinemas and putting them on the map of World Cinema. His *The Silence* (1998) deals with child labour and single motherhood in Tajikistan, with certain autobiographical elements one could argue. *Afghan Alphabet* (2002), one of Makhmalbaf's few documentaries, also deals with children in Afghanistan and their problems caused by the Taliban regime. Some journalists accredit to Makhmalbaf some of the influence that resulted in the passing of a law in Iranian parliament, allowing Afghan children, deprived of education, to attend Iranian schools. The filmmaker's most accomplished film of his 'exile' period without dispute is *Kandahar*. Another interesting aspect of Makhmalbaf's career during the current 'exile' period, is the exploration of sexual relations, an effort inaugurated years ago with *Time of Love*. Liberated from moralistic dilemmas the artist is now free to film narratives that would not pass the Islamic

censorship. In the Tajik *Sex and Philosophy* (2005) the poetical representation-implication of body contact is nothing scandalous for western standards, we should not forget however, how the subject – the relationship of a dancer with his four girlfriends – could have easily caused the film’s ban in the filmmaker’s homeland. His next film *The Scream of the Ants* (2006), a French-Iranian co-production, goes one step further with some sex scenes, which again secure its ban in Iran.

In conclusion, we could see Makhmalbaf’s life and career as indicative of a certain group of Iranian people. From working class and religious militant of the Islamic Revolution, to a disillusioned, struggling-with-censorship filmmaker, and finally a global but still Persian artist, Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s transformations map the route that a part of Iranian society has taken as well. Of course his political activities have distanced him from filmmaking; to many critics it may even seem pointless him making films that will never be screened in Iran. But for a director as important as Makhmalbaf it is the body of his work that will finally confine to him a place in the history of Iranian cinema and not his political stand. After Kiarostami, he is the most celebrated cultural export Iranian cinema has ever produced. Although we are not critical of Makhmalbaf’s new artistic directions, we recognize that his films produced in Iran were much more accomplished than the ones of his later, ‘exile’ period. It may seem paradoxical but artistic freedom does not seem to have been very beneficial for an artist like Makhmalbaf. Like the rebel he has proved to be, and many times the master of social Iranian film, he needs an oppressor in order to skillfully direct his revolt through cinema.

Nikolaos Vryzidis

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Haji Agha, the Movie Actor, Perse Film (Samet).

Cinema arrived in Iran shortly after its invention. Three generations of Iranian film historians, most notably Farrokh Ghaffari, Jamal Omid and Massoud Mehrabi agree that it was an Iranian monarch, Nassereddin Shah of Qajar dynasty, who brought the first film projector to Iran.

There seems to be a general agreement among film historians that it was in Contrexeville, in France, during the summer of 1900 that the Shah saw film cameras and projectors for the first time. He had one set purchased by his chief photographer, Mirza Ibrahim Khan.¹

When the Shah chanced upon a cinematograph, he was fascinated by the apparatus, he wrote in his diary, “The machine projects on the wall and shows people in motion.”²

However, no feature film was made in Iran for a few decades. Until the first Iranian feature film was made in 1930, most films made in Iran were produced in or about the royal court. Many covered trivial incidents that lacked any

or about the royal court. Many covered trivial incidents that lacked any significance at the time although they might be viewed as precious documentaries that shed light on an aspect of life in Persia in late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Ironically, the controversy over the date and venue of the invention of cinema also exists about what happened in the early days of the history of cinema in Iran. Other film historians argue that the first film made in Iran showed Mozaffareddin Shah's (1853–1907) coronation. According to this version of Iranian film history, this film was shot in 1896, only one year after the invention of cinema. It is this last historical note that makes the comment debatable. It could not have been made before the arrival of the first set of cinematography apparatus in Iran, which was still called Persia at that time.³

This version of Iranian film history maintains that the footage on the coronation of Mozaffareddin Shah was shot by Russi Khan, a Russian national living in Iran.

Only to add to the confusion, Russi Khan himself said that he had entered the service of the Shah as a photographer only in 1902. This version of the history puts things in a more reliable chronological order.

Like some other film historians, Massoud Mehrabi and Hamid Naficy take the beginning of Iranian film history to yet another geographical location: "The first Iranian non-fiction footage was shot in Ostend in Belgium, on 18 August 1900, when a flower parade of some fifty floats showered the visiting Shah with bouquets of flowers."⁴

The Shah believed that this toy, which he knew as cinematograph, would be the best surprise souvenir he could bring back home for his harem and the courtiers. This was only five years after the Lumiere Brothers invented the cinema and screened their first film in Paris.⁵

Mirza, in the words of the Shah, "filmed the festivities and the young damsels who threw flowers at the spectators." In a sense, Mirza Ebrahim Khan could be remembered as the first Iranian motion picture photographer. He is said to have filmed the Shah's private and religious ceremonies; but no copies of such films have survived the test of time.⁶

According to this version, which conforms to the ones presented by many other Iranian film historians, this footage was shot by Mirza Ibrahim Khan with a Gaumont camera. Once again, this puts things in a better chronological order assuming that the visit to Belgium was made after the tour of Paris.

Yet, no matter which one of the various versions have provided a better view of the history of cinema in Iran, one could always ask: What is that makes this part of Iran's history a part of the history of Iranian cinema? Is it about the

part of Qajar history a part of the history of Iranian cinema: Is it about the way cinema apparatus found their way to Iran? Is about the first films showing Iranians? Can one really call these treasured pale prints “documentaries?”

Having come across two kings and one court photographer, the latter deserves more than a sheer mention.

Miraz Ibrahim Khan (1874–1874) the photographer (Akkas Bashi) travelled to Europe when he was 14. There, he learned the arts of photography and lithography. Upon his return to Iran, he joined the court of the crown prince Mozaffareddin in Tabriz and later married the prince’s sister-in-law. He was given the official title of Akkas Bashi (the Photographer) in November 1897. He accompanied the Shah in his trip to Europe in 1899 or 1900 (yet another point of dispute among historians) when he bought the famous cinematography equipment. His name was established as Iran’s first cinematographer when he tested the newly purchased Gaumont camera on 18 August 1900 in Ostend.⁷

Nevertheless, some argue that the first professional Iranian motion picture photographer was Khan Baba Motazedi (1892–1892), who started his work a few years later, about the time when cinematograph was beginning to become a popular pastime. The following advertisement appeared in one of the June 1908 issues of *Sour-e Esrafil* newspaper: “New sights to see through cinematograph, which depicts the world in motion. Recently imported and presented at one of the shops of the great Tajerbashi. Gentlemen are most welcome from one o’clock in the afternoon till two hours after dark.”⁸

Motazedi made many documentary films, most of them cannot be found anywhere. He brought back an extensive set of cinematography tools and several reels of comic films from a trip to Paris in 1909. Back in Tehran, he filmed family events at the homes of the elite and showed the films to them. His camera had a focal length of 3.5 and unless everything was at the proper distance, most of his scenes were blurred. The processing of the film stocks was done manually. He shot several films during the Qajar period, but made most of his more well-known documentaries in Iran under Reza Shah Pahlavi. One of the most notable one of these films is the footage that shows the Shah delivering his first speech to the corps in 1925. Later he films the Shah’s coronation and the inauguration of the Parliament Majles in 1926. He also filmed the launch of Iran’s railways project and the opening of Iran’s National Bank (Bank Melli Iran) by the Shah in 1927.⁹ One of the last one of his documentaries was about the opening of Radio Iran in 1940.

Filmmakers from other countries also made films in Iran during the same period. It was in 1924 in the South of Iran that Miriam Cooper and E.

Schoedsack shot their much celebrated documentary **Grass**, about the migration of the Bakhtiary nomads.

Motazedi was also a playwright and the owner of the first movie theatre for women in Tehran in 1928. He also filmed captions in Persian and inserted them in foreign films by replacing the original caption, making the movies legible for Iranian viewers. All the films showed in Iran, up until the time that dubbing was introduced, were explained by inserting text or captions in the original copy. For approximately twenty years, most of these texts, translated from the original version, were filmed in the private laboratory of Khan Baba Khan Motazedi.

This was an interesting juncture in Persia's history. "At the turn of the century, Iran was still beset by the despotic rule of monarchs. But a growing intelligentsia, impressed by the cultural and technological advancements of European countries, was becoming increasingly vocal in its demand for freedom and constitutionalism."¹⁰

The people in the country were generally poor and the economy was chaotic. "The visual arts in Iran at that time were restricted to sumptuous palaces and remained out of the reach of the common people. It is therefore, legitimate to ask, if it were not for the Shah's many visits to Europe at the end of the 19th century and his enthusiasm for the new medium of film sweeping the West, when would the silver screen have finally lit up in Iran?"¹¹

The first movie theatre in Iran opened in Amir Kabir Street in Tehran in 1904 by Ibrahim Sahaf Bashi (the Book Binder), who was a liberal man who had visited Europe and the United States and was involved in the Iranian constitutional revolution. While visiting foreign countries he was fascinated with modern life and particularly with cinema. So, on his way back to Iran, he bought a projector and some films and brought them to Tehran. He opened his cinema, which was for men only. Thanks to his political activities, soon he was forced to leave his shop and cinema in Tehran and go to live in exile, first elsewhere in Iran, and finally in India where he died.

Before leaving Tehran, however, he sold his cinema and other film apparatus to Aradeshir Khan, aka Ardashes Badmagerian, who worked alongside Motazedi and was another pioneer of Iranian cinema. He made short films and newsreels.

Later, Russi Khan established his own cinema in Amir Kabir Street where he showed short films with a Path' projector. Russi Khan later set up a makeshift movie theater at the courtyard of Tehran's first high school, Dar ul Fonoun. This theater could accommodate 200 people. He then went on by opening Farous Cinema at the second floor of a printing house. This cinema had a restaurant and

a power generator and showed better movies. Russi Khan's good days, however, came to an end as soon as the struggle between the Shah and the freedom fighters led to the Shah's downfall.

In 1926, Ali Vakili rented a salon at Tehran's Grand Hotel and opened the Grand Cinema. This theater had 500 seats and its tickets were sold for one, two and three Rials. A film shown at this cinema with the name of *Cyrus the Great and the Conquest of Babylon* was in fact a part of another film: *Intolerance* which was directed by D. W. Griffith in 1916. Grand Cinema was opened with the serial movies *Tiger's Trail* featuring Ruth Roland and went on with more popular films with stars such as Douglas Fairbanks, Richard Thalmadge, Rudolf Valentino and Ivan Mazhukhin.¹² This was the first modern cinema, although it was far from perfect.

All the films made in Iran until 1932 could invariably, though loosely, be categorized as documentaries. They depicted various aspects of life in Iran, though not every walk of life was represented in them.

In 1932, the first nearest thing to a feature film was made in Iran by Ovanes Oganians (1897–1897), aka ohanes Ohanians, who was a genius in his own right. The title of his film, *Abi and Rabi*, was taken from the ending syllable of its leading actors' names: Zarrabi and Sohrabi. Although there is no copy of this film available, and it has never been to the best of everyone's knowledge, all Iranian film historians agree that this silent film was an imitation of the Danish comic series *Double Patte and Patachon*. Or the historians have been told so.¹³

Oganians was a Russian immigrant, who was born in Turkmenistan and studied cinema in Moscow. He Came to Iran in 1929 with his daughter. He did not speak a word of Persian upon his arrival in Iran via Mashhad in the Northeast. Later when he opened his acting school, he taught his pupils in Azeri. Many of them hardly understood a word of what he said. He tried hard to convince Iranian officials that cinema was important and tried in vain to persuade them to fund his school. Disappointed by his lack of success in Iran, he went to India to continue his ambitions, but a revolution was going on in India and he could not do much. He ended up in jail in India.

He returned to Iran once again in 1947, converted into Islam and changed his name to Reza Mojdeh, an Iranian name and started a new business: Giving hope to the bald that hair would grow on their heads thanks to his medicine. It is more than obvious that he had to shut down the clinic. Oganians then opened an office as an inventor, but he did not manage to invent anything. Before he died in 1961, he tried at least another three times to revive his career in films, but did not succeed.¹⁴

Two years after *Abi and Rabi*, Oganians and his pupils made two other feature films. Ibrahim Moradi led one group to make *Frivolous*, and another group led by Oganians himself made *Haji Agha, the Film Actor*. Both films were silent and both were presented at the same time with the first Iranian talkie, *The Lor Girl/Dokhtare Lor* (1932), which left behind the other two thanks to the miracle of sound.

The Lor Girl/Dokhtare Lor was directed by Abdol Hossein Sepanta, a man from Isfahan. He made the film in India at the Imperial Film Studio in Bombay. His leading character is a shy woman with a thick accent that could be traced to her hometown, Kerman in Southeastern Iran. The actors were simply known by their first names: Sohrab Pouri and Hadi Shirazi. The film was funded by another expat Iranian in India, Ardeshir Irani. Sepanta had gone to India in 1931 at the invitation of the Zoroastrian Society of India. At the time he was doing some translation work for Dinshah Irani, the head of the Zoroastrian Society, who was interested in Iranian studies.

The success of this first talkie was overwhelming. It sparked the idea of other films inspired by Persian history and literature. *Ferdowsi*, one of these films, depicted the life of Iran's most celebrated epic poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi, the author of *The Shahnameh* or *The Book of Kings*. Another example was *Black Eyes (Cheshman-e Siah)*, which told the story of Persian King, Nader Shah, aka the conqueror of India. *Khosrow and Shirin* and *Leili and Majnoun* were both inspired by the works of Iranian poet Nizami. None of these Indian-made Iranian films equalled the success of *The Lor Girl*.

In Iran, after the failure of the two silent films, the officials put the improving of the production of local films on the national agenda, but the result was not impressive enough. A few short films and documentaries including *The Countryside of Tehran*, *The Royal Palaces* and *The Private Life of the Sovereigns* was all that the government-backed filmmaking organizations could accomplish between 1933 and 1947. Even some of those films, including a series of documentaries on the countryside were made by the 20th Century Fox representative to Tehran, Stefan Naiman.

While efforts to make films in Iran remained futile, Esmā'il Kooshan, who was later nicknamed as the father of Iranian cinema, started a career in films by dubbing foreign films into Persian for Iranian viewers. The first film dubbed into Persian was a French production, *Premiere rendezvous* directed by Henri Decoin. It was shown for the first time in Tehran at the Crystal cinema as *The Fugitive Girl*. Kooshan had originally planned to dub several films for the Iranian market, but the huge success of this first film lured him into coming to

Iran, establishing his Mitra Film Studio and starting to produce Iranian films.

It was in 1948 that Mitra Film produced the first talkie ever made in Iran: *The Tempest of Life*, directed by Ali Daryabeigi, with Zinat Moaddab and Avina Afshid as its cast. The film was shown at the Rex cinema, one of the most magnificent movie theatres of its time in Iran.

The Iranians were delighted to watch a film in Persian with Iranian actors. Unlike *The Lor Girl*, *The Tempest of Life* was made in Iran, yet another reason to be proud of this film. Nevertheless, after three days of initial success, it flopped. The reason could have been attributed to poor technique, banal plot unattractive photography and sloppy directing.¹⁵

Later on a divide took shape in Mitra Film as some of its stakeholders insisted on continuing the dubbing business. Others were in favour of film production in spite of the failure of their film. The second group, led by Koushan, established Pars Film, which continued making the Iranian equivalent of American B-Movies and a caricature of Italian spectacular throughout its lifetime, which ended in 1979.

In the early 1950s Pars Film produced several films, the highlight of which was *Ashamed/Sharmsar* (1951). The film was highly successful thanks to the presence of a highly popular leading Iranian singer Delkash as its leading actress. Many viewers thought the sad film depicted the real of life story of he singer.

As a result of this film's success, many other studios were established. That included Studio Badi' and Iran Film Studios. The later produced several films including *The Rascal*, which brandished a superior quality of acting and film directing as well as photography at its time. This film also introduced Nasser Malakmoti'i one of the greatest stars Iranian cinema ever produced.

This was a promising sign showing that Iranian cinema was improving, though gradually. The qualitative growth was coupled by financial success in the box office thanks to the presence of stare such as Delkash and Malakmoti'i.

Two years later, in 1953, a Pars Film production based on a popular Iranian novel, *Amir Arsalan*, directed by Shapour Yasami, became one of the most successful films of the decade. The leading actor of this film was a body-builder, Iloush, who later went to Italy to appear in spectacular movies, albeit with an Italian name. The leading actress, Roufia, enjoyed a lifetime of fame thanks to this film.

Until 1953, anybody with some money could launch a film studio and produce films sometimes with no previous experience in the area of filmmaking. Some went bankrupt as their business ended in disaster. Nevertheless, some of the

amateur filmmakers proved successful artistically and financially. There were 35 film production companies in Iran in 1953 thanks partly to the post-coup effort to create entertainment for the masses. They made a record 37 movies in that year.

A few years later, former stage actor Majid Mohseni made his debut in a series of melodramatic films with stories that were set against a rural backdrop and often played with the juxtaposition of rural and urban life. Mohseni who became a very famous film and radio actor made many films following the same model. The highlight of this period for him was the internationally successful *Swallows Return to Their Nest* (1963), which won him awards from the Moscow Film Festival, thanks partly to the artist's popularity among the working class. Other films in this series included *The Song of the Village* (1960). The two films were the main parts of a trilogy that had started with the *Field Nightingale* (1957). The series introduced, among others, Azar Shiva, one of the best actresses in Iranian cinema of the 50s and 60s.

Swallows Return to Their Nest was the first Iranian film that brought the Shah and his wife out of the palace to watch it with the man in the street at Sa'di cinema in downtown Tehran.

Mohseni also made *The Noble Ruffian/Lat-e Javanmard* in 1958, which became a model for a style of filmmaking that continued throughout the late 1950s and early to mid 1960s.

The first Iranian colour film was produced in 1956 by Pars Film Studios. *The Runaway Bride* was a musical comedy. At about the same time, other independent producers, for the first time, made Iranian films in colour. However, this was shot solely on 16 mm film. *The Runaway Bride* was shot in 35 mm video scope and was directed by Ismaeil Koushan with Delkash as the leading actress and Nasser Malakmoti'i as the leading actor.

Apart from Malakmoti'i, Pars Film introduced another superstar, the legendary Mohammad Ali Fardin, a former wrestler and a world champion. He first appeared in *The Spring of Life* in 1959 next to the beautiful star Iren, who came from a Gregorian Armenian ethnic background and was the first Iranian actress to appear in bikinis on film.

Yet another milestone set in 1957 was a major film studio set up by producer Mehdi Misaqieh. The studio undertook one of the major and most expensive production projects in the Iranian cinema, *Evening Party in Hell/Shabneshini dar Jahannam* (1956), which is very well known for its special effects. This was one of the first films made by another prolific ethnic Armenian filmmaker of Iran, Samuel Khachikian, aka the Alfred Hitchcock of Iran. He worked on this

film with an Iranian-Lebanese director Musheq Soruri.

Later Khachikian made his own unique thrillers marked by the interplay of shadows and darkness. These included *Scream in the Midnight/Faryad-e Nime Shab*(1961) starring Fardin, Arman and Parvin Ghaffari. The film opened in two of Tehran's top movie theatres, Sa'di and Radio City, which were normally reserved for screening Hollywood movies. This film was a great success for the producer and assured both Fardin and Khachikian's lasting popularity.

Following the model of Hollywood studios, two years later Misaqieh gathered together every popular actor and actress to make *The Human Beings* with Fardin, Arman, Majid Mohseni, the extremely popular actress Forouzan who later became the star of the Iranian cinema's best selling movie ever, Siamak Yasami's *Qaroon's Treasure/Ganj-e Qaroon* in 1965 in which she appeared in the opposite part of the celebrated Fardin. The film, a melodrama, written by renowned Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlou, became Iranian cinema's biggest box office hit to date. The film was viewed by nearly one million Iranians in the city of Tehran during its first screening. Numerous other Iranian films followed this film's style, often with similar stories and even with the same cast and director, but none of them were able to repeat its success although the films were popular enough in small towns and the underprivileged parts of big cities until a couple of years before the 1979 Islamic revolution instilling hope among the down and out.

However, starting from the mid 60s, this and other forms of traditional films began to lose their popularity and the entire film industry was plunged into a financial crisis as a new generation of filmmakers such as Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan and later Massoud Kimiai, Dariush Mehrjui, Nasser Taqvai, and Amir Naderi came on board one after another and changed the face and the course of Iranian cinema forever.

Behrooz Turani

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Abi and Rabi

Abi va Rabi

Studio/Distributor:

Cinema Mayak

Director:

Ovanes Ohanians

Producer:

Sako Elidze

Screenwriter:

Ovanes Ohanians

Cinematographer:

Khan Baba Motazed

Editor:

Ovanes Ohanians

Duration:

60 minutes

Genre:

Comedy

Cast:

Zarrabi Sohrabi

Year:

1930

Synopsis

The comic adventures of Abi (a tall man) and Rabi (a short man) in various situations. Abi drinks a great amount of water through a plastic pipe, but Rabi's

stomach grows big. Abi wants to sleep. He moves his head on the pillow because of the heat. The pillow gets torn, and the white feathers inside fly around all over the room. At this moment, Rabi enters the room. Thinking that it is snowing, Rabi opens his umbrella and holds it over his head. Rabi is squashed under a roller and he becomes tall. Abi hits him on the head with a sledge, and Rabi becomes short and fat again. Abi and Rabi take a cab and head for Shahabdolazim. When they reach their destination, people are having their lunch and children are playing by a pool. One falls in the pool and the other's nose starts bleeding. A doctor appears to treat the injured one. Abi and Rabi order chicken in a restaurant. When the waiter brings the dish, the two start to eat with their forks, but the chicken flies away.

Critique

Abi and Rabi is the first silent feature film in the history of Iranian cinema, written and directed by Ovanes Ohanians (also known as Oganians) an Armenian Russian immigrant who studied film in the Cinema Akademy of Moscow and returned to Iran in 1925 and established the first film school in Tehran under the name: 'Parvareshgahe Artisitiye Cinema' (The Cinema Artist Educational Centre). After a few months Ohanians directed his first feature film *Abi and Rabi*, a black and white comedy that was premiered on 2 January 1930 for the dignitaries, journalists and dramatists. The film was very well received by Iranian audiences.

Setare Ye Jahan daily review had this to say about the film two days later:

This film in which modern Iran's progresses are fully explained and deals with the armed forces, royal audiences, festivities, prosperity of the country and the life style of the Iranians, is a good production despite the unavailability of equipment and other problems and, to be fair, cannot be criticized. Let's note that we do not mean it is free from flaws. The point is that with regard to the lack of means and the difficulties they have faced in producing it, not only does it not deserve criticism but is admirable and praiseworthy.

This was the first film review in Iran, beginning a euphoria of self-flattery for what was publicized as 'gargantuan strides on the path of development and progress'.

Abi and Rabi was no more than an imitation of a series of popular Danish comedies made by Palladium Studios in the 1920s with two similar characters

Patte and Patachon.

The film lacked a coherent plot and consisted mainly of some comic and burlesque sketches, somehow similar to all early comic films relying on farcical adventures with an illogicality of their own, as in Lumière's *L'Arroseur Arrose/The Sprinkler Sprinkled* (1895). Not all of the film was shot live however, and wherever necessary, Oganians used paintings by Frederick Thalberg as illustrative captions linking live scenes. In 1932 the only available print of the film was destroyed in a fire which burnt down the movie theatre screening the film.

Behrouz Turani & Massoud Mehrabi

The Lor Girl

Dokhtare Lor

Studio/Distributor:

Imperial Film of India

Directors:

Abdolhossein Sepanta
Ardeshir Irani

Producer:

Ardeshir Irani

Screenwriters:

Rostam Irani
AD Irani

Cinematographers:

Ardeshir Irani
Rostam Irani

Art Director:

Abdolhossein Sepanta

Duration:

155 minutes

Genres:

Melodrama Adventure

Cast:

Abdolhossein Sepanta
Rouhangiz Saminejad Hadi

Year:

1932

Synopsis

The Lor Girl is about Golnar, a teahouse maid who falls in love with Jafar, a government agent. She was kidnapped by bandits in her childhood and now Gholi Khan, the chief of the bandits, has a lustful eye for her. Gholi Khan asks Jafar to join him and work for the bandits, but Jafar refuses. Then Gholi Khan imprisons Jafar but Golnar deceives the gang and helps to release him. Jafar finally murders a number of bandits and also Gholi Khan. Fearing the revenge of the bandits, the couple flee to Bombay and later return to Iran after the 1920 coup, when they hear news of the motherland's progress.

Critique

The story of *The Lor Girl*, the first Iranian talkie movie produced in India, was supposed to take place in Iran, and costumes and props to reconstruct an Iranian location had to be brought from Iran. The director, Abdolhossein Sepanta, who is acknowledged as the father of Iranian sound films, had almost despaired of finding an actress to play Golnar, when Rouhanguiz Saminejad, wife of a studio employee volunteered to play the role. She had a heavy Kermani accent and Sepanta had to make changes to the script to cast her. Casting for other parts presented no specific problems: Hadi Shirazi and Sohrab Puri could still speak Farsi despite their many years in India.

Although the film title and posters credit Ardeshir Irani with the direction of the film, there is good reason to believe that Sepanta had a greater share in the creation of the film. Publicity materials for *The Lor Girl* (and also the final sequence of the film) would seem to indicate that its producers were fully aware of the political atmosphere prevailing during the reign of Reza Shah, and of the fact that the regime relied heavily on mass media. Sepanta was a man of letters

and a prominent scholar in pre-Islamic literature, but he seems to have been unaware of the social conditions of the country and was easily duped by the official propaganda about the country's 'great progress and the establishment of order and social justice'. *The Lor Girl* illustrates the effect of this propaganda on Sepanta's nationalistic sentiments. Concerning his motives in making *The Lor*



Girl, Sepanta explains:

The Lor Girl, Imperial Film of India.

As it was the first Iranian sound film to be presented abroad I felt it should present a bright picture of Iran, and thus I fell more or less in line with government propaganda [...] but I have to admit that the film was a great boost for the nationalistic pride of expatriate Iranians.

The Lor Girl was released both in Tehran and India and well received by Iranians and the Parsi Indian population. The financial success of the film encouraged the Imperial Film Company of Bombay to produce a few more Iranian films with Sepanta such as *Ferdowsi* and *Shirin va Farhad*.

Behrouz Turani & Massoud Mehrabi

Haji Agha, the Movie Actor

Haji Agha, Actore Cinama

Studio/Distributor:

Perse Film (Samet)

Director:

Ovanes Ohanians

Producers:

Maghasedzadeh Foroozin

Habibollah Morad

Ovanes Ohanians

Screenwriter:

Ovanes Ohanians

Cinematographer:

Paolo Potomkin

Editor:

Ovanes Ohanians

Duration:

75 minutes

Genre:

Comedy

Cast:

Habibollah Morad

Asia Qostanian

Zema Ohanians

Abbas Khan Tahbaz

Year:

1933

Synopsis

A director (played by Ohanians himself) looks for a subject for his movie and someone suggests that he films Haji Agha secretly. Haji is very rich and frowns upon cinema. Haji's daughter, son-in-law, and servant help the director with the film as well. Haji's watch gets lost, and he suspects his servant. Haji and his son-in-law start chasing him. At first, they tail him to the dentist's, and then they meet a fakir who claims he can find the lost watch. He does some strange things. The director photographs Haji all the time. Then Haji watches the film and becomes aware of the true merits of cinema. One of the most exciting scenes of this movie was filmed at Pars Café in Laleh Zar Avenue.

Critique

Ovanes Ohanians' (also known as Oganians) second silent film *Haji Agha, the Movie Actor* which he made after the success of *Abi and Rabi/Abi va Rabi* (1930), was the first Iranian film that reflected the clash between tradition and modernity in Iranian society in the early 1930s. The film which placed ironic stress on the rise of cinema as a modern media blossoming within the fold of Iran's traditional society faced the cinema-goers, especially the intellectuals, for the first time with a serious and fundamental question: How could cinema, as a modern technological media, grow in a closed and traditional society? How has the dominant fanatic, dogmatic, and backward mentality dealt with cinema and to what extent will it tolerate and approve of it? By astutely portraying this pivotal contradiction – namely the clash of the traditional mindset with cinema – *Haji Agha, the Movie Actor* consciously and illuminatingly defended cinema and offered a logical and clear answer to the questions posed above. Ohanians set a trend in this film by employing an actress for the first time ever in Iran. And this happened in a society which was on the verge of modernization and disposal of the hijab but which still faced huge opposition towards these developments.



Ironically, Ohanians, the first representative of professional cinema and the founder of cinema in Iran was a foreigner (an Armenian Russian immigrant) who was not even a Muslim in a country with a majority Muslim population. Highly infatuated with the modern world, he went to an underdeveloped and traditional country. He even appeared to be in tune with the traditional view that cinema was a blasphemous phenomenon that wanted to disrupt everything. *Haji Agha, the Movie Actor* laid the foundation of critical reflection in Iranian cinema. This film, that marked the onset of an intellectual approach towards cinema, did not do well at the box office and practically brought the formation of Iran's serious and intellectual cinema to a halt. Nor did it become a major trend in Iranian cinema. After the failure of his second film, Ohanians could not find any support for further activities. He left Iran for India and continued his academic career in Calcutta. Subsequently he returned to Iran in 1947, where he died seven years later. But the idea of setting up a national and intellectual cinema, nevertheless, occupied the minds of Iranian intellectuals for years though it did not come to fruition until the 1960s.

Parviz Jahed

The Tempest of Life

Toufan-e Zendegi

Studio/Distributor:

Mitra Film

Director:

Ali Daryabeigi

Producer:

Ismaeil Koushan

Screenwriters:

Nezam Vafa

Dr Ziaee

Cinematographer:

Ismaeil Koushan

Duration:

90 minutes

Genre:

Melodrama

Cast:

Zinat Moaddab

Farhad Motamedi

Mehr Aghdas Khajenouri

Year:

1948

Synopsis

Nahid and Farhad meet each other at a party at the Iranian Society of Music and fall in love with each other. Nahid's father, a rich man, is against Nahid's marrying Farhad and instead gives her hand to a rich man. Farhad throws himself into his job and soon becomes a successful and rich man. Nahid's husband, on the other hand loses everything including his wife. Nahid and Farhad see each other on another occasion and eventually get married.

Critique

The Tempest of Life was the first post-Second World War Iranian melodrama. Ismaeil Koushan's (known as the father of the new film industry of Iran after the Second World War) efforts bore fruit and the twelve-year spell cast on Iranian cinema began to disappear. The second round of Iranian cinema began with *The Tempest of Life* in 1948. The film had a critical approach towards the traditional values of Iran's society and focused on the pitfalls of arranged marriage which was a common practice in Iran at that time.

To guarantee the film's commercial success, Koushan made use of all the available resources. He assigned Ali Daryabaygi, a then prominent stage figure, to direct the film. Nezam Vafa, a romantic poet much admired by the younger generation wrote the script. Khaleghi and Saba, two masters of Iranian traditional music, composed the score while Rahi Mo'ayeri, another reputable poet, wrote the lyrics, which were performed by famous singers Banan and Iran Alam. The film's premiere at the Rex cinema was attended by Ashraf Pahlavi (the Shah's twin sister). *The Tempest of Life* was a flop in spite of all Koushan's calculations, and failed to stir up the storm Koushan expected. The picture was marred by many technical defects and did not run for more than three weeks. The financial disaster sent Mitra Film into bankruptcy.

Behrouz Turani & Massoud Mehrabi

Evening Party in Hell

Shabneshini dar Jahannam

Studio/Distributor:

Misaqieh

Directors:

Mousheq Sorouri

Samuel Khachikian

Producer:

Mehdi Misaqieh

Screenwriter:

Hossein Madani

Cinematographer:

Enayatollah Famin

Editor:

Jamshid Sabuki

Duration:

118 minutes

Genres:

Comedy

Thriller

Melodrama

Cast:

Ezzatollah Vosough

Roufia

Reza Arham Sadr

Year:

1956

Synopsis

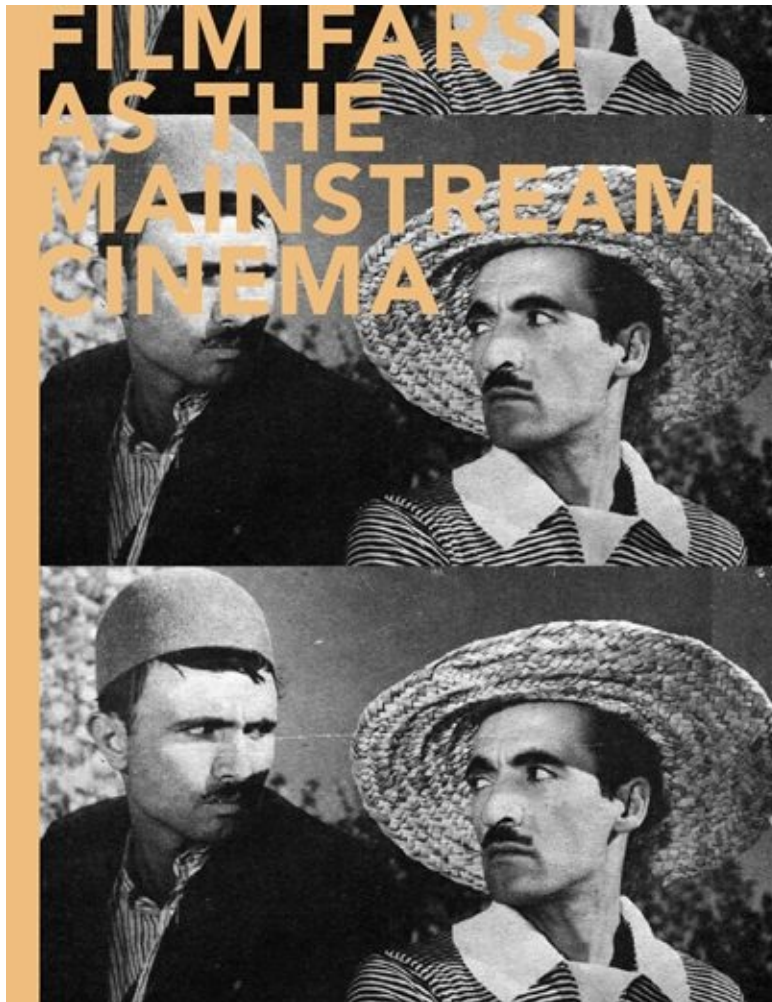
Haji Jabbar is a rich and terribly stingy man. His daughter, Parvin, is in love with her cousin, but he is against their marriage because the boy is penniless and Haji wants to marry his daughter to a rich merchant. Haji has an assistant named Ahmad who continuously gives him grief and advises him to change his ways. One night, when Haji is badly ill, he sees Azrael (the angel of death) in his dream. Azrael is eager to take his life. Haji and Ahmad pass through limbo and reach hell. He is terrified when he sees Napoleon, Hitler, and Genghis Khan in hell. When he wakes from his dream, he decides to change his lifestyle and be kind to his family. Among other things, he agrees to his daughter's marriage to her poor cousin and gives some of his property to them, donating the rest to charity.

Critique

Evening Party in Hell was considered controversial at the time for its

deployment of new cinematic techniques and its surrealistic aspects. It was produced by Misaqieh Studios in 1958 and was hugely welcomed by Iranian audiences. The film was also entered into the '8th Berlin International Film Festival' but failed to receive any prizes. *Evening Party in Hell* was a comedy with an Iranian take on an amusing subject and comedy styles often seen in western films, for example, the use of slapstick, mannerism and even surreal comedy. Various scenes of this film are indicative of technological progress in Iranian cinema which enabled the director to successfully create some of the more impressive scenes, such as when Haji (played by Reza Arham Sadr, a well known comedian from the stage, in his debut film) dies and is sent to hell. The film was technically and artistically far superior to any other Iranian films made at the time. However the basic elements and formula of Film Farsi remain and account for the dancing and singing scenes, moral narrative and simplistic characterization. Also, the class differences between its characters and the happy ending, was a common theme in the melodramatic Film Farsi of the time.

Parviz Jahed



The Farm Nightingale, Diana Film.

The problem of definition Since there is no agreement on the exact definition of the term 'Film Farsi', it is necessary to clarify what it means when used in this essay. Film Farsi literally means Persian films, but the term was increasingly used to refer to the technically and artistically 'inferior' Iranian movies, thus differentiating them from the 'superior' western movies. And so it had a negative and degrading connotation in the critical film discourse within Iran before the Islamic Revolution. All the definitions of Film Farsi are accompanied by a value system which blocks the route for academic understanding and analysis, free from ideological, prejudgemental and degrading outlooks. Iranian film critics and writers of the 1950s and 1960s have almost unanimously, seen Film Farsi as hollow, vain, indecent, vulgar and worthless. They have even regarded them an insult to the Iranian culture and the intellect of their audience.

Film Farsi was consistently discredited, ignored and/or ridiculed by many

Iranian film critics of the time. They were either extremely critical of or indifferent to this Iranian popular and mainstream cinema, with the elitist critique arguing that Film Farsi neither meets the elementary technical standards nor the cinematic conventions, let alone possesses any artistic qualities. More politically oriented film critiques, (concerned mainly with the content of films and less inclined to deal with cinematic aspects) were generally inclined to allocate the same criticisms, focusing more on the socio-political implication of Film Farsi. Viewing Film Farsi as a vulgar and unthinking entertainment product, which distracts the audience's attention from crucial socio-political issues, contributing to the apoliticization of the masses and hence to the maintenance of the status-quo. Moreover, more crude approaches among this group tend to consider Film Farsi as an organized plot by the Shah's regime to manipulate and brainwash the audience. These contemptuous or suspicious outlooks do not exclusively pertain to the old generation of Iranian film critics. Many new film critics who have conducted research on Film Farsi in recent years have adopted the same debasing and snobbish attitudes, for instance, Asghar Abdullahi observes that: 'A serious and reasonable person would not waste his time studying and haggling over Film Farsi and its history' (Moazezinia 1999: 183). Another film critic writes: 'Even now, many years after their production, Film Farsi cannot be tolerated as a case study, because the loathsome corruption embedded therein blocks the path of academic investigation' (Moazezinia 1999: 9) Those who reviewed Film Farsi with an aesthetic and structural approach have found them to be of low artistic quality, their plots to be superficial, and dialogue to be commonplace. Other writers who looked at films as providing social documents, and sought to adapt them to social realities, denied that there was any realism contained within Film Farsi, and believed that these films reflected an artificial, dreamlike world. According to Faroughi Ghajar: 'These stories do not have anything at all to do with the lives of the Iranian people or with the wishes and aspirations of the present generation' (Ghajar 8). Criticizing those who regard the whole of Iranian cinema, under the title of Film Farsi, to be vulgar and worthless, Robert Safarian believes that Film Farsi should be criticized and investigated from a sociological point of view. Unlike Faroughi, Safarian argues that Film Farsi movies are valuable social documents and reflect the life of an important social juncture in Iran's history (Safarian 112). What has been classified by Houshang Kavousi, a veteran film critic, under the title of Filmfarsi (coined by him, as a singular word) was a type of Iranian movie which has been adopted following arbitrary and stereotypical styles derived from 'low class' Hollywood films and generic products of Indian cinema, and which were enthusiastically welcomed by

ordinary folk because of the utilization of a special kind of mainstream attractiveness.

Is Film Farsi a film genre?

It may be inferred from this definition that Film Farsi is a genre in Iranian cinema, which was influenced by Hollywood and Indian films. According to this definition one should look for another kind of Iranian cinema, which was produced at the same time as Film Farsi and which pursued other styles and forms. However it is abundantly clear that, apart from a few documentary films and some feature films, which were made inconsistent with the familiar conventions and patterns of Film Farsi, no specific kind of cinema other than Film Farsi existed at that time. It is wrong to think that Film Farsi is a deviation in the whole unit of Iranian cinema before the Islamic Revolution. That is to say, the main body of the Iranian cinema was Film Farsi, and only a few films and film-makers were, under very special and unique conditions, able to extricate themselves from this predicament. But what really was Film Farsi and what kind of attributes did it include?

In regards to the question of technical deficiencies within Film Farsi and lack of understanding of the universal cinematic grammar by Film Farsi makers, I would like to argue that this approach is not a good way for the critical understanding of Film Farsi. Obviously there are technical shortcomings in Film Farsi, but they are not the focus of my concern. Instead, the standpoint should be shifted to the discussion of the genre and the structural elements of Film Farsi. For, in my opinion, it is only through such an approach that one can explain Film Farsi without being entangled in prejudgement and evaluation debates, and one can grasp its repetitive components and elements, and also its social impact on the society and its attraction to a mass audience.

The major genres of Film Farsi

Since its commencement, the Iranian cinema has tried its hand with a variety of genres. But the most important genres which have appeared in Film Farsi cinema, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s were: historical, rural and urban melodrama, comedy, thriller and Jaheli Film. Although, according to David Bordwell there is no single principle for recognition of the genres and various genres interfere with each other (Bordwell 1985: 81). The merging of genres does not mean that they cannot be distinguished from each other and not studied independently. For example, melodrama is the most comprehensive genre in Iranian cinema that can encompass sub-genres like urban, rural, love story, and adventure genres. However, as some of the sub-genres, such as urban

melodrama, turned into a main and important one in a particular period of time (the 1950s) due to particular conditions in Iranian society, *i.e.* the growth of urbanization and the migration of villagers to cities, these genres must be studied separately.

Historical films

After experimenting with comedy and social genres, Iranian cinema turned to making historical genre films in the early 1950s. But the history displayed in Film Farsi bears no resemblance at all to the real history of Iran. Rather, it is based on historical myths and fables which form an important part of Iranian classical literature, and also historical fictions that were published in instalments in the popular journals of the time. In principle Film Farsi is indebted to the tradition of the serial fictions of Iranian popular magazines. Many of the themes and characters in Film Farsi have emerged from those publications, and many similarities in structure and content may be found between the two mediums. An insubstantial storyline, exaggerated and hollow characterization, *deus ex machina*, consecutive climaxes and ethical consequences, were some of the characteristics of the Iranian serial fictions of the 1940s and 1950s that can also be found in Film Farsi.

The growth of these pulp serial fictions and pseudo-historical novels coincided with the assumption of power by Reza Shah, the climax of his chauvinistic tendencies, and his efforts to revive the ancient glory and honour of Iran. Reza Shah portrayed himself as the inheritor and perpetrator of all heroic deeds of the past. Iranian writers and intellectuals at the beginning of this era were attracted by Reza Shah's patriotic and nationalistic slogans and supported him. Reza Shah emphasized the importance national identity and independence, which were also desired by intellectuals in the light of Iran's Constitutional Movement.

Abdoulhossein Sepanta was the first Iranian filmmaker who, being motivated by a search for national identity and revival of the glorious past of Iran, embarked on filmmaking. His first film, *Dokhtare Lor/The Lor Girl*, which was in fact the first talkie of Iranian cinema, was made in India in 1933. By creating a hero who evidently resembled Reza Shah, Sepanta implicitly praised Reza Shah's rule. In one scene in the film, Golnar (the female protagonist of the film), addressing Jaafar (the hero) says: 'I see that a star is shining in the dark, and it will lighten this country one day.' This was a symbolic expression of Reza Shah's emergence as the so-called saviour of the Iranian nation.

Thereafter, Sepanta made other films based on the history and classical literature of Iran and developed the historical genre still further, but Sepanta's

historical films could not be regarded as an investigation of Iran's history, nor could an image of Iranian society in those days be found through them. Sepanta himself furnishes the following explanation concerning the reasons for his tendency to allude to the past and to Persian classical and historical works: The coup d'état of 1921, was followed by disturbances and famines and finally strangulation and eliminating of freedom. Like most Iranians I was forced to get used to the new conditions, and it was only through study and research about the history, sciences, culture and literature of ancient Iran that I could soothe the sorrow caused by futility of so much fight for freedom and by the prevailing atmosphere of injustice. (Baharlou 2000: 54) Sepanta's efforts to establish a national cinema under Reza Shah's conditions reached a deadlock, and the government bureaucracy paralysed it. He was among the Iranian intellectuals who sought to find a cultural and national fulcrum in the turning point of the establishment of a new nation and government in Iran after the elimination of the Ghajar dynasty and pre-modern feudalism. Following Sepanta, other film-makers, like Ismail Kooshan (founder of Pars Film Studio) and Siamak Yasemi, continued making historical films. But as a result of the industrial and technical weaknesses of the Iranian cinema of the time, and the low cinematic knowledge of these film-makers, the results are fake and superficial.

Melodrama

Melodrama was one of the principal and comprehensive genres of Film Farsi that was started by the film *The Tempest of Life/Toufan-e Zendegi* (Ali Darya Beigi, 1948). It must be admitted however, that prior to that date, Ebrahim Moradi, in the film *Bolhavas/Whimsical* (1934), used the basic elements of melodrama. Through *The Tempest of Life/Toufan-e Zendegi*, the subject of the love of a poor boy for a rich girl turns into a repetitive and familiar theme in Farsi films. In Hamid Dabashi's view the increase of the middle class in Iranian society in the 1950s and the migration of people from remote rural areas into major metropolitan centres, was the reason of the emergence of melodrama in Iranian cinema: The most successful among these migrant workers join the petty bourgeoisie, whereas a sizeable number end up in shanty-towns on the outskirts of the capital. The increasing size of the petty bourgeoisie provides a constant source of income for Iranian melodramatic cinema. (Dabashi 2001: 41) Like the historical genre, this genre was also rooted in the Iranian instalment writing tradition. At the same time the impact of Indian and Egyptian melodramatic films on Iranian melodrama cannot be overlooked. Indian and Egyptian cinema established contact with an ordinary Iranian audience. The popularity of some Egyptian actors like Farid ul Atrash, Samieh Jamal, Ome Kolsoom and Ismail

Yasin, who were also singers, was so great that many famous Iranian singers, like Delkash, Pooran and Vigen, were fascinated by cinema. The sentimental, emotional, and heart-rending atmosphere of Indian films, were among the factors which contributed to the success of Indian films in Iran. Indian films did not forget morality and did not let the audience leave the hall without hearing a few pieces of advice. India was the ancient sister of Iran and the two countries held in common similar cultural practices and spiritual beliefs, enlightened ego, and the aesthetic elements of Indian cinema, including dancing and singing, were quickly accepted in Iran.

Sharmsar/Ashamed.



A happy ending was one of the main narrative elements of Iranian melodrama

during this period of time. After enduring many ordeals, characters attain welfare and tranquillity in the end. The young poor man of *The Tempest of Life/Toufan-e Zendegi* who had fallen in love with a rich girl, in the end is destined to be united with his beloved. The deceived village girl in *Sharmsar/Ashamed* (Ismail Kooshan, 1950) returns to her village in the end and marries her fiancé.

Film Farsi follows the philosophy of fatalism which is the interference of destiny and fate in man's life. It comes from the religious convictions of the general audience who were the real spectators of Film Farsi, and were thought to have optimistic and excessive views with respect to man's nature and life. These films impress on people's minds an idea of a definite destiny which takes man forward. In Iranian melodrama everything ended happily and the spectator left the cinema feeling happy and satisfied. At the critical moment in the film, someone would arrive or something capricious would happen, resulting in the rescue of the film's protagonist. The spectator is separated from his real life for about two hours, and shares the hero's happiness and sorrow. The more negligent he is with real life the happier he leaves the cinema.

Beliefs such as 'the world goes on anyway', 'take life easy' and 'don't worry about anything' were among the thematic elements of Iranian melodrama. When things do not bode well for characters in the films, they attribute their hellish lives to fate, and when they found themselves to be incapable of changing and improving their living conditions, they would accept it submissively, or await a miracle to save them from their predicament. Ali Bigham, the protagonist in *Ganj-e Qaroon/Qaroon's Treasure* (Siamak Yasemi, 1965) was a typical example of such a character who depicted his indifference towards life in the songs he sang. Iranian melodrama covers a vast scope, and thus it includes some other sub-genres, such as urban melodrama and rural melodrama, which are discussed here briefly.

Urban melodrama

The story of the happy Iranian family, which in the midst of conflict between tradition and modernity has become disturbed and broken up, constitutes the dominant theme of most Iranian urban melodrama. The chaotic atmosphere of the 1950s revolved around the stability, or otherwise, of the family, casting questions on love and the immorality of human beings, particularly women, who were taken as the measure for decline or solidity in society. This genre dealt mostly with the urban middle-or upper-classes of society. The heroes were mostly engineers, doctors, or other such educated persons, whose lives were transformed due to some events. However, the middle class could never look for

and find its real and living image in the Film Farsi movies of that time. Ismail Kooshan's efforts in *Masti-e Eshg/Intoxicating Love* (1951) and Parviz Khatibi's in *Dastkesh-e Sefid/White Glove* (1961), to depict stories about the lives of the middle classes, were very superficial and simplistic. It was not until the New Wave films of the 1960s onwards that a real and spirited image of the middle class and its problems emerged onto the screen, particularly in the films of Ebrahim Golestan, Bahram Beizai, Dariush Mehrjui and Nasser Taghvai.

The film *Velgard/Vagabond* (1950), made by Mehdi Raees Firooz, is a typical example of Iranian urban melodrama. While observing all the elements of the genre, the film bears essential differences with similar films, the most important being the ending of the film in which the protagonist is killed by a policeman in Tehran. In the type of film in which a happy ending was usually a part of the narrative structure, such an ending caught people by surprise. The disintegration of the family was the result of caprices and revelries of a man who had abandoned his family, and when he found them again after many years, lost his life in the streets of Tehran by the bullet of agents of the martial law.

Family in Film Farsi was a traditional and powerful institution that was exposed to onslaughts of modernism and had become vulnerable. As Hamid Reza Sadr puts it: Lack of confidence in the institution of family reflected mistrust in conditions of a society that paved the ground for disintegration of the same family. Struggle to preserve a safe haven in the family was as futile as efforts to change the class and social structure of the society. (Sadr 2009: 149) The pattern of family degradation and crisis, as was shown in *Vagabond*, was subsequently turned into a successful pattern in the urban melodrama genre of Iranian cinema, and was repeated in other films like *Gheflat/Negligence* (Ali Kasmai, 1953), *Gerdab/Whirlpool* (Hussein Kheradmand, 1953) and *Shabhay-e Tehran/Nights of Tehran* (Siamak Yasemi, 1953). A society with ethical and traditional values, frightened by the encroachment of manifestations of corruption by the modern world, noticing that the foundations of the sacred family are being undermined by alcoholism, revelry, crime, disloyalty, rape and aggression, was ready to welcome pieces of work that conveyed ethical advice and advocated honour, prestige and chastity. In these moralistic and didactic tales the immoral characters and their self-destructive ways would not go unpunished, and the innocents always become prosperous.

Rural melodrama

The rural melodrama genre is one of the most prominent film genres in Iranian cinema, in which the conflict between tradition and modernity is reflected through the conflict between town and village. Following the Second World

War, importation of consumer goods from the West propagated western style consumerism. Newspapers further expanded and radio found a wider audience. But the Iranian film industry was in a state of recession. When it awoke from its coma and resumed activities after eleven years (1937–48) it was weak due to low investment and lack of technical ability, and was unable to find an audience among the middle class and intellectuals. *Ashamed* was made at a time when the culture of urbanization and modern living was being publicized in society, a film which countered city and modern living. *Ashamed* depicted the story of a village girl called Maryam who is deceived by a young urban man, abandons her village, and comes to the town where she turns to singing in a cabaret. The film begins with the pure and simple atmosphere of the village, and the first picture it gives of the town is at a bar in a café, with a drunken man and a woman in the arms of another man. The town is portrayed as a sordid and dirty place whereas the village has a pure, lovely and beautiful atmosphere. The fact that the village girl is reduced to being a singer is alien to the agrarian values of the villagers. Places such as cabarets had only just begun to emerge and gain popularity.

Through selecting the theme of the opposition between the village and the town, *Ashamed* succeeded in attracting many spectators to cinema houses in a society confused and bewildered by these clashes. It turned into the best selling film of the 1950s and succeeded in founding the formula of rural melodrama. *Ashamed* took up position against town life and urbanization criticized the migration of villagers to towns, even if did so in a simplistic manner and with crude methods. Following *Ashamed*, the themes of wandering villagers in towns and their inevitable corruption, persuading villagers to return to rural areas, and the conflict between suppressive landowners and oppressed peasants, is repeated in Farsi films. These films were made under conditions of when the Shah's land reform scheme had not yet been initiated, and the 'musaqat' based sharecropping system was still the order in these villages. In other examples of this genre, the dirty son of the landowner rapes the village girl and, in contrast, the good son of the landowner rises to defend the villager. In spite of the oppressive role of masters in the real lives of villagers, the rural films of the 1950s did not fully portray the cruelties. What was represented in rural melodrama films in Iranian cinema was not the real picture of the lives of oppressed villagers, who were presented with few options aside from migration due to the adverse agricultural economy and deprivations of the rural life. Rather, these films convey a false picture full of idealism, where the innocent inhabitants of the village have their tranquil and happy existence disturbed by the evils of urbanization.

From an iconographic point of view, the village has a steady and repetitious

image in the rural melodrama films of the 1950s. The village that was portrayed in those films had a pleasant climate, surrounded by groves and orchards, with natural streams and sheep and cattle which grazed on its meadow. They enjoyed the work that they did and celebrated by singing and dancing during reaping and harvest time, they had achieved happiness and fulfilment. Later on, the Iranian New Wave Cinema defamiliarized this dreamlike and imaginary picture of village dwelling, demolishing it in the minds of Iranian spectators and replacing it with a more gritty and real image of peasantry. The village that we see in *Gaav/The Cow* (Daruish Mehrjui, 1968) was a remote, miserable, and underdeveloped village suffering from poverty and misery.

Thriller

Arguably *Chaar Rah-e Havades/Crossroads of Events* (Samuel Khachikian, 1954) can be regarded as the first thriller film in Iranian cinema. It was the starting point of a very popular genre in Iranian cinema which remained influential for over a decade. Khachikian was an intelligent and creative filmmaker whose films enjoyed comparatively advanced techniques and skilful execution and were among the only Film Farsi movies of the time to do so. He was one of the preliminary Iranian film-makers who was well aware of important elements such as *mise en scène* and editing, and had sufficient knowledge about the function of lighting in constructing atmosphere and characterization in film. Hamid Dabashi describes Khachikian as the master of Iranian thriller with conventionalism written and pictured all over his screen (Dabashi 2001: 41).

Khachikian's films had an important role in promoting the technical level of Iranian films of the 1950s. He was deeply influenced by the American thriller and film noir, which were popular with the Iranian audience at that time. Khachikian understood the prevailing tastes of Iranian spectators, imitated the narrative form of Hollywood thrillers, yet embarked on making distinctly Iranian ones. Although the shapes and appearances of his film actors from their dress code, to the way they would shoot a gun and their general treatment, was almost a caricature of their American thriller and noir counterparts. The visual elements, from the physical features of the characters to the props, settings, cinematography and lighting style of Khachikian's film, soon became the familiar icon of this genre of films and were adopted by other film-makers including Amin Amini, Siamak Yasemi and Khosrow Parvizi. By using successful conventions of this genre, *i.e.* putting main characters in dangerous situations, crime scenes and chases, and a general build up of suspense, Khachikian managed to create anxiety and excitement and attracted a large

number of spectators. Nevertheless, Khachikian has been always criticized by the Iranian film critics for lacking an Iranian identity and genuineness in his films, that there is no sign of Iranian culture and life in them, apart from Farsi language and a few Iranian locations. For instance, Hooshang Kavousi the veteran Iranian film critic observes that: 'It is said that Khachikian's characters are not Iranian [...] Khachikian's characters are neither Muslims, nor Armenians, nor Russians nor Americans. They are persons peculiar to himself' (Omid 1995: 337). Characters in Khachikian's films were either men who were about to commit a crime, such as burglary or murder their spouses (in films such as *Zarbat/Shock*, *Delhoreh/Fear*, *Faryad-e Nimeh Shab/Scream in the Midnight*) or criminals seeking warfare, and the pursuit of revenge (in films such as *Marg Dar Baran/Death in the Rain*, and *Kooseh Jonoob/Shark at the South*). Nevertheless, the conditions of the evil men who were seeking to hurt the hero of the film were not elaborated precisely, and relations between the grimy men and the ringleader were vague. The gangsters of Khachikian's films are mostly forged and superficial characters devoid of real motivations to commit inhuman and illegal acts.

Following Khachikian's success at the box office, a lot of thrillers were made in the 1950s and 1960s by other film-makers but none of them could compete with Khachikian financially. Even Houshang Kavousi's (an ardent and serious opponent of Film Farsi movies of that period, and critical of Khachikian's films) first attempt at filmmaking, *Hefdah Rooz Be E'daam/17 Days to Execution* (1956), could not apply the conventions of the genre properly, and reach Khachikian's level of success. Later on Farrokh Ghaffari, one of the forerunners of New Wave cinema in Iran, carried out a new experiment in this genre based on Iranian classical tales. *Shab-e Ghuzi/The Night of the Hunchback* (Farrokh Ghaffari, 1963) was made in the last years of the climax of Iranian thrillers, and was in fact a parody of this genre, following a path contrary to the effects of the genre. Following the film *Gang-e Qaroon/Qaroon's Treasure* in the 1960s and shaping and success of Jaheli Film (genre), the success of thrillers declined in Iran.

Jaheli films

The Jaheli Film genre, which is also known as *kolah makhmali* (velvet capped) in Iranian film literature, is the purest and the most unique genre in Iranian cinema, the like of which cannot be found in the cinema of any other country. This genre is attributed to a typical character called Jahel, who has a special place in the popular culture of Iran. Before dealing with this genre and its typical films, it is necessary for me to explain that Jahel (literally meaning ignorant) or

Looti (a person of generous disposition), is historically rooted in the tradition of chivalry and the manliness of an Iranian, and in the past referred to chivalrous and altruistic persons and those who defended the weak and oppressed in the face of bullies and oppressors. In the contemporary culture of Iran and with the development of modernism and extermination of traditional values and institutions, Jahel or Looti has lost its former significance and is now applied to ruffians who do not belong to any class or social strata, and who lead a parasitic life and benefit from other people's toils.

According to Hamid Dabashi, 'Jahel'

referred to a type of lumpen who embodied the most sordid traits of patriarchy. caricature of the medieval practice of "fotuvvat" [chivalry], the Jahel represented the basest manifestations of male chauvinism in which masculine "honour" was vested in the chastity of men's female relatives. The Jahels themselves, however, frequented the bordellos and prided themselves in pederasty. (Dabashi 2001: 26) Jahels had common characteristics that distinguished them from other layers of Iran's society before the Revolution. These characteristics are widely reflected in Film Farsi movies. Jahels did not have a permanent job or profession. They lived a parasitic life or turned to unsteady, insecure, and illegal jobs, like hawking, shoe shining, driving, selling lottery tickets, pick pocketing, begging, burglary, smuggling, *etc.* They often pass their time idly in cafes and public houses, dicing, gambling, playing billiards and juggling. Hamid Dabashi believes that the Jaheli genre first emerged in Iranian cinema with the film *Kolah-Makhmali/Velvet Capped* (Esmail Kushan, 1962) but I want to argue that the character to best fit this persona appeared in Iranian cinema in the 1952 film *Kamarshekan/Backbreaking* (Ebrahim Moradi), and later on appeared again occasionally in films such as *Afsoongar/Magician* (1953), *Dozde Bandar/Thief of the Harbor* (1956) and *Shab Neshini Dar Jahanam/Banquet in the Hell* (1957). However it was, in fact, through the film *Lat-e Javanmard/Chivalrous Vagabond* (Majid Mohseni, 1958) that wearing a velvet cap (*Kolah-Makhmali*), black suit, white shirt, leather shoes, and a silk handkerchief around the neck, was established as the iconic features of the Jahel character and which turned it into the major and lasting genre of Iranian cinema in the succeeding decades.

Majid Mohseni was a distinct figure in the rural melodrama genre of Iranian cinema. By following changes in the social conditions of Iran, the increasing migrations of villagers to the towns, and growth of urbanization, he abandoned the rural genre and made the film *Chivalrous Vagabond*, a significant example

of Jaheli Film in Iranian cinema. This film was praised by Iranian film critics and intellectual film-makers such as Ebrahim Golestan and Farrokh Ghaffari, who regarded it as the kind of film that has 'succeeded in conveying a human moral messages in a simple language'. Ebrahim Golestan thought that the film was the best made up to that point, and Ghaffari specified that it was an important film that, in the midst of Iranian films which did not show any sign of veracity, contained some manifestations of the realities of the Iranian society. At the time many Film Farsi movies were made in studios, but much of the film was shot on location, which imparted a genuine significance thereto.

Being influenced by the neo-realistic cinema of Italy in the early 1950s, and the portrayal of poverty, desires and outlooks of villagers, Film Farsi took up another task in the early 1960s following the development of the pseudo-modernist policies of the government. Jaheli films became the dominant genre of Film Farsi in the late 1960s and 1970s to an extent that Hamid Dabashi brought forward that 'The phenomenon of *film Jaheli* plagued the Iranian cinema of the 1960s' (Dabashi 2001: 26). Film Farsi, particularly Jaheli films, demonstrates, albeit unconsciously, contradictions in the Iranian society and a more developed examination of the conflicts between traditional and modern values. The Jaheli genre, by creating a character who bears traditional convictions, is inherently fatalist and resistant to any kind of change, and took a stand against modernism. This aspect of the Jahel character in Film Farsi and his negation of modern life can be compared with the American gangster found in studio productions before the emergence of film noir. In the words of Robert Warshow, the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and demands of modern life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself [...]. The gangster is the 'no' to that great American 'yes' which is stamped so big over our official culture and yet has so little to do with the way we really feel about our lives. (Cook 1999: 141) Yet Film Farsi, unlike gangster films, does not want to interfere in and disturb social order but rather defends the status quo. It responds intensely against change and tries to reject modernism. For example Habib, the illiterate Jahel of the film *Aghay-e Gharne Bistom/Mr. 20th Century* (1964) shows himself alien to manifestations of modern life. He does not wear a suit and tie, does not listen to foreign music, and ridicules westernisation. But he drinks vodka like water and dances the *Babakaram* (a traditional popular dance). Another worthy example is the film *Aroos Farangi/European Bride* (Vahdat, 1964). Hasan Tormozi, the protagonist, is a taxi driver who takes a German girl, Maria, to her relatives' home in Tehran. En route he gets out of the car and prays in the middle of the desert. The girl falls in love with him because of his sincerity in religious attitude. He prays and weeps but a few minutes later he sits

in a cabaret and encourages the girl to dance with a stranger. He watches them dancing and takes a lot of pleasure from it but later on when he marries her he has so much pride that he does not allow her to dance the tango with a stranger and is willing to disrupt the wedding function.

When the heroes of Jaheli films found themselves in a modern atmosphere by accident, they ridiculed the modern culture and the values of the upper class. The Jahel in the film *Mr. Twentieth Century*, is a defender of archaic social values and traditions, disdains and scorns modern life, and for this hostility to modernism is welcomed by the traditional and lower strata. Due to their parasitic lifestyle, temporary jobs, vagrancy and poverty, a Jahel lives in perpetual deprivation of family life and sexual relations. He satisfies his sexual desire with the dirtiest and cheapest prostitutes. The strong language and dirty slang that is used by Jahel when talking about women and sexual relations points to his deprivation and his problems in meeting his sexual needs. Many of the wishes and desires of the men in Jaheli films are reflected in folk and street songs sung in cabarets or heard from the mouth of a Jahel.

The Jaheli genre was the most lasting and popular genre in Iranian cinema that continued as a dominant genre until the onset of the Islamic Revolution and changes in the political condition followed by the changing tastes of the Iranian audience. In his first feature film, *Jonoob-e Shahr/South of the City* (1958), Farrokh Ghaffari embarked on the deconstruction of the Jaheli genre. Although *South of the City* features conventional elements of the genre such as the Jahel, a cafe in the south of Tehran, a dancer and a prostitute, it has some essential differences to other Jaheli films of the time. For the first time in Iranian cinema, Ghaffari portrayed a real and acceptable image of the Jahel type. The film was banned by the Shah's censorship and was never screened in Iran or elsewhere because of its representation of the poverty and misery of life in the slums of Tehran. After the Islamic Revolution, the characteristics and features identifiable as 'Film Farsi' such as female dancing and singing and sexual attractions, were no longer apparent in Iranian cinema, whether due to prevailing tastes, social conditioning, religious codes, or government censorship. But even so its influence has remained so profound that it can be considered to be partially alive in almost every production by the Iranian film industry that is aimed at a mass audience.

Parviz Jahed

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The Farm Nightingale

Bolbol-e Mazra'eh

Studio/Distributor:

Diana Film

Director:

Majid Mohseni

Producer:

Majid Mohseni

Screenwriter:

Majid Mohseni

Cinematographer:

Ahmad Shirazi

Composer:

Akbar Mohseni

Editor:

Vanik Avidisian

Duration:

116 minutes

Genre:

Rural melodrama

Cast:

Majid Mohseni

Shahin

Mina Maghazeh'i

Siroos Jarrahzadeh

Akbar Khajavi

Niktaj Sabri

Mohammad Reza Farmani

میدان فرهنگ

Hamid Ghanbari

Taghi Zohoori

Year:

1957

Synopsis

A village boy named Shirzad falls in love with his master's (a feudal) daughter, Zohreh. Also his sister, Golnaz, falls in love with the master's son, Siroos. The master is against both marriages at first, but then he agrees to his son's marriage to Shirzad's sister on condition that Shirzad would make a good life for them. The master wants to marry his daughter to a relative of his. Shirzad tries hard to find a job to pay for his sister's marriage. He cannot find a job, so he decides to commit suicide. At this time, he sees a man who wants to rape a girl. He saves the girl, and the girl's father gives him a reward. Meanwhile, Zohreh cannot bear Shirzad's absence and falls ill. Listening to the doctor's advice, the master agrees to the marriage of Shirzad and Zohreh.

Critique

The Farm Nightingale is a typical example of the rural melodrama genre that is known by its inventor Majid Mohseni. Majid Mohseni in the late 1950's was famous for a type of film within which he was contrasting rural simplicity and purity with urban corruption and decadence. In most of his films, Mohseni was advocating returning to villages and to rural life. His films were being produced within a socio-historical context when Iranian society was facing an unprecedented increase in the number of migrations from villages to the cities due to radical socio-economic reforms. Mohseni was an actor who played the genre's role of village migrant very well. Through presenting a villager and speaking with a village accent, Mohseni was turned into an iconic figure of this genre. In his films, clashes between rural and urban cultures are noticeable. Mohseni's facial makeup (short hair and thin moustache) and his village dress (felt cap, waistcoat and long white shirt) were familiar icons of a village man in rural Film Farsi movies.

The Farm Nightingale, Diana Film.



Many Iranian film critics dismissed Mohseni's films due to their 'escapism', 'vulgarity' and 'high superficiality' while they accepted that his acting was emotional and stunning. *The Farm Nightingale* depicts a world in which Mohseni appreciates the purity of life in villages and puts it in juxtaposition with an often corrupt city life. This black and white way of looking at characters and social values makes the movie an Iranian classic. Like the other films Mohseni made in this genre, this film was also praised in the former Soviet republics and screened for a long time in its Persian-speaking wing in Tajikistan and parts of Uzbekistan. A characteristic feature of this particular movie is Mohseni using his own real life character as a broadcaster in a part of the film, making it more attractive to lower-middle class viewers as a real life story. However, Mohseni, in an interview, considers this film a true representative of Iranian cinema, and claims that his films have always had Iranian soul and colour.

Behrouz Turani & Parviz Jahed

Chivalrous Vagabond

Lat-e Javanmard

Studio/Distributor:

Diana Film

Director:

Majid Mohseni

Producer:

Majid Mohseni

Screenwriter:

Majid Mohseni

Cinematographer:

Ahmad Shirazi

Art Director:**Editor:**

Ahmad Shirazi

Duration:

97 minutes

Genres:

Melodrama Jaheli Film

Cast:

Majid Mohseni

Fakhri Khorvash

Parkhideh

Hamid Ghanbari

Taghi Zohoori

Niktaj Sabri

Saber Rahbar

Year:

1958

Synopsis

Dash Hasan runs into a girl who wants to commit suicide because she has been seduced. He talks her out of it and takes her home. Meanwhile, Mohammadtaghi intends to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca and asks Dash Hasan to take care of his family. Dash Hasan stops Mohammadtaghi's daughter from seeing a boy named Khosro. Khosro and Dash Hasan get into a fight; Khosro drowns in the sea, and Dash Hasan is sent to prison. In the court, they find out that Khosro is an expert in seducing girls, and Fati is one of the girls he has seduced. Dash Hasan marries

Fati when he comes out of prison.

Critique

Chivalrous Vagabond/Lat-e Javanmard could arguably be seen as the first example of the Jaheli Film genre in Iranian cinema, and was consequently followed by many films with the same characteristic of having a ruffian in the lead role and as the hero of the film. This is one of the forerunners of a long series of films about sympathetic young male characters with good intentions at heart, who went out of their way to restore justice in their neighbourhoods often by taking the law into their own hands and defended traditional values against the intervention of modern standards.

Director Majid Mohseni – a distinct figure in the rural melodrama genre – by following changes in the social conditions of Iran, the increasing migrations of villagers to towns, and the growth of urbanization, abandoned the rural genre and made the film *Chivalrous Vagabond*, thus establishing the Jaheli genre in Iranian cinema. This film was welcomed by well known Iranian intellectual film-makers and film critics such as Ebrahim Golestan and Farrokh Ghaffari, who regarded it as a piece of work that succeeded in conveying pleasant and human moral messages in a simple language. They also regarded the Iranian atmosphere of the film as a distinct feature, which distinguished it from other Film Farsi movies. Ebrahim Golestan thought that it was the best film made up till then, and Ghaffari specified that it was an important film that, in the midst of Iranian cinema which did not show any sign of reality, it contained manifestations of the realities of Iranian society. At that time many Film Farsi movies were made in studios, but many of the locations of *Chivalrous Vagabond* were out of the studio, which imparted a real significance thereto.



Chivalrous Vagabond, Diana Film.

Although the protagonist in this early film in the genre was timid and barely comical, later versions of the same character had a more evident sense of humour and represented more a world of fantasy than of real life. Majid Mohseni, who made the film and played the leading part, was an author, radio, theatre, and film artist who advocated social justice in his later films, which were set against a rural backdrop.

Behrouz Turani

Qaroon's Treasure

Ganj-e Qaroon

Studio/Distributor:

Pouria Film

Director:

Siamak Yasami

Producer:

Siamak Yasami

Screenwriters:

Ahmad Shamlou Siamak Yasami

Cinematographer:

Ahmad Shirazi

Composer:

Roobik Mansouri

Editor:

Ahmad Shirazi

Duration:

122 minutes

Genres:

Melodrama Jaheli Film

Cast:

Mohammad Ali Fardin

Forouzan

Taqi Zohouri

Arman

Year:

1965

Synopsis

A poor young man (Ali Bigham) rescues a rich depressed man (Qaroon) who has lost the incentive to live and tries to commit suicide by throwing himself into a river. Ali Bigham takes care of the rich man at his own home and tries to cheer him up. Qaroon then decides, perhaps hoping that he would get rid of his loneliness and sadness, to spend a few days with these poor people. Later Ali Bigham finds out that the desperate rich man is his father and that he left his poor wife and only son many years ago in order to follow his own ambitions. Having found out the truth, he no longer wants to see his father because he resents the way he treated his mother. The old man however, later convinces his son that he has been changed and the film ends with a family reunion and Ali's marriage to a girl from a rich family and thus the fairy tale-like narrative comes to its closure.

Critique

With *Ganj-e Qaroon*, arguably the most famous and popular film in Iran, the Jaheli genre entered a new stage in the history of Iranian cinema.

Siamak Yasemi (the director of the film) instinctively understood the spirit of his time and met the demands of the Iranian mass audience.

The Theme of the film concerns the worthless and desperate life of the upper rich class in contrast with the poor and happy working class that was rich in morals.

The pivotal character of the film, a mechanic with ruffian attitude called Ali Bigham (played by Mohammad Ali Fardin, one of the most popular actors of the time) always longed to get rich, and in the end sees that his dreams come true when he accidentally finds his father (Qaroon), who is a rich man.

Ganj-e Qaroon was screened at a time that rising unemployment, extension of migration trend from rural to urban areas, and deepening class and social rifts in the society were the results of the Shah's reform policies and through presentation of wishful and dreamlike approaches and the thesis of class reconciliation was welcomed by the audience of Film Farsi.

In an interview with the Film Va Honar magazine about the question of class struggle as enunciated in *Ganj-e Qaroon*, Siamak Yasemi, the director of the Film, observed that: "There is a great deal of class difference in the country. This gross difference impressed me to put two opposite classes against each other, the worker who has nothing in the world would be pleased to play the role of a hero in a film." (Film Va Honar, July 1965).

Ganj-e Qaroon was one of the few Film Farsi movies that attracted the attention of many Iranian film critics and was commented upon by most of them. In his Marxist and class analysis about the film, Behzad Eshghi tries to find external and real symbols for its characters and events in the society of Iran. He regards *Ganj-e Qaroon* and the character of Ali Bigham to be symbols of the Shah and his White Revolution and writes: "When *Ganj-e Qaroon* was screened, most social movements were defeated and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (The Shah), with his land reform and seeking allegedly to establish equality and justice, played the role of an emancipator. In fact in the absence of real saviours, he was a caricature of a revolutionary saviour, and could manipulate the simple-minded people to a certain extent. Now villagers who had born a lot of agonies for centuries, deemed this caricature revolutionary to be their emancipator, one whose revolution was white, and who sought to bring about reconciliation among hostile groups. Makers of *Ganj-e Qaroon*, too, promoted this idea either willingly or unwillingly. The mockery of the 'White Revolution' talked about

unity between the Shah and people, master and peasant, worker and employer as well as the rich and the poor. *Ganj-e Qaroon* too sought to realise this dream on the magic screen of cinema (Eshghi, July 1998).



Qaroon's Treasure, Pouria Film.

In a similar analysis, Mohammad Tahaminejad, too, draws a similarity and regards sickness of Qaroon, the wealthy character of the film to be a sign of sick and declining bourgeoisie. Tahaminejad writes: “Qaroon’s anti tranquillity disease is the result of his amassing fortune for years. He is now facing a dilemma, in that he has accumulated a lot of money and knows how to increase it, but he is not sure whether he would survive to benefit from it. He symbolises a group or stratum that is caught in the political whirlpool of the 50s and 60s and on the verge of decline.” (Tahaminejad, 1978) Behrouz Turani another film critic in his review of the film suggests: *Qaroon's Treasure*, was viewed by many film critics as the opium of the working class. They did not need to do anything to get their share of life. The rich were indebted to them and they would inevitably have to hand over to them what they had stolen from them while they were too weak to realize that their guardians, the very people who had to take care of them, had betrayed them and left them in poverty. The message was: Money is bad, God loves the poor and everybody will reach eternal happiness one day.

Stress on class antagonism and conflict between the rich and the poor, which prevailed in the family melodramas of the 50s, persisted in the Jaheli genre of the 60s.

But the fact is that the audience of Film Farsi accepted the logic of dreams of these films and identified himself with them.

Ganj-e Qaroon is a combination of situation comedy, musical and melodrama. The song and dance scenes are the major stylistic components of the film. They

are means through which a portion of the ideological ingredients of the film are conveyed.

Ganje-e Qaroon was highly successful and was visited by 870000 out of one million residents of Tehran. As a result of its success, Indian films, which were the main rivals of commercial Iranian films, lost their market to a great extent. Although *Ganj-e Qaroon* did not help with the qualitative elevation and cinematic articulation of the Iranian cinema, it brought quantitative rise and economic boom for it.

It is also the first film that the star system in Iranian cinema was largely established with.

Parviz Jahed

The Distance

Faseleh

Studio/Distributor:

Damavandno Studio

Director:

Morteza Aghili

Producer:

Morteza Aghili

Screenwriter:

Morteza Aghili

Cinematographer:

Mehdi Amirhasemkhani

Composer:

Tooraj

Editor:

Mehdi Amirhasemkhani

Duration:

01 minutes

01 minutes

Cast:

Morteza Aghili

Aylin Vigen

Bahram Vatanparast

Mehri Vedadian

Abbas Nazeri

Khashayar

Ahmad Mo'ini

Farhad Aghakhani

Gholam

Parvin Soleimani

Hengameh

Year:

1971

Synopsis

Mehdi, a young, jobless man living in poverty with his parents falls in love with Gol, who is from an upper class and westernized family, but Gol's father, Hesam Khan, refuses to let them see each other on account of wanting his daughter to marry her cousin, Bijan. Despite this, Gol convinces Mehdi to talk to her father about marrying her, and he ends up being humiliated by Hesam Khan and his family. Gol attempts to commit suicide, so Hesam Khan pretends to agree to her marrying Mehdi, but he frames Mehdi for theft and Mehdi is sent to prison for two years. Gol is forced to marry Bijan but is then abandoned by her husband and ends up becoming prostitute in a southern city. When Mehdi is released from prison, he starts looking for Gol and finds her in a whorehouse and they decide to be with each other again, but she is 50,000 tomans in debt to her pimp. In order to get the money, Mehdi attempts to rob a company and gets stabbed in the process, resulting in fatal wounds. Badly wounded, he goes to see Gol with great difficulty, and finds that she herself has been murdered by the pimp.

Critique

The Distance is an example of Film Farsi being influenced by Iranian New

Wave films thematically and stylistically. Although it draws from the dramatic and technical aspects of such films, it is still executed within the template of Film Farsi productions in its dramatic and escapist elements, and is essentially a tale of heroism with a superficial and distorted outlook towards the reality in Iran. The characterizations and the differences between good and evil are very black and white: Gol's father is a typical high-ranking, corrupt and materialistic person. Whereas Mehdi comes from a family with traditional, higher moral values in contrast to Gol's secular and materialist family. The sentimental love affair between a young poor man and a rich girl is a well known and much adapted tale, a narrative element that often appears in Film Farsi.

In order for the protagonist to overcome the class distance and pursue his love interest, he must pay a big price, which in this case is his life. Although the manner in which events take a turn for the worse for Mehdi and Gol, the film is a departure from what was found in Film Farsi before the deviation but still relies on the presumption that class differences would be completely resolved through marriage. It therefore does not deviate from the codes of Film Farsi. However, being made at a time when Film Farsi had made advancements and improved upon the technical proficiency of the original films made during the 1950s and 1960s, enabled the film to utilize audio-visual tactics and strategies. For example, the utilization of a wide-angle lens to signify distance and portray the sense of intimidation felt by Mehdi as he enters Gol's house, and in the closing scene, slow-motion shots of Mehdi and Gol being stabbed intercept each other, and lively, wedding music plays over it to create a contrasting effect and intensify its tragic impact.

By the almost simultaneous death of the main characters, the narrative comes to a high degree of closure, with the lovers united and the barriers broken in death. The film met with high success at the box office and was well received by the Film Farsi audience, which proves that the audience embraced new strategies within the familiar format of Film Farsi.

Parviz Jahed

Throughout the Night

Dar Emtedad-e Shab

Studio/Distributor:

Filmiran Cooperative

Director:

Parviz Sayyad

Producer:

Bahman Farmanara

Screenwriters:

Jila Sazegar Parviz Sayyad

Cinematographer:

Alireza Zarrindast

Composer:

Mojtaba Mirzadeh

Editor:

Roohollah Emami

Duration:

111 minutes

Cast:

Googoosh

Saeed Kangarani

Mahboobeh Bayat

Maliheh Nazari

Jahangir Foroohar

Naser Mamdooh

Ashraf Saghar

Farideh Varjavar

Giti Foroohar

Year:

1977

Synopsis

Parvaneh, who is a famous singer and movie star, has an affair with Kaveh who

has a family, after she gets divorced. A student named Babak, who suffers from leukaemia, falls in love with Parvaneh and writes her letters expressing his love. They meet and have a good time together for a while. Parvaneh hears about Babak's disease and decides to send him abroad for medical treatment. Babak rests his head on Parvaneh's shoulder on the plane and passes away.

Critique

There was more than one reason for this film's success at the box-office: a story line with an already proven success, a superstar cast, a highly successful TV star in his first movie role as the main protagonist, and half a dozen songs by a legendary artist Iran never managed to forget even after three decades of state-imposed silence.

The familiar love story in which one side falls victim to cancer was reminiscent of Arthur Hiller's *Love Story* (1970) with Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw. Here, however, it looked even more familiar, with the legendary singer Googoosh and the leading actor of an extremely successful TV series, *My Uncle Napoleon* (Saeed Kangarani).

The formula became even more powerful with a few revealing shots of the singer, and the intriguing bond between an older woman and her younger lover. The movie is still one of the peaks; some would say the only summit, among Iranian blockbusters, although an ongoing Islamic Revolution halted its success. In the years after the Revolution the film was obviously banned. However, many millions managed to watch it on bootlegged VHS tapes. Apart from Iran, the film was a hit in Tajikistan where the singer enjoys tremendous popularity. The film's director, who had made and starred in several comedies (in the role of comedic alter-persona of a rural stereotype, called Samad), proved himself to be a master filmmaker in other genres as well as comedy, although it was too late as he had to leave Iran for the United States soon after the Revolution.

Behrouz Turani



The Night of the Hunchback, Irannama Studio.

What is referred to as Iranian New Wave cinema was an intellectual movement that was itself part of Iran's broader modernity project. An in-depth study of the Iranian New Wave entails a thorough investigation of its historical roots and the social and cultural conditions that paved the way for its emergence. Reviewing the works on the New Wave, either before or after the Revolution, in English or Farsi, we find a sort of confused, disordered, and ambiguous perception of New Wave cinema which fail to define its characteristics and aims. Despite an extensive amount of sources on New Wave Iranian cinema, I believe that the period between the late 1950s and early 1960s has been ultimately ignored by film historians and researchers. I would like to argue that these works have failed to recognize the true intellectual roots of the New Wave movement and its forerunner's ideas and thoughts.

There is no definitive source for the term 'New Wave' in Iran's film literature, but it first appeared in the early 1970s in the writings of Iranian film critics. The

term is used to describe a body of distinctive Iranian films made in the 1960s and 1970s, and its development can be largely credited to a group of young intellectual directors, many of whom were foreign educated. From this perspective, the term represented a younger generation's desire to break free of the conventions of mainstream Iranian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, known as Film Farsi, a term coined by Houshang Kavousi, a veteran Iranian film critic. In the late 1950s a number of cinema graduates returned to Iran from Europe. Initially they were mainly involved with reviewing films and criticism, often concerning themselves with the artistic quality and technical values of Iranian films. Whereas a large number of Iranian filmmakers were busy making productions called Film Farsi for the majority of the audience of Iranian cinema, this small number of young intellectual filmmakers dedicated themselves to creating a form of cinema distinguished from the Film Farsi standard. These young filmmakers also shared the trait of possessing immense passion for both good literature and cinema.

It was in this period that we are best able to observe a process by which cinematic and literary discourses crossed each other. The tendency for a strong interaction between the modern literature and cinema of the time was an important feature of the movement, and it is through this that I aim to justify my case for recognizing the first filmmakers to utilize this connection as the true pioneers of intellectual Iranian cinema. As a result of their efforts and the improving collective cultural conditions, the beginning of the 1960s could conceivably be thought of as the golden era of modern Persian literature and arts. Outstanding modern literary figures like Ebrahim Golestan, Forough Farukhzad, and Fereydoon Rahnama were also sensitive to the literary and poetic quality contained in their films. The interaction between cinema and literature is most evident in Golestan's striking film *Khesht va Ayeneh/The Brick and The Mirror* (1964) which is most likely a reflection of his unique narrative style and storytelling.

As a story writer acquainted with the modern narrative structure, whether in story writing or scriptwriting Golestan employed modern techniques of storytelling in the narrative form of his film. The structure of *The Brick and The Mirror* is divided into several parts. Apart from the main narrative, there are also sub-narratives within the film which was until that point, completely unseen and controversial for Iranian cinema at the time. With his modern narrative approach and by abandoning the classic form of storytelling, Golestan severed ties to the old principles of Iranian popular cinema. The generation who were young adults in the 1960s tried to find a new way to communicate with the audience, that had

gained a relative level of funding and had become part of a strong middle class during the 1960s, mainly through its connections with the previous generation, the film society and the press, and mostly through its strong and continuing ties with the long standing literary tradition in Iran.

In this intellectual, quixotic and rapidly changing climate, the first serious attempts were made in producing some high quality poetic documentaries by filmmakers/writers such as Ebrahim Golestan, Forough Farrokhzad and Fereydoun Rahnama. Documentary films such as *Khaneh Siah Ast/The House is Black* (Forough Farrokhzad, 1962) and *Yek Atash/A Fire* (Ebrahim Golestan, 1961) were the first films to receive international acclaim. Nevertheless, these films were not well received or completely understood on a domestic level because of their narrative style and controversial structure which were completely different to the structure of Film Farsi. Hamid Naficy, the Iranian scholar who has studied Iranian Cinema with an academic and analytic view, describes the New Wave as a small but growing movement that intended to release Iranian cinema from all the political, social and artistic restrictions (Naficy 1981).

Some Iranian film researchers made attempts to find a link between the French *nouvelle vague* and the Iranian New Wave, analyzing the similarities and differences between the two movements. Studying cinema in Europe, writing for cinematic magazines and journals such as *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Positive*, partaking in film clubs and programs such as the reckoned Cinémathèque Française in France, as well as familiarity with French film culture, are some of the reasons that have been mentioned in the works of the film critics who emphasized that European art-cinema, especially French cinema, influenced the Iranian New Wave. Although the New Wave in Iran would never be able to have the same impact on the history of cinema as the French New Wave or Italian neorealism, it can be regarded as a radical movement in the history of Iranian cinema.

There is significant evidence that suggests the influence the French New Wave filmmakers' ideas and works had on the Iranian movement. Just like the roots of the French New Wave, which should be sought in French film magazines, particularly *Cahiers du Cinema*, the first sign of the rise of the New Wave in Iran can be found in the Iranian film magazines of the 1950s. Like French New Wave filmmakers, the forerunners of the New Wave cinema in Iran were also involved in film criticism before they started to make their own films. Film directors such as Ebrahim Golestan, Farrokh Ghaffari, Hajir Dariush, Fereydoun Rahnama, Ahmad Faroughi Qajar, and Houshang Kavousi

profoundly attempted to write and publish their ideas and comments on cinema in general and Film Farsi in particular. These filmmakers/critics had a severe and radical position against Film Farsi and challenged the established conventions and practices of it, but criticizing the mainstream cinema did not, however satisfy them. Therefore they decided to make their own films and it was mainly a practical process. That is to say, unlike in the French New Wave or Italian neorealism, there was not a strong theoretical framework behind their attempts.

Significant increase in the quantity of film journals in Iran in the early 1960s (for example *Honar va Cinema/Art and Cinema*), translating articles from *Cahiers du Cinema*, *Positive* and other European and American film magazines, as well as screening French New Wave movies, created an atmosphere which was conducive to introducing European art films and French New Wave cinema and its filmmakers to Iranian film critics and directors. The style of this group of journal and magazine film critics was more or less similar to that of *Cahiers du Cinema*. The presence of an Iranian author and thinker named Fereydoun Hoveyda among the *Cahiers's* writers was also a source of further motivation for the Iranian film critics.

I would like to argue that the Iranian intellectual filmmakers of the time have been influenced largely by the movies shown in Iran's Film Club (Kanoon-e Film-e Iran), founded by Farrokh Ghaffari the veteran Iranian film historian, film critic, and director who was an assistant of Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque Française during his stay in Paris in the early 1950s. It was in this club that for the first time, movies by Godard, Truffaut, Luis Malle, and other French New Wave filmmakers were shown. Some stylistic and aesthetic features in the films of the pre-New Wave Iranian filmmakers, especially innovations in editing, the break up of time, and avoiding classical narrative, were influenced by the French New Wave filmmakers and can be found in works by Ebrahim Golestan and Fereydoun Rahnama.

The filmmakers whose effective and influential role in the formation of New Wave cinema in Iran have been ignored by Iran's film historians and critics. Referring to Rahnama, Ali Issari writes: 'His aim was to lay the foundation of a "free cinema" movement in Iran, much as the Nouvelle Vague was started in France by the Cahiers du Cinema group' (Issari 1989: 191). Issari argues that Ghaffari's first feature film *Jonoob-e Shahr/The South of the City* (1958) was a take-off on Vittorio DeSica's *Umberto D.* (1952) (Issari 1989: 147). Unlike the New Wave filmmakers in France, it is hard to find any sort of relationship between Iranian filmmakers' cinematic views. Each and every movie made by them, has its own individual style, structure and content which is different from

the others. In this regard, the umbrella term 'New Wave', to describe a movement that occurred in Iranian cinema, is confusing and misleading.

The rise of this distinctive cinematic stream however, did not and could not stop the continuation of the mainstream cinema in Iran, known as Film Farsi. Although the Iranian New Wave was not an integrated movement and its filmmakers were not following the same style, ideology or cinematic approach, there were undoubtedly some common elements and similarities in form and content. Realism, poetic vision, documentary style, and most importantly intellectuality are the most important common elements which can be recognized in the intellectual films made by Golestan, Rahnama and Ghaffari, and also can be distinguished in the films made afterwards. Furthermore, the same diversity of cinematic thoughts and views can be found among the French or German New Wave filmmakers, or Italian neorealists. In this regard, is there any difference between radical and leftist Godard and liberal Truffaut? Is there any political or ideological similarity between Rossellini, who was a 'democrat Christian', and De Sica who was a 'social democrat'? What David Bordwell has said about New German Cinema is to some extent true about the New Wave in Iran. Bordwell described it not as a stylistic movement in the sense of Italian neorealism and the French New Wave. That is, it did not consist of a group of filmmakers using comparable formal and stylistic traits. Rather, the term was coined to describe a surprising revival in the largely moribund German cinema by a number of young filmmakers who had begun working outside the traditional industry in the 1960s (Bordwell and Thompson 2003: 453).

This is similar to what the writers of 'Studying Film' (2001) said about the differences between Italian filmmakers' thoughts and political views: The 'neorealist' directors (chief among them Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti) in fact came from different backgrounds and did not necessarily share the same political views: Visconti, though from an aristocratic family, was a Marxist, Rossellini later had difficulty denying his links with Christian Democrat ideology, De Sica was a Social Democrat. Nevertheless their films of the neorealist period were similar in significant ways. (Abrams, Bell & Udris 2001 261) In fact, like their French and Italian counterparts, Iranian New Wave filmmakers' intention was to liberate Iranian cinema from Film Farsi and the traditional filmmaking conventions. Whether influenced by Italian neorealism or the French New Wave, Iranian New Wave Cinema emerged within the context of the cultural and intellectual climate of 1950s and 1960s Iran. Therefore, it is primarily an outcome of internal factors rather than the external factors. This is a fact that has been observed by the Iranian film critic Ahmad Talebinejad. He points out that

the factors leading to the rise of the New Wave in Iran were, in part, due to internal conditions – intellectual or even political movements that came into existence at the time (Talebinejad 1994). Therefore, it is vital to concentrate on the domestic factors and intellectual roots of New Wave cinema.

It was Hajir Dariush, one of the well known Iranian filmmakers and critics of the time, who first acknowledged the formation of a new form of cinema after the public screening of *Shab-e Ghuzi/The Night of the Hunchback* (Farrokh Ghaffari, 1964). In an article published in the newspaper *Ayandegan*, Hajir Dariush, pointed out: A few Iranian intellectuals have made attempts in making some short films and documentaries in recent years: Farrokh Ghaffari with *Shab-e Ghuzi*, Ebrahim Golestan with *Khesht va Ayeneh* and Fereydoun Rahnama with *Siavash dar Takht-e Jamshid*. Apart from stylistic aspects, all these three films were at a much higher level than our usual local film products. But we have to note that these works were righteously denying any practical or mental connection with Film Farsi and were made out of the framework of this industry or business or whatever you want to name it. With unlimited patience, we waited for years for the first Iranian long feature film, so that we can declare unanimously that Iranian cinema has started and today, with Farrokh Ghaffari's *Shab-e Ghuzi*, we can say so. But, the important fact and what makes us happy is that it is a good start.

What most Iranian film critics share despite their different views on the Iranian New Wave is that they have, at some stage, ignored the films made by some pioneering filmmakers such as Ebrahim Golestan, Fereydoun Rahnama and Farrokh Ghaffari. These film critics and researchers would unanimously name *Gaav/The Cow* (Dariush Mehrjui, 1969) and *Qaysar* (Masoud Kimiai, 1968) as the films that started the New Wave of Iranian cinema, with a little bit of attention to the roots of Iranian cinema. For example, Ahmad Talebinejad an Iranian film critic, argues that Iranian cinema entered a new stage with the making of three films: *The Cow*, *Qaysar* and *Aramesh dar Hozure Deegaran/Tranquility in the Presence of Others* (Nasser Taghvaei, 1970) (Talebinejad 1994: 10). Although Talebinejad agrees that before the production of these films, other filmmakers (i.e. Rahnama, Ghaffari and Golestan) tried to produce prestigious films, he believes the results were a failure. But one should correct this historic misconception and positively assert that the initial signs of the New Iranian Cinema were seen in the early 1960s, within a few years of the beginning of the modern cinema.

In contrast with such arguments about the historical roots of the New Wave, I argue that there were other films which should be regarded as the first attempts

that paved the way for the emergence of the New Wave movement in Iran: Ebrahim Golestan's *The Brick and the Mirror*; Farrokh Ghaffari's *The South of the City* and *The Night of the Hunchback*; and Fereydoun Rahnama's *Takht-e Jamshid/Siyavash in Persepolis*; all of them made in the early 1960s and were about to change Iranian cinema more than the next three films, that were made in 1968.

It is not clear why these remarkable films have been left out of the critical discourse of Iranian cinema, with critics insisting that it was the successive generation who actually started New Wave cinema in Iran, going so far as changing the time of the emergence of the New Wave to 1968. I believe that the very first sparks by the forerunners of Iran's New Wave, in films such as *The South of the City*, *The Night of the Hunchback*, *The Brick and the Mirror* and *Siyavash in Persepolis*, put a lot of hope in the hearts of the new generation of filmmakers for the creation of serious filmmaking in Iran, even though those films did not manage to attract a big audience to the theatres. Golestan, Ghaffari, and Rahnama did not merely stop at making films. After years of working at Cinémathèque Française in Paris as an assistant to Henri Langlois, Farrokh Ghaffari returned to Iran and founded something similar to the Cinémathèque by the name of Kanoon-e Film-e Iran, where Golestan was among its lecturers, Rahnama was one of its associates, and many of the film critics and filmmakers of the later years of Iran's New Wave were among its regular attendees.

There is no discussion that intellectuality was one of the substantial and important characteristics of the first distinctive films of New Wave cinema in Iran. It was not a gesture but genuine and pithy. In this sense, these films were first and foremost an image of the intellectual atmosphere of society back then, but they were subjected to severe attacks from the film critics of the time. Iranian film critics looked at these three films with praise and dispraise simultaneously. They admitted that these intellectual films were the ground for artistic and dynamic cinema in Iran, but found their cinematic language crude and stammering. They do not explain how it is possible for a stammering and crude cinema, which cannot communicate with or impress any one, to be the ground for the growth and bloom of Iranian artistic cinema.

It seems that the perennial deeply rooted rift between intellectual and traditional society in Iran is the reason why New Wave cinema could not attract the public audience. Parviz Davai, one of the influential film critics of the time, in his critique of Golestan's *The Brick and The Mirror*, tried to explain why intellectual films like it failed to attract Iran's ordinary cinema goers. Davai pointed out: No! *Khesht va Ayeneh* isn't the film of this people, neither is *Ganj-e*

Gharoun, *Delhore*, *Dozd-e Bank* and *Shamsi Pahlewoun*. Comparing these movies and Mr. Golestan's works isn't a right thing to do, but in a general comparison, *Khesht va Ayeneh* defames the intellectuals among the ordinary Film Farsi viewers as *Ganj-e Gharoun* defames ordinary viewers among intellectuals. (Davai 1998: 88) In criticizing Golestan's *The Brick and The Mirror*, Davai wrote: No, Mr. Golestan! Our miserable and low-literate people, among whom you have held up your nose and passed, don't want a work in the scales of Antonioni (at least not yet). If you make films for these people, you should know them first [...] *Khesht va Ayeneh* shows in every part that you don't know them. (Davai 1998: 88) In Davai's view most of the filmmakers educated in the West, lack thought, nobility and being Iranian. With regards to the first intellectual films he wrote: I have to say that our friends may know the mechanism and technique of filmmaking and have talent, but they haven't been a good Iranian. They have lived in the Film Farsi intellectuals' zone apart from the ordinary people's lives. They have gone abroad and studied in the West and then came back but remained in that same special zone and made films. One can't talk about the lives of people in a level apart from the people's life. If they talk, what we see they do, their words don't reflect these issues and aren't a simple picture of the life of our people. (Davai 1998: 88) That is why Davai has refused to approve the cinematic values of films such as *The Brick and The Mirror*, *The Night of the Hunchback* and *Siyavash in Persepolis*. To improve the work of intellectual filmmakers he suggests that they should go and live among people to get to know the Iranian people and society better: Our intellectual filmmakers should go rent a house and get to know the problems of a rented house. They should go to teahouses, among peddlers and frippery sellers and spend some time with them to get to know their mentality and intellectuals. (Davai 1998: 88) In his article, 'Cinema as a political instrument', Hamid Naficy attributes the difference between New Wave films and traditional genres in Iranian cinema, to their distinctive style and theme. He pointed out: From 1966 till 1977, while the narrative film industry was increasingly producing stereotypical movies just to demonstrate popular subjects, there was a small but growing movement, which aimed to liberate Iranian Cinema from social, economical and artistic restriction. New Wave filmmakers gained support from different governmental filmmaking organizations, and produced significant numbers of movies to show Iranian life in a realistic way. (Naficy 1981) Although Naficy's critical and analytical view played a considerable role in introducing the New Wave movement, his articles lack the same prerequisites as the writings that came beforehand. He has hardly paid attention to the forerunners of the New Wave movement and their films. Therefore Naficy, like

so many other Iranian researchers and historians, has not properly considered the intellectual ground of the New Wave and intellectual filmmakers' role in and impact on developing Iranian art films.

More than any other film scholar, Hamid Dabashi in *Close-Up: Iranian Cinema: Past, Present, Future* (2001), expounds the intellectual and cultural atmosphere in Iran in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in which New Wave cinema emerged, while also reviewing the impact of the philosophical and intellectual debates of that time on Iranian movies, such as tradition and modernity, and westernization and anti-westernization. The distinctive aspect of intellectual films like *The Brick and The Mirror*, *The Night of the Hunchback* and *Siyavash in Persepolis*, is their abstract and subjective atmosphere and their fragile and frustrated characters who are trapped in a definite determinate situation and are not interested in changing it either.

Usually, New Wave cinema is considered as a 'split-flow', but there are filmmakers from the intellectual community who have never been part of the dominant cinema (Film Farsi), and made their films independently. So this is not a split from the Film Farsi flow, but a distinctive and distinguishable cinema. In its first steps, intellectual cinema tried its best to build up new aesthetical standards to contrast with the thematic and stylistic characteristics of typical Film Farsi, such as reconciliation between the classes, heroism, dancing, singing and a simple narrative. It could be argued that documentarism and poetic language are the two main stylistic characteristics of intellectual cinema and Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan, and Fereydoun Rahnama's films were the first ones which embodied these two characteristics.

Through a close study of Iranian cinema within the context of modernity I came to the conclusion that the idea of setting up a prestigious intellectual cinema, nevertheless, occupied the minds of Iranian intellectuals for years but did not come to fruition until the early 1960s. That was a remarkable time in the history of Iranian cinema; the idea of cinema as an art had become a reality, and this was followed by the next generation of motivated filmmakers in the 1970s.

Parviz Jahed

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The Brick and The Mirror

Khesht-va- Ayeneh

Studio/Distributor:

Golestan Studio

Director:

Ebrahim Golestan

Producer:

Ebrahim Golestan

Screenwriter:

Ebrahim Golestan

Cinematographer:

Soleiman Minasian

Editor:

Ebrahim Golestan

Duration:

124 minutes

Genres:

Drama Art house

Cast:

Zakaria Hashemi

Mehri Mehrnia

Taji Ahmadi

Jalal Moghaddam

Parviz Fannizadeh

Manoochehr Farid

Mohammadali Keshavarz

Jamshid Mashayekhi

Pari Saberi

Akbar Meshkin

Year:

1964

Synopsis

On a dark night in Tehran a woman leaves her baby in the back seat of Hashem's taxi and runs away. Hashem runs after her but he cannot find her. He takes the baby to a smoky cafe where some chatty intellectuals argue about trivial things. He seeks their advice but gets disappointed when they tell him to give the baby to an orphanage. Hashem gets help from his girlfriend Taji, a lonely waitress in the cafe who sees the baby as the perfect opportunity to construct a family of her own. Hashem takes the baby to the police station where he is told to take it to an orphanage. Hashem and Taji take the baby to Hashem's home and they spend the night with the baby. The next morning, Hashem takes the baby to an orphanage against Taji's will. After an argument with Hashem, they go to the orphanage to get the baby back, but when Taji enters, she finds hundreds of orphans, all alone and looking for someone to adopt them. Taji leaves the orphanage hopeless and disappointed. Hashem goes after her but she is reluctant to go back to him. They wander through the streets of Tehran, frustrated with their divergent solutions.

Critique

The Brick and The Mirror was a unique modern experiment in 1960s Iranian cinema. It was the first feature-length fiction film made by Ebrahim Golestan, a legendary figure of Iranian cinema and literature. The film takes place on the streets of Tehran over the course of a night and a day. Golestan fused his poetic vision with a realistic style which as in his earlier documentary films. The main themes of the film are alienation, solitude and broken relationships, within a traditional society which is shifting towards modernization. The characters are bewildered, doomed, and as such could be seen as an echo of the characters of Michelangelo Antonioni and modern European cinema in the 1960s. With no heroes or villains it breaks away from the dominant Iranian cinematic principles of the time.

The two main characters are most like anti-heroes that are stuck in a very harsh and critical situation with no way out. Hashem, the taxi driver (played by

Zakaria Hashemi) is shown as a seemingly strong male figure whose weaknesses are made evident throughout the film, in turn making him a parody of chauvinistic values within a traditional society that are steadily reaching obsolescence. Taji, the female character (remarkably played by Taji Ahmadi) is a rebellious woman who is standing against the status-quo and the approved chauvinistic values of society, though it is this rebellious attitude which finally leads to her destruction. The film also has some metaphoric elements which resonate with the horrific events in Iran in the early 1950s after the US-British led *coup d'état* against the national government of Dr Mossadegh. The abandoned child who constantly exchanges hands is a metaphor for a chaotic country in turmoil. The taxi driver's fear of his neighbours and his nosy landlord, reflects a despotic society wherein no one feels comfortable.



The Brick and The Mirror, Golestan Studio.

As a story writer acquainted with the modern narrative structure, whether in story or scriptwriting, Golestan employed some modern techniques of storytelling in the narrative form of the film. The narrative form is divided into several parts; apart from the main narrative there are also sub-narratives within the film, which was totally controversial in Iranian cinema at the time. With his modern narrative approach and by abandoning the classic form of storytelling, Golestan created a huge severance with the old principles of Iranian popular cinema which furthered the simplistic approach to the family melodrama, which was the main popular genre in Iranian cinema in the 1960s. For example, the final sequence shows the separated couple left alone in the streets, more or less in the same situation as they were at the beginning of the film. This was a component derived from European art cinema, creatively employed by Golestan. The scene set inside the orphanage before the film concludes, with a long-take shot of the nursery's babies bouncing and crying, is outstanding and a stunning piece of social realism in Iranian cinema. The monochrome black and white

cinematography of Soleyman Minassian, with its smooth yet complex camera movement and poetic use of lighting, in tone with the melancholic atmosphere of the film, helped establish *The Brick and The Mirror* as a masterpiece of Iranian cinema which paved the way, along with *The Night of the Hunchback* (Farrokh Ghaffari, 1964), for the formation of the Iranian New Wave in the late 1960s.

Parviz Jahed

The Night of the Hunchback

Shab-e Ghuzi

Studio/Distributor:

Irannama Studio

Director:

Farrokh Ghaffari

Producer:

Farrokh Ghaffari

Screenwriters:

Jalal Moghaddam

Farrokh Ghaffari

Cinematographer:

Griom Hayrapetian

Editor:

Ragnar

Duration:

91 minutes

Genre:

Comedy thriller

Cast:

Pari Saberi

Khosro Sahami

Mohammadali Keshavarz
Zakaria Hashemi
Farrokh Ghaffari
Farrokhlagha Hooshmand
Behrooz Sayyadi

Year:

1964

Synopsis

Asghar Ghuzi (*The Hunchback*) is a member of a Persian traditional comedy troupe who perform in theatres or rich people's houses. One night after the end of a private performance at the residence of a wealthy couple, the landlady (the hostess) gives Asghar a piece of paper, on which is a list of smugglers, to deliver to someone. Asghar goes to the suburbs of the city to have dinner with his friends, but accidentally dies when one of his friends tries to put some food in his mouth by force. His friends, shocked by his sudden death, get rid of his corpse by dumping it next to a barbershop. The owners of the barbershop, who are smugglers and intend to go on a trip, put Asghar's body in the yard of a house where there happens to be a wedding reception. Yet, when they leave the shop, they are suspected by the police. The bride's father finds the dead body and takes it out of town. The hostess is informed of Asghar's death and goes after a drunken man who found the list of names in Asghar's pocket by chance. They are tailed and found in a bakery. The police arrive and arrest the woman, the man, and his collaborators.

Critique

The Night of the Hunchback is Farrokh Ghaffari's third film, made after the banning of *Jonoob-e Shahr/The South of the City* (1958) and the box office disappointment, *Aroos Kodomeh/Who is the Bride?*. The film is a black comedy loosely based on a tale from *One Thousand and One Nights (Arabian Nights)* and is one of the few modern and intellectual cinematic experiences in Iranian cinema made by one of the forerunners of its New Wave. Ghaffari and his scriptwriter Jalal Moghadam (his second collaboration with Ghaffari), brought the characters of the classic story of *One Thousand and One Nights* to the modern world so that the story could resonate with people and reflect the

political and social situation of Iran in the 1960s.

Set in a popular theatre troupe, the story follows the sudden death of a comedian (The Hunchback) in a farcical accident. The Hunchback is a victim of the foolishness and pleasure-seeking disregard of his friends, and subsequently his cadaver becomes the driving force of the comedy as it gets passed around from person to person. The corpse works just like a Hitchcockian McGuffin, as with the body of Harry in *The Trouble with Harry* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1955) and similarly reveals the corruption, hypocrisy, and fear within a society living under the dominance of horror and despotism. The corpse of The Hunchback falls like a disaster from the sky over the head of a bunch of bad guys involved in felons and sins, disturbing their calmness. What a policeman says to the corpse of The Hunchback at the end of the film, implicitly transfers the metaphoric theme of the film: 'Your death has brought everything to light.'

Ghaffari's socio-realistic approach and his innovative narrative style was totally new and shocking at the time and therefore not welcomed by the ordinary audiences of Iranian cinema, inhabited by the simplicity and naivety of Film Farsi productions. The film characters can be categorized in four bands: the naive and dumb people (such as the members of the troupe); smugglers and gangsters (the landlady and the owner of the barbershop), drunken and carefree people; and the police force who intend to control society. The comedic tone of the film has been influenced by the French comedies of the 1950s, especially the films of Jacques Tati, but Ghaffari give it an Iranian flavour by relying on Persian traditional performing art.



The Night of the Hunchback, Irannama Studio.

Ghaffari takes a critical and satirical approach towards upper-class Iranians in this film. Coming from an aristocratic family, Ghaffari himself was well aware of wealthy Iranian culture and behaviour and was therefore able to convey this in a very effective manner, filled with rock 'n' roll and revelry alongside traditional attitudes. Ghaffari's profound knowledge of Iran's traditional and ritual performing arts, such as Ta'zieh and Siah Bazi theatre, enabled him to creatively use some of these attractive theatrical elements in his film. The whole story occurs within one night, one of the 'One Thousand and One Nights' happening in Modern Tehran in the 1960s. Thanks to the narrative structure of *One Thousand and One Nights* and the appealing theatrical features of Iranian traditional comedy plays, Ghaffari successfully manages to create a balance between the grotesque and mysterious atmosphere, and the realistic critical modern approach towards Iran's society in the film.

The casting of some top and well-known stage actors of the time like Pari Saberi, Mohammad Ali Keshavarz and Khosro Sahami, shows Ghaffari's idiosyncratic and elitist tendency in Iranian cinema in the 1960s. The film was shown in some international film festivals, such as 1964's 'Cannes and Locarno Film Festival' and was welcomed by western film critics and historians like George Sadoul. Despite some of its technical and narrative shortcomings, *The Night of the Hunchback* has a unique place in the history of Iranian cinema and is regarded as an intellectual film which has developed the language and culture of cinema in Iran, and paved the way for the formation of the Iranian New Wave.

Parviz Jahed

Iran's Son Has No News of His Mother

Pesar-e Iran az Madarash Bikhabar Ast

Studio/Distributor:

National Radio and Television of Iran

Director:

Fereydoun Rahnama

Producer:

Fereydoun Rahnama

Fereydoun Rahnama

Screenwriter:

Fereydoun Rahnama

Cinematographers:

Ali Hejrat

Hosein Rahnama

Mohammad Daneshmandi

Composer:

Fozieh Majd

Editor:

Fereydoun Rahnama

Duration:

75 minutes

Genre:

Drama

Cast:

Sadegh Moghaddasi

Ahoo Kheradmand

Shahnaz Semaji

Soheil Soozani

Reza Jian

Iraj Zohari

Esma'eel Khalaj

Jamshid Layegh

Reza Mafi

Year:

1976

Synopsis

A young playwright and director wants to write and perform a historical drama about faith in the Ashkani period of Iran. There is an incongruity between the man's personal life, and his quest to pursue and present history. The woman who

lives with him believes he should not neglect their relationship when embarking on such a quest. The people who work with the playwright believe the play ought to be made popular to satisfy the public. Finally, this matter makes the playwright perform the play all by himself.

Critique

Fereydoun Rahnama's last film before his death concerns itself with Iranians' loss of identity, the inconsistency of national history, and the relationship between the today's modern Iranians and their past history and mythology. Rahnama, a poet, thinker and modern experimental filmmaker who is regarded as one of the forerunners of the New Wave cinema in Iran, has explored the same theme in his previous films *Takht-e Jamshid/Persepolis* and *Siyavash dar Takht-e Jamshid/Siyavash in Persepolis*. He has made only three films: a short documentary and two feature films.

Mythology and history have been always important to Rahnama. In fact, he never separated the two and never drew a line as a definite border between them. In both *Siyavash in Persepolis* and *Iran's Son Has No News of His Mother* Rahnama has used the structure of 'a film within a film' in a way that allows for a modern interaction, or conversation with history. In *Siyavash in Persepolis* a young director and his crew are making a film in the ruins of Persepolis about Siyavash, a Persian mythical figure in Ferdosi's epic the *Shahnameh*. Siyavash is a symbol of innocence in Persian Literature who is sacrificed by the plots, deceptions, and traits of the people around him. He was the son of Kay K vus, then Shah of Iran, and due to treason by his stepmother, Sudabeh (with whom he refused to have sex and betray his father), he exiled to Turan where he was killed artlessly by the order of The Turanian king, Afrasiab.

In *Iran's Son Has No News of His Mother* the young screenwriter and director who echoes Rahnama himself is fond of Iran's history and tries to depict, in a play, the war between the Parthian and the Greeks in an era when Iran was coping with the west for the first time. In the play the Greeks stand for the people of the West and the Parthians are the representatives of Iranians who are trying to comprehend their enemy's culture. And how the Parthians needed to know their foreign enemies in order to have accurate recognition of themselves. The protagonist is presented as alienated and not understanding of the mentality of the group around him, like in his previous film *Siyavash in Persepolis*. He is an Iranian legendary hero, a princess who like Siyavash is a stranger to his own father. He is a stranger in this world and feels like a stranger in his own land and among his own people. He feels closer to the enemies than to his own army force

just like Siyavash in the film *Persepolis*.



Iran's Son Has No News of His Mother, National Radio and Television of Iran.

The Greek commander tells the Parthian commander: you are defending the people who see you as a stranger and they obey us. You are defending an imaginary freedom. The protagonist is worried about Iranian's loss of identity, becoming rootless, and the cut of cultural connections with history and the past. The title of the film *Iran's Son Has No News of His Mother*, is an allegory and is taken from a newspaper headline – a woman is looking for her child or the opposite, a child is looking for his mother (his motherland) Iran. Not knowing where the mother is, is a metaphor and shows how people are unaware of their identity and previous history.

Rahnama's film is very personal and semi-autobiographical, and was made based on his own personal experiences. He had lots of problems in making this film and portraying his artistic and philosophical ideas. By making this film and showing the difficulties in presenting the play, Rahnama has explained some parts of his life and the atmosphere he has worked with – misunderstandings, jealousy and sabotage. We feel his presence actively by the hand which is writing his memories all through the film. This is in fact Rahnama's hand writing his memoir and the voice of the leading role of the film is dubbed by himself. Even the room, in which the main character of the film is located, is Rahnama's personal room. What he writes are short notes about the difficulties of screening the play, which are turned into haiku-like poems – the director's anecdotes: 'at times, the life's invisible burden...'

The film's protagonist is an adventurous artist with a mind full of questions which are not understood by society. Despite all of the pressures, misunderstandings, harsh words, humiliation the hands of the people around him, and sabotage by the theatre players; all the shortcomings he copes with and never gives up, and in the end succeeds. Similarly, Rahnama succeeds in making a different kind of film which was unusual at that time in Iran, despite the numerous difficulties and barriers he faced. However, his death did not allow him to witness the screening of his film for the first time in the Paris Cinémathèque with Henri Langlois, director and co-founder of Cinémathèque Française. This film could in fact be seen as Rahnama's legacy before his early and untimely death. Henri Langlois described the film as a 'conversation between fact and fiction; a conversation between past and present, between history and the routine life of today'.

Rahnama was more of an archeological thinker than a nationalist. His fondness for past culture and the nation's historic identity had not inclined him to be a chauvinist or absolute thinker, and he took a more critical approach to the

past and history. In the film there is a quote from a Greek commander speaking to the Parthian commander: 'The rule in this land has been and is based on dictatorship and this is why this land is going to be destroyed; don't you ever forget it.' Though Rahnama was a patriotic and full-blooded Iranian, he never held any sort of hatred or grudge against the West and western culture. He lived for years in Europe and spent a long time learning French, writing and publishing poems in the language. It is a fact that westernized Iranians and their alienation towards their identity and to Iran's history was the major theme of many stories, plays, and films made in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, and is strongly emphasized in Rahnama's films.

The nativism in Rahnama's films and writings is a philosophical discourse common among the Iranian elites and intellectuals during 1960s. It is a way of thinking which says the West is another thing and that I am a pure Iranian, which does not exist in today's world and in the routine lives of modern Iranians, and the filmmaker is remembering this with a sense of pity and regards it as a loss of history. In the film *Iran's Son Has No News of His Mother* we see the director writing: 'I see the oblivion scattered all over this land. Where is Iran? What is Iran?' Rahnama wants to bring the past to the present. He wants to remove the great distance between yesterday and today, provide a situation for the people who only think about and live in the present; people who are forgetting their roots while deep inside the joys of life, encouraging them to make up with their past. History and roots have no place in the modern lives of such people, and is only available to them in museums or theatre scenes.

Showing the embrace of western-style rock and roll music and dancing, shows Rahnama's great concern about the new generation and their loss of identity. Though he had lived in the West for a long time, he had never thought of himself as westernized in the sense that Jalal Al-e. Ahmad used the term, and had lived for Iran and its culture till the last moments of his life. The problems that the main characters of both films cope with are rooted in their sense of alienation from such 'westernized' people. Their history and identity prevents them from understanding or making any connection with such thoughts and views. Rahnama's searching camera in Iran's Archeology Museum is his nonstop searching in the heart of history, and modern life, to discover Iranian identity. In the museum the camera pauses in front of a statue of a Parthian commander whose hand is cut out of the frame, but appears in the next scene. This hand is filmed throughout the film writing and narrating the story. Rahnama is suggesting that there are other hands which can replace the Parthian's cut hand, and continue the unfinished job for him.

Iran's Son Has No News of His Mother is a film-essay reminiscent of the cinematic style of Jean Luc Godard and Chris Marker. Rahnama's preachy tone in the film however, may be seen as damaging to its narrative structure, but it is consistent with the style of a film-essay. Making space in the narration to intercut to the past (for example, the scenes in which they rehearse for the play) was highly innovative at the time. Rahnama has benefited from use of various audio-visual possibilities to express himself in the film, including photographs, historical documents and objects. The film's main weak point is the exaggerated and somewhat poor performance of its actors. The actors' artificial tone in their dialogue delivery is a barrier that prevents the audience connecting with the film and suspending disbelief.

Rahnama has separated the two worlds of yesterday and today through use of colour; however, he has avoided the cliché of showing the past in black and white by presenting it in colour, while all the scenes related to the present are in black and white. Only the rehearsal scenes and the show's performance are in colour. Rahnama's awareness of the spirit of the society around him is successfully reflected in the film. That is to say he is aware of the criticisms likely to be raised because of the film's narrative structure, language, dialogue, the method of acting, and the way he looks to the past throughout the film. As a matter of fact, this film is a kind of echo coming from society and a harsh critique coming from Rahnama's thoughts and ideas. For example, Reza Zhian, the actor playing the role of the Iranian commander, protests about the royal focus in the play and tells the director: 'You know what? This play is all about royalty; the royalty which has caused us so much problems.' He then leaves the scene in protest.

In other scenes, the producer and the players are against the elitist way the show is presented, and the idealized and aristocratic way history is viewed. They want the director to quit and to change the content of the show, so that it would appear more hopeful to the ordinary people. The new writer's and director's belief is that the aristocratic hero of the film should be changed to harmonize with the suffering people of society. This scene is not only a criticism aimed towards the norm of cinema and art in Iran; but also a critique on the tendencies towards leftism and populist views common among the Iranian intellectuals of that era. The director of the show says to the theatre group members who want him to quit: 'A *coup d'état* against the director for making the show popular is a democracy, isn't it?'

In another scene, the carpenter who is the protagonist's best friend asks him: 'Why don't you choose a play which is modern and has less cost?' He replies: 'What they do (the Parthians) is related to today. What did the Parthians ask for?'

They asked for a better country.' The dialogue continues:

Carpenter: Yes, I agree, but does anyone listen? Nowadays, people are so busy with their lives that they don't listen to facts anymore.

Director: This was true of the people at that time, too. But Parthians could make people understand it.

Carpenter: But they were aristocrats, weren't they?

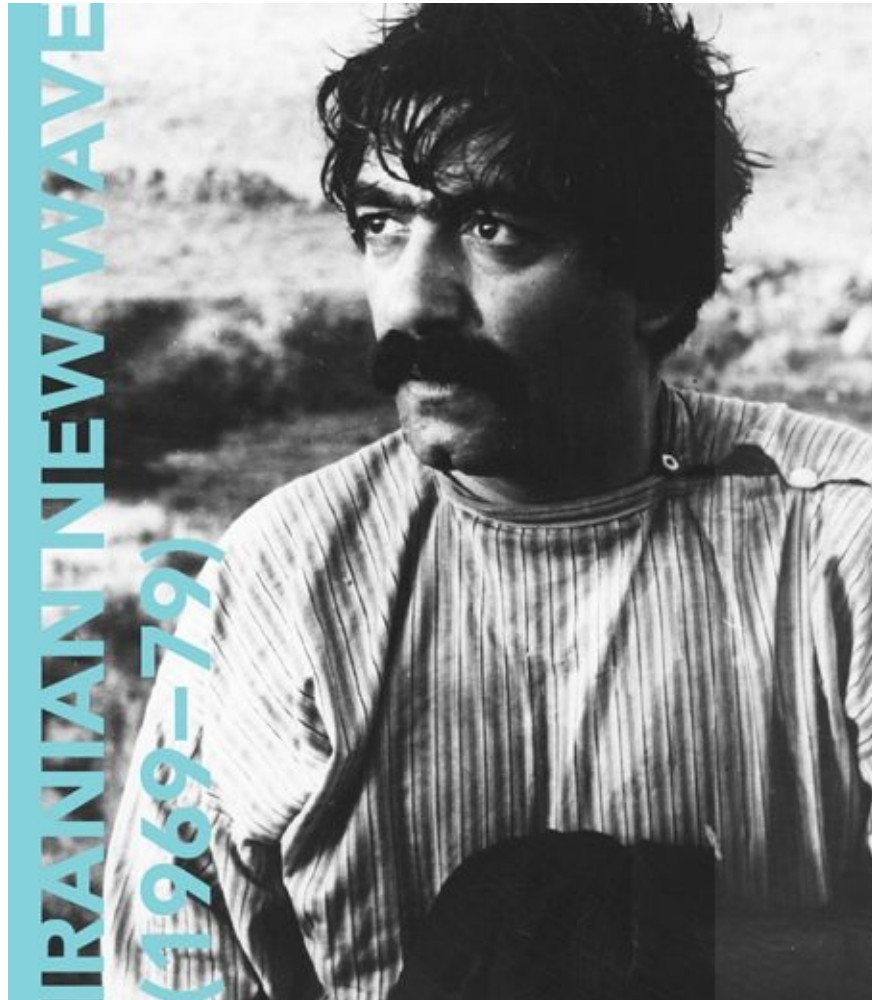
Director: So what?

Carpenter: Well, it is different. They didn't understand the ordinary people.

Director: How do you know? How do you know who understands the people?

Rahnama presented this conversation in a fixed-plan sequence without cutting it into number of shots or applying camera movement. This style of filmmaking had been previously used by Arby Ovanessian in the film *Cheshmeh/The Spring* (1972), and shows how much Rahnama and his generation of filmmakers were influenced by French cinema, especially the works of Robert Berson which had a radical impact on Iranian cinema at the time. *Iran's Son Has No News of His Mother* is a unique example of Iranian Experimental and New Wave cinema because of its narrative style and form which was unseen at that time and is still considered ground-breaking.

Parviz Jahed



The Cow, Iranian Ministry of Culture.

The New Wave of Iranian cinema, or what was later called by this name, is closely tied to the name of one of Iran's greatest storywriters. Even though Gholamhossein Sa'edi, a prolific and inventive psychiatrist/writer, never made any films himself, he wrote the main material for two prominent New Wave films. Some of the greatest theatrical performers in Iran, who all had roles in his play *Gaav/The Cow* (Jafar Valizadeh) (once in the TV adaptation and one in the theatrical performance), took part in its movie version this time under the direction of a young director introduced by Sa'edi himself. This young director was Dariush Mehrjui who had studied philosophy at ULCA and only had one dull and commercially failed movie called *Almas 33/Diamond 33* in his resume. In a rather strange and paradoxical move, the ministry of art and culture, which happened to be the producer of the film, banned the screening of the film due to it 'displaying ruins and poverty in Iranian villages'.

Mehrjui brought success to the film by secretly taking it to the 'Venice Film Festival', and the influential and positive reviews of international critics caused Iranian cinema to be taken more seriously than before. In retrospect, almost all of this film's success is owed to Sa'edi's powerful script and Ezatollah Entezami's superb performance in the main role, which make the primitive technique and mostly blurred shots of the movie look not that irritating to the audience. The subject of the film, *i.e.* the gradual metamorphosis of a villager into his only possession (a cow with an unknown cause of death), is the main theme in most of Sa'edi's works, which has been utilized in various ways in his stories and plays. The gradual psychological decay of a person after normalcy is taken away from their life is also noticeable in Sa'edi's other works that were the best among the initial New Wave films, *i.e.* *Aramesh dar Hozore Digaran/Tranquility in the Presence of Others* (Nasser Taghvaaee, 1970).

In this film, a retired colonel, whose days in the armed forces are over and who has turned into a miserable and melancholic creature, has more or less the same sad fate as the villager in the movie *The Cow*, except with the difference that in this contemporary and horrifying urban story, the family and the whole of society is living with this horrible illness. His two daughters live with a deep confusion, which becomes evident when the elder daughter commits suicide. The educated regular customers of the cafe (in a scene reminiscent of the cafe sequence of Ebrahim Golestan's *Khesht va Ayeneh/The Brick and The Mirror* [1964]) also have no choice but to just nag, look forward to their nightly parties, and forget about their sad lives.

Tranquility in the Presence of Others was caught in a ban as well, and was released years later. The delay in its public screening was an irreparable blow to the Iranian New Wave Cinema. Maybe if it had been shown in its year of production (1970), Iranian cinema would have taken a different path, and the filmmaker would have been able to continue his work the way he preferred. But at any rate, Nasser Taghvaaee, who was already known as a successful documentary filmmaker and whose short story titled *Summer* had won great acclaim that same year, became one of the most important names of the New Wave alongside Dariush Mehrjui. Due to the unsuitable circumstances under which they were released, neither of these two films managed to attract a huge number of cinema lovers to movie theatres (*The Cow* was produced by the ministry of art and culture and *Tranquility* was co-produced by the state TV); but right or wrong, most of the attention of people interested in cinema was focused on the commercial success of new films. So the intellectuals too, along with the populace, voiced their praise for a film that introduced a new formula to Iran's

commercial filmmaking, in which the personal vendetta of the film's hero was interpreted as a bloody uprising against the injustice of that time: *Qaysar* (Masoud Kimiai, 1968).

Masoud Kimiai was warmly embraced by commercial producers, and during the 1970s he managed to make seven more films; a chance that none of the other New Wave directors received. In retrospect, there is no clear correlation between *Qaysar* and the Iranian New Wave Cinema. *The Cow* and *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* demanded awareness from their audience, and went beyond the temptation of sensationalism, exaggerated plays, and the creation of phony legends. But the hero of *Qaysar* keeps on with the drumbeat of revenge and violence, and shouts: 'it's a matter of honor!' The film's famous sequence, which won the praise of the New Wave pioneer Ebrahim Golestan, was the killing of the first brother in a public bath, where (the use of) still images and the complete removal of all dialogues demonstrated the director's abilities, and constituted the film's only acceptable scene. Yet, there is an undeniably huge distance between *Qaysar* as a second-rate imitator of classic filmmaking and its completely traditional and reactionary view of social concepts, and the idea of 'New Wave' as symbols that belong to a new trend and a novel approach to promoting modern institutions.

The major trends of the New Wave: New Wave and commercial filmmaking *Qaysar's* unprecedented success at the box office quickly drew the younger generation to the movie theatres, and three major trends gradually started to emerge in the New Wave: the first one that was the most distant from the (ideals of) New Wave and had a direct effect on commercial filmmaking was created and represented by Masoud Kimiai and Ali Hatami. Kimiai loved creating western-style heroes based on an Iranian theme; and Hatami showed an inclination towards traditional Iranian theatre and literary narration (known in Farsi as *Naghali*). Aside from the influences of an autocratic upbringing and the deeply rooted self-centredness in Iranian culture, the especial attention paid to monologues as opposed to dialogues in both of these filmmakers' films is also a sign of disregard for dramatic speech. The commercial success of *Qaysar* and *Hassan-Kachal/Hassan the bald guy* (Hatami's first film) brought a change, at least in appearance, to the formulae of commercial filmmaking. Hatami's next film, *i.e. Towghi*, was an imitation of *Qaysar*, which of course was combined with his mythical and fatalistic ideas. The commercial failure of two weak and low-grade films by these filmmakers (*Reza Motori/Reza the Biker* and *Baba Shamal*) caused them to make a new attempt at surviving in commercial filmmaking. His weakness in developing characters and lack of command in

storytelling and depiction, and despite making one of his best and most personal films, *Khastegar/The Suitor*, which was a parody of 'ever lasting love, Iranian style' as well as a weak heroic tragedy mixed with the idea of 'incestuous love' (which he was forced to modify) in a film called *Ghalandar*, and finally a film named *Sattar-Khan* about the life of one of the most well-known heroes of the Iranian constitutional revolution, caused Hatami to end up with three failed movies, and in 1973 to go into television and stay away from cinema for five years. During this period he made two television series named *Mowlavi's Stories* (based on five tales from Rumi's *Spiritual Couplets*) and *Soltan-e Sahebgheran/The Wealthy Sultan* (based on the life of Nasser al-Din Shah Qajar),¹ then made a comeback to cinema with his most famous film *Sooteh Delaan/The Lonely Hearts*. The characters in Hatami's films are like loudspeakers, from which rhyming monologues come out with a style similar to the texts of the Qajar era. That is why in his films, storytelling and logical relations have been replaced by a fragmented narration of stories in which the scenes do not follow a logical succession. In other words, the idea of 'dramatic procession' has turned into a sort of narrative improvisation in his films. From a technical perspective, and due to Hooshang Baharloo's good cinematography, *The Lonely Hearts* has been known as Hatami's outstanding and signature work.

Masoud Kimiai took a more secure path back to commercial filmmaking, and by using the story *Dash Akol* (Sadegh Hedayat) won the hearts of the ordinary audience as well as the intellectuals. He narrates the story of a middle-aged hero who gets to experience forbidden love for a young girl. He himself organizes her wedding and eventually gets cowardly killed by the neighborhood's dark-faced evil macho man. Hedayat's story is completely devoid of the concept of chivalrous heroism, exactly what is extensively focused on in the film, and it is somehow at odds with Hedayat's world view (tragedy against tradition and fatalism). Kimiai's traditional hero still keeps on with his usual traditional method, and in films like *Baluch, Khaak/The Soil, Gavaznha/The Deer* [1974], and *Safare Sang/The Millstone Journey* does not think of anything but heroic revenge. The combination of heroism and realism, the adding of prostitutes as complementary elements (from *Qaysar* to *The Soil*), and violence are among the characteristics of his films. The obvious contradiction in developing characters is quite evident even in his interpretation of Borges's story *Intruder* in the film *Ghazal*. Despite being the most popular New Wave figure among the critics, it was Kimiai's strategic and ideological distance from the New Wave that allowed him to continue with his commercial filmmaking in spite of having made a number of unsuccessful movies. The leftist movement saw its dreams

materialize in his films, especially *The Deers*. The young gun-carrying eyeglass-wearing type (Ghodrat, played by Faramarz Gharibian) had the visual characteristics of the leftists' favorite guerilla fighter; the same way that the villagers in *The Millstone Journey* carried with themselves a whole collection of religious symbols (slogans, prayer, oath, etc.) along with the millstone.

New Wave and the middle cinema

Among the filmmakers of the younger generation, the struggle for survival in the commercial film industry forced them to choose different and sometimes contradicting solutions. Their films were made with a small capital and had limited screening possibilities. In order to survive in the movie business, the banning of the film *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* caused Taghvaei to make the two films *Sadegh Kordeh/Sadeq the Kurd* (based on a true story with a vengeful antihero) and *Nefrin/The Curse* (an adaptation of a novel by the Finnish writer Mika Waltari about a relationship between a middle-aged psychopathic man, a tormented and unhappy woman, and her young lover in a tragic [love] triangle in southern Iran), both of which failed to attract that big an audience despite their positive qualities. He too was forced to go to television, but he managed to recapture the spotlight by making the most popular series in the history of Iranian television, *i.e. Dai-jaan Napoleon* (aka *Uncle Napoleon*) (based on a novel by Iraj Pezeshkzad) about the farcical lives of an aristocratic family during the reign of Reza Shah. Nasser Taghvaei could probably be called the most important victim of the new wave; a director that made the most important New Wave film through his great ability in storytelling and his mastery in (cinematic) depiction, yet failed to continue on the path that he had originally set off on.

In contrast Amir Naderi, who came from a very poor family in the south of Iran, learned cinema through watching films, and began his career as a photographer in the movie *Qaysar*, and managed to make his very first film, *Khodahafez Rafiq/Goodbye Pal*, under very difficult circumstance in 1971. The film, which is shot entirely with the camera carried in hand and without a tripod, and whose production style is reminiscent of American independent and street movies, tells the story of three friends who rob a jewellery store and then get into a fight with each other over the money and thus create a tragedy. With this film and its violent and fatalist heroes, Naderi was in a way the starter of street cinema in Iran. The film goes on in a hopeless and sad atmosphere, and is full of confusion and aimless wandering. He kept on with this path in a more effective way in the film *Tangna/The Tight Corner*. The film's antihero is caught in a dangerous situation where there is no way out.

Even though these two films did not have much commercial success, Naderi was determined to remain and survive in commercial filmmaking: the expensive and famous movie *Tangsir* (1973) with its vengeful and triumphant hero, and the ingenious and symbolical film *Saaz Dahani/The Harmonica*, about child exploitation demonstrated that his work was not limited to street movies. The making of the sad, naturalistic, slow paced, and weak movie *Marsieh/The Obituary* marked the end of Naderi's work in the New Wave. He too took refuge in the Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) (where he had made *The Harmonica*) and made the film *Entezar/Waiting* there. His views on filmmaking quickly changed and he effectively did not make anything new until the dawn of the 1979 Revolution, when he made the documentary *Jostego/The Search*. Fereydoun Goleh, who received his education in cinema in the United States and worked as a scriptwriter in (Iran's) commercial cinema, started his work as a filmmaker with two mediocre and unsuccessful films *Kafar/The Infidel* and *Deshneh/The Dagger*. *The Dagger* was generally made under the influence of post-Qaysar trends and even carried a happy ending as a hallmark of commercial films, but *The Infidel*, despite its obvious shortcomings, had the characteristics of street films: an antihero with a tragic fate, a gloomy atmosphere, an unsuccessful robbery, and strangest of all a quote from Nietzsche about cutting ties with the past in the beginning sequence of the film! Goleh's success began with *Zir-e Post-e Shab/Under the Skin of the Night*. This time his antihero was being depicted as the evil castoff in a society which had been turned into an unbearable hell by the wide class-gap within that society. Under such circumstances, the only way left for the antihero is to bond with his own instinct, trying to find a place to sleep with a foreign tourist woman, and his eventual arrest by the police and a woman's flight (back home) while at the same time the man masturbates in jail. The idea of deprivation among the society's poor did not stop at instinctual needs. Two years later, in the amazing film *Kandu/Beehive* (1975), Goleh pulled out the winning card of New Wave's street cinema: an antihero who accepts the unusual bet for eating without paying.

For the first and probably the last time in Iranian cinema, the antihero, the spiritual journey of a hero and tragedy, are combined together without any of them looking illusory, slogan-like, or as if they are imposed on the others. *Beehive* makes a clear reference to Iranian mythology (like the seven cities of love), and contrary to the similarity established between the references made in this film and those in *The Swimmer* (Frank Perry), they are closer to the concept of 'transformation of character' in Iranian literature. The created atmosphere, the performances, and the style of narration, put this film among the New Wave's

very best. Between *Under the Skin of the Night* and *Beehive*, Goleh made a different and tragic film called *Mehrgiah/The Mandrake* which is a combination of mystic mentalism (a man alongside his imaginary wife) and the road genre; an ambiguity which is sometimes symbolic and sometimes in the form of a mystery. Before the New Wave, the camera was rarely taken into the poverty stricken neighbourhoods of southern Tehran, and the image shown of poverty and the life of poor people had nothing to do with reality. The middle trend in New Wave is full of these images. By writing the novel *The Parrot*, Zackaria Hashemi, who himself came from that (socio-economic) class and had acted in *Shab-e Ghuzi/The Night of the Hunchback* (Farrokh Ghaffari, 1964) and *The Brick and The Mirror*, showed a naturalistic image of the two main characters' endless wandering in the evil surrounding them. In his cinematic adaptation of this novel (and with him playing the main role), he took the camera to Shahr-e Naw (the neighbourhood of the chain of brothels in Tehran before February of 1979) and displayed an atmosphere that was unimaginable before that. The film's tragedy caught up with Goleh himself as well: *Tooti/The Parrot* was banned too and was put on display in a very limited way in the beginning of the 1979 Revolution.

Before making *The Parrot* Hashemi made two other films *Se-ghap* (1971) and *Zan-e Bakereh/The Virgin Woman* (1973): the former was a hopeless and palpable tragedy about a professional gambler who set out to do a bloody gamble for the last time to make money for his friend's sister's wedding, and the latter is a mediocre story with even worse cinematic development about jealousy, betrayal and revenge. Shahriar Ghanbari, who was known as a pop singer and songwriter for a couple of New Wave films (*Reza Motori* and *Goodbye Pal*), with his only long film *Sham-e Akhar/The Last Supper* (1976), in the form of an average melodrama tried to distance himself from the ongoing trend; an endeavor that did not lead to anything because of shortcomings in narration and cinematic language.

Reza Mirlowhi, like Fereydoun Goleh, entered filmmaking from scriptwriting, and in his first work *Topoli* (based on John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* [1937]) owing to his main source of adaptation and the film's relative success in terms of creating atmospheres as well as the performances, he raised hopes of having a new filmmaker in the New Wave movement. Unfortunately, he was also very quickly dissolved into commercial filmmaking and his later films caused even this slight hope to vanish. Nosrat Karimi too, who had revived hopes with his naturalistic film *Doroshkeh-chi/The Carriage Driver* with echoes of Dino Risi and Pietro Germi's style, took on a different path in his later movies

and disappointed his fans.

In works such as *Taleh/The Trap* (Jalal Moghadam) too, one could see traces of the New Wave: the same familiar antihero and stories of robbery, the fighting over the money, and eventually a tragedy, which in terms of development and the atmosphere created is reminiscent of Mexican commercial cinema of the same period. The mixture of the symbols of street cinema, direct influences of Godard's *À bout de souffle/Breathless* (1960), and some of the conventions of commercial filmmaking (like the initial fight and the accidental death of the man), turned Kamran Shirdel's only long film *Sobhe Rooz-e Chaharom/The Morning of the Fourth Day*, into a rather cluttered potpourri. It was a film that undoubtedly carried the signs of the New Wave inside, but when watching the film, one just wishes the filmmaker had focused on Godard's technique and expression rather than on the story of *Breathless*. Shirdel, who received his education in cinema in Italy, began his career with making documentaries, and in cooperation with Nosrat Karimi, made the experimental film *On Shab ke Baroon Omad/The Night it Rained* in 1967. In this outstanding film, which is among Iran's best ever, the techniques of the French New Wave and especially Godard's influences can be seen; the reward for making this exceptional film was a seven-year-long ban on its release, which completely changed Shirdel's filmmaking career.

New Wave and the artistic cinema

The return of western educated people to Iran and the passing on of their filmmaking experiences (to people inside) as well as the entrance of playwrights and poets into filmmaking, brought a great deal of variety to filmmaking in Iran. In the midst of all this, the pioneers of the New Wave each, through one film, left their mark on 1970s cinema: Farrokh Ghaffari with the subtle and satirical film *Zanburak*, combined the search for the treasure of Iranian identity with symbols of different historical periods and put together a collection that sometimes reminds one of *Mulla-Nasreddin* and *Obeyd [Zakani]*, and is sometimes reminiscent of *Il Demcameron* and *A Thousand and One Nights*. Ghaffari's traditional narrative style and the nested narration of a seemingly simple story, along with Fereydun Nasser's music, whose epic rhythm amplifies the ridiculing tone of the film, makes *Zanburak* an acceptable film. *The Secrets of the Haunted Valley* (Ebrahim Golestan) pretty much follows the same path; except that its political analogy and its remarkable prediction of the 1979 Revolution turns it into an exceptional film, even though in terms of storytelling and technique, it hovers between realism and parody. In the mean time, before his tragic death in 1975, Fereydown Rahnama managed to release his artistic,

will titled *Pesar-e Iran az Madarash Bikhobar Ast/Iran's Son Has No News of His Mother* (1976). The common theme shared among the three films is concern for Iranian history, identity and culture, which is depicted in Golestan's and Ghaffari's works through satire, and through some sort of mentalism in Rahnama's work. The main weakness in Rahnama's film is lack of consistency and a coherent tone and dynamic narration that could help him reach his goals, and apparently his illness had something to do it.

The work of the next generation in this period showed that the efforts of the pioneers were not in vain: Mohammadreza Aslani, Rahnama's old friend, after making his amazing experimental documentary *Jaame-Hassanloo* (1968), and then his political allegory in *Badbade* (1975), and his exceptional comedic work on the country's education system *Chenin Konand Hekayat/So It Has Been Told* (1975), which was immediately banned, directed his first long film titled *Shatranj-e Bad/The Chess Game of the Wind*. With its coherent narration and its unique compositions, the film tells the story of the gradual disintegration of an Iranian family near the end of the Qajar era; a family in which people are scheming against each other in all sorts of ways and eventually all fall victims to this tragedy, and the heritage is practically left without an heir. In this film, reality and allegory are completely intertwined, and the influence of Iranian painting alongside western formalism, as well as a selection of the best ever camera movements and plan-sequence in the history of Iranian cinema, make it a clear embodiment of intellectualism in the New Wave.

After fifteen years of continuous presence as a playwright and making the short film *Amoo Sibiloo* (1970) for children, Bahram Beyzaie turned the short presence of a teacher at a school in the south of Tehran into an influential event in his first long film *Ragbar/The Downpour* [1971]). Lack of coherence and inexperience in storytelling and technique, has brought confusion to the cinematic expression of this film. Yet, Beyzaie's favorite theme, *i.e.* 'a stranger in an incompatible world', transforms from a rather realist shape into mystery in his next film *Gharibe va Meh/The Stranger and the Fog* [1974]). In both films, a stranger comes and after a short period of notable presence, leaves the film's universe. The realism and the familiar location in the first film, makes it easier to relate to, whereas the intentional ambiguity of the latter plus the obvious influences of Japanese cinema, make the second film, which has a much better structure, all the more difficult to grasp. In both films, especially *The Downpour*, Beyzaie openly insists on using theatrical expression (the teacher in his first encounter with the old woman says: 'There is not a heroic element in me!') and tries to explain the goals of all the characters out loud. In his third film,

Kalagh/The Crow (1977) the stranger is in the form of a picture which a TV announcer had already seen but did not remember where; it is in fact a picture of his mother in her youth. The unique point about these three films is the gap between being unaware of one's fate and awareness: Mr Hekmati's awareness in *The Downpour* puts his character way ahead of his counterparts in the next two films. In *The Stranger and the Fog*, the real puzzle is in the fact that even Ayat (the main character) himself does not know why he has come to that village; and the fatalism in *the Crow* makes the old woman's character a static element, and renders the process of others trying to discover her identity useless. His fourth film *Tcherike-ye Tara/Ballad of Tara*, which was made with a notable time-gap after the previous three at the onset of the Revolution and was never released, brings the battle between myth and reality to an obvious level, and properly displays the filmmaker's favourite cinematic patterns. In fact, the filmmaker allows reality to present itself only so far as it does not hurt his dramatic clarity.

The realism of Sohrab Shahid-Saless is of a different kind. His look at marginalized people and the poor in his two films *A Simple Event* and *Still Life* strongly demonstrate his personal style, which is a combination of realist paintings, the characters' rhythm of life, and empty and secluded places. The mother's death, the escape from the soldier, and being slapped in front of strangers in the first film, and the old woman threading the sewing needle, the reading of the retirement order, and the old man's surprising presence at the pub in the second film, make up a few examples of the most memorable moments of the New Wave.

After graduating in cinema in France and making a number of successful short films, Parviz Kimiavi made the beautiful and intellectual collage *Moghol-ha/The Mongols*, and after that the praiseworthy pseudo-documentary film *Bagh-e Sangi/The Stone Garden*. *The Mongols*, with its explosive and exciting beginning, revives elements of the French New Wave, very little of which was left by 1973. The analogy drawn between the television's attack and the Mongols' invasion of Iran, the director playing himself in the film, along with numerous innovative ideas, makes *The Mongols* quite distinct from conventional New Wave films. This excessive approach is softened to some extent in *The Stone Garden*, and due to its simple storyline, we are faced with a more focused composition. At the dawn of the Revolution, Kimiavi made the film *OK Mester/Okay Mister*, which is a comic narration of contemporary Iranian history, and the demise of colonialism at the end of the film is a reference to the events of 1979, just as the standing up of the film's servant at the end of *Shazdeh Ehtejab* (Bahman Farmanara) (based on Hooshang Golshiri's novel), disheveling

the pictures of the Qajar clan, and the descent of the last remaining member of this family into an endless cellar, promises the end of an old era and the arrival of a new season.

Among the New Wave filmmakers, Arby Ovanessian (a London film school alumnus) with his different, long film *Cheshmeh/The Spring* (1972), turns a story about love and self control into a deep confrontation between the past and the present. The filmmaker's fluid style in storytelling and the graphical layouts, turns the story's plot into a framework for displaying pictorial motifs. In contrast, Hajir Draioush who graduated from I.D.H.E.C and was known as an influential critic and serious manager in show business, drew attention to pseudo-intellectualism as the New Wave's Achilles' heel, with his mediocre and unbelievable melodrama titled *Bitā* (1973), at the centre of which was a clumsy and ridiculous character. Khosrow Haritash too, with films such as *Adamak/The Dummy*, *Berehneh ta Zohr ba Sorat/Naked until Noon with Speed*, *Soraydar/The Janitor* and *Malakout/The Divine One* (based on Bahram Sadeghi's famous novel) showed that he also follows more or less the same path. The filmmakers confusion between realism and fantasy as well as his deficient knowledge of different social classes caused his films to lack the required coherence. Although in certain scenes of each film there are traces of careful directorial work, none of them leads to a complete and whole film. Dariush Mehrjui, as one of the most important names of the New Wave, after the rise of *The Cow* and the downfall of *Agha-ye Halou/Mr. Naïve*, made the film *Postchi/The Postman* (1972) based on the play *Woyzeck* (Georg Büchner), and mixed tragedy with an allegoric and ridiculing tone, which despite having notable moments such as the cinematography of the final scene and the image of the main character in the middle of lightning-stricken trees, still fails to get rid of its caricature-like atmosphere. In his next film, *Dayereh-ye Mina/The Cycle* (1974) (which was banned for vacuous reasons), he again sought refuge in a story by Gholamhossein Sa'edi and his favorite theme, *i.e.* transformation, and created one of the best works of the New Wave. The gradual change in Ali (played by Saeed Kangarani), from someone who sells his own blood to someone who takes blood, and from an innocent individual to a tattletale, is depicted with subtlety and without any overemphasis, and shows Sa'edi's realism in a very good way. Here we should also mention the 'Vittorio-De Sica'-like role of Parviz Sayyad: someone who took on the role of producer for many of the New Wave films through making commercial box office hits. He directed the highest earning Iranian film (before 1979) titled *Dar Emtedad-e Shab/Through the Night* and then in 1977, based on a free interpretation of a short story by Anton Chekhov, directed and produced the outstanding film *Bonbast/The Dead-end* (which was

immediately banned and later after the Revolution was screened for a very short period of time). The girl's (played by Mary Apick) impression of her messenger of happiness, leaves her completely under the illusion of love, while the man watching her arrests her brother and Ahmad Shamloo's famous lyrics (played over the girl's blushed face brings melodrama closer to tragedy: 'Oh lover, oh lover, your red face is not visible.' Sayyad's multi-faceted role as actor, director, and producer of several important New Wave films, demonstrates how much making provisions for creating a film in Iran depends on the producer's understanding of the filmmaking process. Names like Parviz Sayyad complete the triangle of script/directorial work/editing in the New Wave.

The common aspects of New Wave

Pre-New Wave cinema was essentially oblivious to tragedy. Films were total imitations of Indian and Egyptian commercial cinema, and were made without having any particular genre in mind, in the form of 'one chapter melodrama, another chapter musical, and one chapter comedy', and on this path they ended with nothing other than a happy ending. The New Wave suggested an entirely new formula. In commercial cinema, 'revenge' became a permanent replacement for 'happy ending', hallmarked by the film *Qaysar*. In New Wave films tragedy manifested not as an excuse for revenge but rather in the form of a crisis, as if this tragic process was a cultural/social response to the fake jubilation and forced happy endings of the films in the previous era. And thus the New Wave's outlook in the context of the events of the 1970s, which ended the Islamic Revolution, inevitably showed the audience a gloomy image filled with the tragic fates of their heroes.

The active and raging heroes in Kimiai's films kept the idea of tragic revenge in commercial filmmaking alive, and even in certain instances such as *Tangsir* (based on a novel by Sadeq Choubak) or *The Soil* (based on Mahmood Dolatabadi's novel) tragedy does not happen to the main hero, and the survival of the righteous and revenge-seeking hero kept the hope for struggle alive in the audience. But these active and raging heroes carried with them a mythical and unreal tendency, which good or bad were reminiscent of heroes of western films. This need for creating a hero implied an escape from reality. The sudden transformation of heroes in Kimiai's films, the unusual mythologizing in Ali Hatami's films, and caricaturing of characters (like that of *Mr. Naïve*) make us draw a clear distinction between such films and the general idea of 'New Wave'. Reza in the film *Reza Motori* suddenly decides to return all the money that he had gone to so much trouble to steal; and Seyyed (played by Behrouz Vossoughi) in the film *The Deer*, suddenly influenced by his friend's words,

blindly and aimlessly decides to kill the heroin dealer; the very same strong guy who had easily beaten him the night before.

So these films, hugely distant from the New Wave, merely count as new formulae to break away from the cinema of the past. The monologues of the characters in these films remind the audience of the monologues of the joyful heroes in the commercial cinema of the past, and their spontaneous decisions set them apart from the patterns of logical character development. The big lesson in reviewing the Iranian New Wave Cinema, is that historical prejudice cannot stand in the way of thoroughly appreciating the films' quality, and historical memory cannot be made to work, unless the films are qualitatively reviewed, taking their historical role into consideration.

Saeed Aghighi (Translated by Arash Jalali)

Note

1. King of Persia (1831–1896) of the Qajar dynasty. [Translator's note.]

Qaysar

Studio/Distributor:

Aryana film

Director:

Masoud Kimiai

Producer:

Abbas Shabavizi

Screenwriter:

Masoud Kimiai

Cinematographer:

Maziar Partov

Composer:

Esfandiar Monfared Zadeh

Editor:

Maziar Partov

Duration:

108 minutes

Cast:

Behrooz Vosoghi

Naser Malek motii-Poori Bani

Jamshid Mashyekhi

iran daftari

Bahman Mofid

Jallal Pishvaian

Year:

1968

Synopsis

Fati explains her affair with Mansour AbMangol in a letter to her family and then commits suicide. Farman, her brother, tries to take revenge but he is murdered by Mansour's brother. Qaysar, Fati's younger brother, returns from the south and decides to take revenge on Abmangol's brothers. He kills Karim in the public bath, Rahim in an abattoir, and Mansour between deserted wagons and he is arrested while wounded.

Critique

Masoud Kimiai's second work, after the failure of his first film which was an unsuccessful copy of *Stranger Comes to Town*, was not only a box office success but also a sign of hope for finding a new formula to restore the dying mainstream of Iranian cinema. *Qaysar* manages to combine the formula of revenge-seeking westerns like *Nevada Smith* (Henry Hathaway, 1966) with the poor bourhoods in the south of Tehran, using the concepts of chastity, prejudice, and urging individual revenge. We can also add Qaysar's hairstyle and his shoes to the public culture of Iranian society.

This film contains some exaggerated acting and pompous dialogue such as 'beat otherwise you'll be beaten', and applies old formulas (cafe, dance, song, and possessing the antagonist's sweetheart) along with newer formulas (an unarmed hero, a victim, a crippled athlete, an awaiting fiancée, and an aged mother) for justifying Qaysar's avenging operation. There are also some technical flaws, e.g. putting the knife in the hand of a dead person who has been stabbed, the primary introduction of film characters, and Qaysar's out of the blue trip to Mashhad. However, in spite of all these shortcomings the film was both a big hit at the box office and with critics because of its new and stimulating formula for viewers and its use of familiar and real surroundings to tell an exciting story. The film's new style was imitated by mainstream commercial cinema for a decade.

The film's success has led to further cooperation of this team including the filmmaker, composer, and the leading actor (Behrooz Vosoghi) in the subsequent five films, and opens the way for younger directors at the box office. The film's destructive social impression mainly serves to mythologize these revenge-seeking lumpens and to widen the fake picture of such heroes, a populist effect which lingers and sustains the popularity and credibility of this film by the untamed ones having ideological criteria.

Saeed Aghighi

The Cow

Gaav

Studio/Distributor:

Iranian Ministry of Culture

Director:

Dariush Mehrjui

Producer:

Dariush Mehrjui

Screenwriters:

Dariush Mehrjui (script)

Gholamhossein Sa'edi (play)

Cinematographer:

Fereydon Ghovanl

Composer:

Hormouz Farhat

Editor:

Dariush Mehrjui

Duration:

105 minutes

Genres:

Neo-realism

Psychological drama

Cast:

Ezzatolah Entezami

Ali Nassirian

Jamshid Mashayekhi

Jafar Vali

Mehmoud Doulatbadi

محمود دولت‌آباد

Khosrou Shojazadeh

Ezatollah Ramezani

Mahin Shahabi

Year:

1969

Synopsis

The film's narrative is quite linear and simple. Hassan is the owner of a remote village's only cow. Suddenly the cow dies, leaving Hassan emotionally devastated. While his fellow villagers try to help him, Hassan's trauma is so deep that he cannot possibly get over it. The atmosphere in the village is bleak and sometimes surreal, as its inhabitants are living under the fear of the mysterious 'Bolouris', possibly a reference to some kind of political militia. Hassan progressively descends ontologically, transforming into his cow. While Hassan's dehumanization takes place the way his fellow villagers treat him changes as well. In one scene he is being hit by one of his friends as if he really was a cow. The film ends with Hassan's complete metamorphosis and tragic death.

Critique

The flag of the Iranian New Wave according to some, sharp criticism against the Pahlavi modernization project for others, Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* impresses today's audiences with its effectiveness. On the surface Mehrjui's oeuvre is an Iranian experiment with neo-realism which succeeds, with its minimalism and expressionist almost darkness, in communicating the existential angst and ontological descent of the impoverished villagers. Mehrjui's film ideologically flirts with Italian neo-realism but thematically and aesthetically bears more analogies with Glauber Rocha's Cinema Novo masterpiece *Deus o Diabo na Terra do Sol*. We are introduced to the eternal setting of peasant life, endless desert and sunbaked hovels, where isolation from the modern world gives birth to pagan religiosity and madness. The cow's death appears to be only the pretext for Hassan's madness to be expressed.

The pseudo-documentary first part convinces us of the verity of Ezzatollah Entezami Mehrjui's representation of Iranian countryside, where the Pahlavi

modernization has never come. The scene where Hassan cherishes his cow, more comical than touching, intensifies the viewer's distancing from the protagonist's pathos. And after the cow's death, engineering of the viewer's emotion begins. The mood of the film Khosrou Shojazadeh progressively moves towards expressionism, with Entezami's centred acting and dark physique accentuating the bleakness of the atmosphere. The unpronounceable evil of Hassan's transfiguration, body and mind, seems unexplainable, dictated by obscure forces. The categorization of *The Cow* as a realist film is proved therefore highly problematic. In an acute moment star lighting frames the protagonist: in the crisis sequence, where Hassan presents himself as his cow for the first time, Entezami is being illuminated by rays of light. This very inventive, corrupted use of star lighting, tailored to the needs of social realism, is characteristic of Mehrjui's style.

This key cinematic text manages to combine Neo-realist, expressionist, and surreal moments in an alchemy that has opened the way to the prolific Iranian New Wave. Finally, it is one of the few films produced before the Islamic Revolution that enjoys popularity still. Irony it is that *The Cow*, so successful in the Venice and Chicago Film Festivals, was initially blocked by censorship in Iran.

Nikolaos Vryzidis

Tranquillity in the Presence of Others

Aramesh dar Hozure
Deegaran

Studio/Distributor:

Tele Film

Director:

Nasser Taghvaei

Screenwriters:

Nasser Taghvaei

Gholamhosein Sa'edi (Based
on a story by Gholamhossein

Sa'edi)

Cinematographer:

Mansour Yazdi

Composer:

Homouz Farhat

Sound Recordist:

Haidar Nakha'i

Editor:

Abbas Ganjavi

Duration:

86 minutes

Cast:

Akbar Meshkin

Soraya Ghasemi

Mohammad Ali Sopanlou

Masoud Asadollahi

Manouchehr Atashi

Leila Baharan

Year:

1970

Synopsis

A retired colonel marries a young teacher, Manijeh, after the death of his first wife, and moves to Tehran to live with his daughters, Maliheh and Mahlagha. Who, having been away from their father, the girls have turned loose. At first the housemaid, Ameneh, attempts to cover up what the girls do so their father would not find out. When he realizes that his daughters have become morally corrupt, the retired colonel turns to alcohol. The elder one (Maliheh) commits suicide after having been mistreated by Dr Sepanlou, her partner, and the younger one (Mahlagha) becomes pregnant and marries Ali against her will. Seeing these, the colonel has a nervous breakdown and ends up in a mental asylum, where his wife takes care of him.

Critique

Nasser Taghvaei has a reputation for his high quality adaptation of literature to cinema whether it is a Persian or a western story. *Tranquillity in the Presence of Others* is Taghvaei debut feature film. Yet he had made several documentary films before this shift to fiction.

In choosing the subject of his very first fiction film, Taghvaei has boldly taken a new and very difficult path of his own. The story of the film is taken from a collection of stories called *The Anonymous Fears* by Gholamhosein Sa'edi, a distinguished Iranian story writer and playwright. In developing the characters and designing the sets, relying on his own independence and tastes, Taghvaei has created a film beyond the field of literature, a film that, by employing the visual essence and expression of cinema, manages to demonstrate with deep perception the darkness and bitterness within Iran's society during the 1960s.



Tranquillity in the Presence of Others, Tele Film.

Tranquillity in the Presence of Others has been regarded as one of the first Iranian New Wave films which signify an audacious search aimed at opening a thoughtful horizon in Iranian cinema. It is a distinguished film in which the hidden and gradual madness of the middle-class Iranian and intellectuals of the late 1960s is revealed. It depicts the shattering dreams of the people who in their emotional vacuity and incurable malady of loneliness and fatigue, without any promising relationships, are looking for a haven in the darkness of the trees and the crowded nights of the big city. The film adopts a critical view of the middle-class Iranians of the time and their problematic relationships. Sa'edi (the writer of the story) had a close relationship with Iran's intellectual circles and was thus

familiar with their mentality and attitudes. And it was this which enabled him to convey the superficial, hollow, and deformed lives of such people.

The presence of the film's characters in each other's company, not only does not alleviate their terrifying and insuperable loneliness, it even shows the vanity and illusiveness of their superficial relationships in a tragic and painful way. They each have fallen deep into the world inside their minds and are unable to establish any emotional relationship or spiritual bond together. The father (Colonel), his wife (Manijeh) and his daughters (Maliheh and Mahlagha), are all in their own soul's abyss and caught up with despair and absolute emptiness, and so, even if they seek help from one another in times of crisis and helplessness, they will not manage to gain anything except to destroy each other.

Each of the film's characters signifies a certain type of personality in the society. They all have some sort of connection with the others or themselves. In the book, Sa'edi mainly focused on the life of Colonel and his wife but Taghvaei has concentrated on the lives of Colonel's daughters and their relationship. The retired colonel, at the centre of the disaster, represents a character on the verge of downfall and death. He only feeds on the dreams of a rotten glory – an outstanding scene takes place in the street with the sound of a marching band along with his footsteps – and he lives with the help of alcohol, an old and annoying pride mixed with old-age melancholy, and nightmares of loneliness. He is crushed and crippled. He cannot even bring joy to his own young and eager wife; he is filled with the ailment of despair and with dark thoughts of old age. With his feeling of old age, rejection by society, and the illness which is apparently only known to his wife, he has such an impact on the lives of his daughters and wife that it could be counted as the cause of all the catastrophes that follow.

Atashi represents the failed and dispirited intellectuals of the time, who in search for an emotional shelter and a stronghold for his final days of loneliness is futilely going to Manijeh, a woman that has closed her heart to any and all simple and ephemeral excitements and pleasures. Doctor Sepanlou, represents the fake intellectual of the society. For him, consumerism, pleasure, fun, and power can replace all moral principles. He rides on the waves of current popular beliefs and stands on the platform of cowardice and banality moving towards the total annihilation of his soul.

Mahlagha is a girl unrestrained by conventional norms, yet behind her coloured up appearance, she has a simple and provincial look, and is overjoyed when her lover proposes to her. She and other women in the film are each caught up with their personal dreams and thoughts. The colonel's daughters are very

busy with their personal issues and they show no sympathy to his illness which looks quiet strange and mysterious to them. Their problems do not allow them to pay much attention to their father's critical condition. But apart from Manijeh, it is Maliheh that before committing suicide in her moment of desperation and disappointment with the doctor, after watching her father being taken to the mental hospital and maybe when she finds herself all alone and without any support – might have gotten close to understanding the nightmares and the dark thoughts inside the colonel's head.

Manijeh's character remains a mystery and is silent until the final moments of the film. In her unusual silence, she keeps a secret, which is not only the shared secret between her and the colonel, but it reflects the film's entire ambiguity towards her character, and this has more to do with her family's poor economic conditions and the kind of upbringing peculiar to that class which has made her maintain traditions and the healthy ancient cultural habits within her. She represents a large group of people that even amidst a chaos in morality and an egoistic hell manage to carry along their suffering sense of morality; and that is how she manages to disregard the temptations of a heated passionate love despite her innocence and inexperience, and does not leave the old colonel at all throughout his time of sickness and misery. The final sequence of the film where Colonel is given water by Manijeh, is a captivating moment that is masterfully portrayed by Taghvaei. It shows that Colonel actually exists on this earth is his weary love for his daughters and his maternal need for his young wife (Manijeh).

The black and white monochrome cinematography by Yazdi is distinguishable and cannot be ignored for its role in reflecting of the character's inner thoughts and the dark and bitter resonance present in the atmosphere. *Tranquillity in the Presence of Others* was initially banned by Iran's censorship authorities but released three years later and screened at the 'Shiraz Art Festival' for the first time where it received praise from Iranian film critics. The film also received an honorary diploma at the 'Venice International Film Festival' in 1973.

Parviz Jahed

The Postman

Postchi

Studio/Distributor:

Misaghieh Studio

Director:

Dariush Mehrjui

Producer:

Mehdi Misaghieh

Screenwriter:

Dariush Mehrjui (With
inspiration from the play
Woyzeck)

Cinematographer:

Houshang Baharlou

Composer:

Hormoz Farhat

Editor:

Mah-Tal'at Mirfendereski

Duration:

115 minutes

Cast:

Hossein Nasirian

Ezatollah Entezami

Zhaleh Sam

AhmadReza Ahmadi

Bahman Farsi

Esmat Safavi

Exatollah Ramazanifar

Amrollah Saberi

Iraj Raad

Year:

1971

Synopsis

The Postman is the story of a postman (Taghi) in the northern coast of Iran. Taghi is the central figure of a host of 'excessive' characters with simultaneously comedic and tragic insanities. Taghi, who seemingly suffers sexual dysfunction, evades his job to gather cure herbs for his doctor, a 'crazy' veterinarian, half-scientist and a half-philosopher figure who treats human and cattle in the same way. Taghi's mental health seems to have been disturbed by the 'no meat' diet and the cannabis treatment imposed on him by the veterinarian. He dreams of meat more than anything and obsessively carves and serves meat to local lord's guests. Taghi and the veterinarian both serve the lord, Niyatollah Khan: Taghi cooks and serves the meat of the cattle that the veterinarian fails to cure. The lord himself is not quite sane either. He is overwhelmed by the incurable disease that is eliminating his cattle. His happy zone is where his collection of antique swords and guns – relics of a past glory – are displayed. Everyone's miseries take a turn for worse when the landlord's nephew Mohandes Houshang Baharlou arrives from abroad. He insists to turn the family property into a pig farm – thus stripping the lord and the veterinarian of their means of living; and seduces Taghi's beautiful wife Monir – thus stripping Taghi of the last bit of dignity that kept him sane. Although Monir treats Taghi condescendingly for his poverty (as he cannot even pay for the house and is a fugitive from the bailiff who guards the house daily), impotence and clownishness, Taghi loves her. When he walks in on Monir and Mohandes, the last shrieks of sanity leave him; as he chases his wife in the woods and knifes her to death in the same manner that he had killed many imagined things at the sea shore.

Critique

Dariush Mehrjui's fourth feature film after *Diamond 33/Almas-e 33*, *Gaav/The Cow* (1969), and *Aghay-e Haaloo/Mr. Simpleton*, is an Iranian adaptation of the play *Woyzeck* (Karl Georg Buchner, 1873). Like its source, *The Postman*, displays sympathy with the downtrodden and seems to suggest that in a society based on hierarchies of wealth and power, the impoverished and powerless human being, whose dignity is pummeled on a daily basis, is prone to anarchic, murderous, and self destructive rebellion.

Impotence is the film's central theme and its main character's affliction. Agha-Taghi (played by Ali Nassirian) is a postman, a lowly delivery guy on a bike, in a small town somewhere in northern regions of Iran. He lives with his wife in a one-room shabby cottage. Under mounting financial and emotional pressure, he gradually disintegrates. Though his money problems are

pressure, he gradually disintegrates. Though his money problems are emphasized, the root cause of his tragedy seems to be somewhere else: the unjust social relations and their dehumanizing effects on a simple hardworking man. His sexual impotence also stands for his lack of will and his social powerlessness.

The opening shot shows Agha-Taghi in an almost blank state, staring into the camera, mumbling some incomprehensible arithmetic. This is also the film's ending shot, with added traces of blood on Taghi's face. For the most part, he moves and acts in a dazed state, staring and talking sheepishly, all the while repeating unintelligibly his digits and numbers. Nobody takes him seriously. On several occasions he is compared to animals. His doctor is a veterinarian. His wife Monir (played by Jaleh Sam) humiliates him: 'Idiot, works like a dog, day and night, everyone's lackey, all he knows is playing lottery.'

A picture of smiling lottery winners on his wall – that is the first thing he sets his eyes on when he wakes up. Lucky numbers are his permanent dream-world, but there are other numbers that make his life miserable. Rent is overdue, the carpet and the samovar are not paid, and his bike's repair does not come cheap either. Running from the bailiff is his daily routine. Nothing but a cipher himself, he keeps playing numbers.

Agha-Taghi complains to his doctor, 'My stomach aches, my back hurts, my head too... I'm aching everywhere doctor, my head swirls; I feel hungry all the time; meat is what I dream every night.' His no-meat treatment consists mainly of the veterinarian's experimental liquid-mix and a regime of cannabis that he fills his pocket with. When he constantly grinds his jaws on them, he looks like a silent, cud-chewing sheep. At one point, to demonstrate the effectiveness of his remedy, the doctor makes Taghi shake his ears ridiculously back and forth without touching them. Everyone treats him like a clown.

To make ends meet, Agha-Taghi also works as a moonshine manservant at the ancestral house of Arbaab (the local land and cattle overlord, Niyatollah Khan – played by Ezattollah Entezami). Arbaab's fortune seems also on the decline. His stock of domestic sheep is being decimated by an unknown disease. He blames the local veterinarian for his misfortune but nevertheless pays him regular visits for his own ailments. He has nightmares. 'A stroke is in store for you,' is the verdict pronounced by the all-knowing, sermonizing doctor. Arbaab is a comic-tragic figure; the last of a breed to be replaced by his cold, calculating, western educated nephew (Mohandes Aliakbar Khan – played by a young and expressionless AhmadReza Ahmadi) who has his own designs for the ranch.

The comic surface of the film consists mainly of the silent-era type: exaggerated characters in funny situations; the repeated cat and mouse game

between Agha-Taghi and the mortgage man; the doctor's philosophizing theatrics; Arbaab's warrior-like swordplay in front of the mirror; the whole lavish dinner sequence – a feast at Arbaab's mansion staged in an atmosphere of circus and pathetic dissonance; and many similar scenes.

But this comic layer does not conceal, and indeed at times accentuates, the underlying violence and tragic nature of the story. The lush natural surroundings of woods, rivers, and seashore, south of the Caspian Sea, are shot in grim black and white (by cinematographer Houchang Baharlou) where the threat of violence is never far from the surface. Very early on we see Agh-Taghi skillfully slaughtering a few sickly animals. He is at ease with knife and blood. With equal dexterity he cuts and tears apart a large roasted lamb at the overlord's dinner spread and serves it to the wild and hungry crowd. When in distress, he roams about the seaside, childish and menacing at the same time, sticks his knife in sand and shouts, 'Hit them, kill them, hit them, kill, kill.'

Arbaab always carries his hunting shotgun and the walls in his house are covered with antique rifles. Unlike *Woyzeck*, Mehrjuis' story does not take place in a military environment, but its location seems to be near army barracks. (We only hear the sound of soldiers' daily drill in the background.) Monir, Taghi's wife, beats savagely on Taghi's head in a domestic quarrel while he is lying defenselessly on the floor.

The themes of jealousy and sexual incompetence in expressionist dramas usually lend themselves to psychoanalytical readings such as fear of castration, loss of manhood, powerlessness, latent homosexuality, shame, and romantic masochism; all in a context of patriarchal family, disciplinarian or religious schooling, and rigid bureaucratic or militaristic working places. To some extent, a fascist and misogynistic psyche is formed within such a context.

But *The Postman* is not a North European psychological drama. Like so many stories of its kind in countries of the so-called 'Third World', it is conceived to be read as an allegory of a particular social situation, and characters are cast as social types. Arbaab, the local overlord, is the representative of a bygone social formation with its glory in decline, and the deadly disease ruining his fortune is nothing but the symbolic end of an historical era or termination of a native form of life.

Therefore, the theme of sexual inadequacy becomes something else entirely. Here it is anxiety over foreign (western) penetration, the pillage of not only natural resources but also defacing of the chaste native women – in the eye of the nativist man nothing less than prostitution on a societal scale. And the crime, the seduction-rape, both literal and allegorical, is committed by the western-educated and westernized nephew. Freshly back from abroad, with his German

fiancé at his side, the nephew is also meant to be a type, representing comprador capitalist mentality, or in recent academic lingo, 'the colonized mind'. He destroys ancestral structures ruthlessly. He is a modern builder: 'We demolish the stable and build a huge pig farm and a mechanized slaughterhouse with the latest advanced foreign technology.' His 'Swine Empire', will go up over the ruins of native identity and culture.

The doctor (played by the playwright Bahman Forsi) represents the intelligentsia with a social mission, writing prescriptions for all sorts of maladies. Arbaab sarcastically calls him 'the Savior and Prophet of the Age'. His rhetorical flair is indeed prophetic and as depicted by Mehrjui, his is a confused mix of tradition (quoting from and praising Avicenna) and modern science. Utilizing strictly herbal medicine, he champions a 'revolution in the science of psychosomatics' (sporting a ridiculous French accent)! His diagnosis is simultaneously medical, psychological and social. He thinks the land owning Arbaab is terminally infected with 'total degeneracy', living the life of bugs and parasites. The government agents want to take the doctor in as a charlatan, and indeed we can never quite place him between a total fraud and a sincere champion of the people with his heart in the right place.

But *The Postman* manages to be a lot richer than this schematic and rather simplistic allegorical exegesis. This richness is accomplished through the striking visual intensity and structural integrity of the film, where the writer-director holds it all together; the dual structure of satire and tragedy, or comedy and violence. One can point to many memorable scenes, some quite expressive even as still shots: the image of Agha-Taghi sitting in the centre of a small circle of lottery tickets, happily juxtaposing lucky numbers and smiling; or when he helplessly witnesses through a window at night his wife's seduction and surrender, and the camera, instead of cutting to what he sees in the room, gracefully pulls down and shows his trembling fingers holding three wine bottles, their colliding low sound indicating his whole shattered existence at that silent moment; or the image of Taghi, roasting lamb over fire, its reflection in his glasses, burning inside and staring desirously at the forbidden food. *The Postman* is quite successful in depicting visually the relation between indignation, powerlessness and violent rage; partially prescient about the pathology of events that took place five years later in Iran.

Abdee Kalantari

The Downpour

Ragbar

Studio/Distributor:

Mehregan Film

Director:

Bahram Beyzaie

Producer:

Barbad Taheri

Screenwriter:

Bahram Beyzaie

Cinematographers:

Barbad Taheri

Maziyar Partovi

Composer:

Sheida Gharachedaghi

Editor:

Mehdi Rahaeian

Duration:

120 minutes

Genre:

Drama

Cast:

Parviz Fannizadeh

Parvaneh Masoomi

Manoochehr Farid

Year:

1971

Synopsis

Mr Hekmati, a young teacher, who has been transferred to a school in downtown Tehran, is moving into the neighbourhood. He meets his landlady whose son has gone abroad; Rahim, a wealthy butcher who has helped him find his room; and a dressmaker who claims she used to work in an upper-class neighbourhood. Hekmati's future students make trouble by tampering with the cart that carries his belongings. At school they continue making trouble until Hekmati asks one of them, Mosaiyeb to leave the classroom. Later Mosaiyeb's sister, Atefeh appears in the school's office to complain about the new teacher. She talks to Hekmati, assuming that he is the headmaster, but when she realizes who he is she leaves. Some students who have been watching them spread the rumor that Hekmati is in love with Atefeh. The more Hekmati denies the rumour, the more it spreads until he finally decides to speak to Atefeh. When the moment comes, however, he has nothing to say, but that he loves her. Rahim, who intends to marry Atefeh, beats Hekmati in front of his pupils. The children who feel guilty decide to help him. Hekmati begins to exercise, but it is useless. He then realizes that some of his students work hard to earn a living, and that their mischievous behaviour may be the result of having no entertainment.

He begins to renovate the ramshackle school hall, but his colleagues decide that he does this extra work to relieve the pangs of unfulfilled love. The headmaster invites Hekmati to his house and introduces him to his spoiled daughter who knows a few English words and loves television. In his way home Hekmati sees one of his pupils selling things under a downpour. He also notices a mysterious bespectacled man watching him. As he is walking through the neighbourhood, the dressmaker asks him to accompany Atefeh to her house, where he sees Atefeh's sick mother. Atefeh explains that she is attracted to him, but she feels indebted to Rahim who has been helping her family. During the first ceremony in the school hall, the headmaster tries to get the credit for refurbishing the hall, and Rahim attracts people's attention by promising money to the school. Yet it is Hekmati who is hailed by the students. The outraged headmaster predicts that Hekmati will be soon transferred from the school.

Hekmati and Rahim lead a charity procession to collect goods for the victims of an earthquake. Then they drink together, talk about their love for Atefeh, and have their final brawl. Meanwhile, Hekmati's landlady discovers that her son will never return, and the dressmaker is visited by her upper-class customer when no one is around to see. Soon Hekmati receives his transfer letter. A colleague comforts him by saying he at least has done something that will remain, but Hekmati predicts that the hall will not last long. The next day, Hekmati, who looks devastated and injured, leaves the neighbourhood, walking along the cart that carries his belongings. The cart man is the bespectacled man.

The dressmaker encourages Atefeh to go with him, but she looks at Mosaiyeb and does not move.

Critique

Beyzaie made *The Downpour* at an early stage of his filmmaking career. Before this film he was mostly known for his plays which use Iranian performing traditions to reread Iranian history, myths and culture. *The Downpour* has a simple plot which explores the gradual improvement of the relationship between an educated teacher and his downtown school students in a traditional neighbourhood of the early 1960s. The realist surface is problematized by a poetic approach to dialogue and background, through which objects, actions, and relationships are at times loaded with symbolic significances. Beyzaie's major technical departure from mainstream filmmaking in Iran suggests an attempt to emulate the sense of space in Iranian painting and performing traditions, where perspective is of secondary importance and background is at times more important than the main action. Like a *ta'ziyeh* performance, the main characters are always watched by people; and like Iranian paintings, the background is there to suggest the of seemingly irrelevant events and evoke layers of philosophical meanings that transcend the realist surface.

A stranger appears in an unsympathetic environment and effects some change by the sheer force of his will and the help from some people. Yet since things are not what they should be he fails to fulfill his personal or communal dreams. At a psychological level, the film manages to reflect on the retrogressive nature of human personality, thought and experience, and the accidental nature of many of the events that form our identity. The dressmaker, the old landlady, and Atefeh's old mother are immersed in, or still live, because of their illusions, commitments or fixations. Mr Hekmati's love for Atefeh comes about through a series of incidents that are at times triggered by children. His determination to do something for the people is also the result of his psychological state as a man who has to prove his qualities before he is accepted by the community.

This aspect of the film adds an archetypal dimension to the action. Mr Hekmati is a man with a quest, a man whose personal quest for love results in a communal quest. As a stranger he has to prove himself before he can gain the hand of a local woman. Yet his position as a teacher and a man who sets difficult tasks for himself makes him similar to sacrificial heroes and prophets. He is a man with a mission, a man who takes it upon himself to cure the problems of his small community. The ending is also suggestive of this reading. The final scene depicts Mr Hekmati in a series of images that remind the spectator of Jesus

Christ climbing his path towards crucifixion.

The presence of the sinister bespectacled character in a number of scenes and the suggestion that Mr Hekmati has been injured also suggests Beyzaie's intentional arrangement of the background images to suggest the existence of an indeterminate Kafkaesque force, which working at existential, psychological, cultural or political levels keeps individuals under the anxiety-producing gaze of others and prevents them from fulfilling their potential or doing what they can do for their people.

The film heralds the entrance of a new kind of hero into Iranian cinema. The competition of an intellectual and a wealthy roughneck over the love of an intelligent but poor woman may become the allegory of the Iranian cinema or the Iranian society of the late 1960s. A major problem with the film is its length. Beyzaie has too many things to say and has not been able to decide which parts need to go. Furthermore, the mild satiric gaze at human nature and life that runs through its realistic approach to cinematography and characterization at times conflicts with its symbolic suggestions which demand a degree of stylization and artificiality. The music is also uncertain and at times fails to contribute to the creation of atmosphere.

Nevertheless, once we remember that this symbolic stylization is a feature of Iranian visual and dramatic traditions for projecting and heightening the inexplicable existential aspects of human life and death, it becomes easier to appreciate the occasional artificiality. In fact, Beyzaie's success in getting his actors into their roles, projecting the lively atmosphere of the neighbourhood and the school, and depicting the beauty and health of simple human desires and hopes makes *The Downpour* a unique film that like many of Beyzaie's later films introduced a new template to Iranian cinema.

Saeed Talajooy

The Gamble

Seh Ghap

Studios/Distributors:

Image Film

National Radio

Television of Iran

TELEVISION OF IRAN

Director:

Zakaria Hashemi

Producer:

Behrooz Sayyadi

Screenwriter:

Zakaria Hashemi

Cinematographer:

Behrooz Sayyadi

Composer:

Morteza Hannaneh

Editor:

Mehrdad

Duration:

98 minutes

Cast:

Naser Malekmoti'i

Bahman Mofid

Shahrooz Ramtin

Hosein Gil

Ahmad Hashemi

Yadollah Shirandami

Hasan Khayyatbashi

Morvarid

Shahrzad

Mahmood Bahrami

Mehri Mehrnia

Nematollah Gorji

Parvin Soleimani

Year:

1971

Synopsis

Borzou is an expert gambler who spends his life making money through gambling and stealing. Borzou marries a girl named Maryam (Morvarid), but even after the marriage he does not give up his criminal lifestyle. He continues to spend his time gambling, stealing, and slacking with his friends Ali Tatar (played by Bahman Mofid) and Khalife (played by Hassan Khayat Bashi) who take priority over his wife. He eventually gets involved with more dangerous criminals such as Assadollah Mir Ghazab (played by Hossein Gale), Mahmoud The Escaper (played by Shahrouz Ramtin) and Hossein Joo Joo (played by Ahmad Hashemi). Not happy with her new life, Maryam begs him to give up the gambling and crime for the sake of their unborn child. Borzou agrees to give up his habits but his reformation does not last long. Ali, one of his close friends, asks Borzou to help him to raise the money for his sister's dowry, which Borzou agrees to do, but he soon finds out that in order to obtain the money he needs to revert to gambling. Breaking his promise to Maryam, Borzou agrees to one last game. They are to meet at a crypt owned by a man called Jabbar The Beautiful (played by Mohammad Bahrami) whose job it is to steal the dead bodies and sell them. On the way to the gathering, Borzou stops to buy a doll for his unborn baby. When he reaches the cemetery the game begins. Initially things go well, with Borzou looking set to win, but then the competition starts to cheat. Once the cheating is discovered, the game breaks down into a fight in which both Ali and Borzou get stabbed. Although severely wounded, Borzou manages to escape the crypt and return home with the doll. The film ends with Borzou dying at home with his wife by his side.

Critique

Zakaria Hashemi, who was born in Shahr Ray and grew up in southern Tehran, uses his personal experiences to create a film about the life of scoundrels living in the city suburbs. As well as writing and directing many Iranian films, Hashemi has acted in several films including *Shab Ghozi*, *Khesht* and *Ayene* (both uncommon films in Iranian cinematography) and has written a novel (*The Parrot*) and some other short stories. The most important aspects of this film are the relationships and personalities of the characters and the ability to create tangible relationships in the life of scoundrels, without making a hero out of them. Nasser Malek Motiei, who was one of the best commercial actors of his time, arguably gave the best performance of his career playing this role of the

scoundrel Borzou. The terrifying ruins and grim cemetery not only provide an atmospheric backdrop for the crimes that take place in the film, but also reflect the ruin and eventual downfall of the gamblers themselves. This shows the level of insight the filmmaker has into these people and their world. The relationship between Borzou and his wife is based on instinct (for example he knows she is pregnant from her firm breasts) and shows his more emotional side and genuine desire to change his life for the better. The unborn child is a symbol of hope and possible redemption for Borzou while the tragic events of his life inevitably unfold. The fact that his return to gambling takes place at a cemetery shows that, by relapsing to his old ways, Borzou has sealed his fate. With this scene the film passes the naturalistic level and adds realism to the tragic fate of the traditional antihero. Tragedy is present everywhere in the film and, except for Borzou's wife, Borzou's entire social circle share his tragic fate. Though the filmmaker has created an honest representation of criminals, close to those he saw growing up in southern Tehran, it seems that the lack of technical possibilities has damaged the film more than anything else. The poor lighting, incorrect camera movement and the visual form in the film have undermined the consistency of the film. Hashemi as a story writer has opened up different methods in Iranian story writing as he uses telegraphic and naturalistic methods, like in his stories 'The Parrot' and 'Eyes and Ears Open'. But as a screenwriter and filmmaker, he could never utilize his full potential. His next film, *The Virgin Woman*, was a total failure in every way. His third film, *Tooti/The Parrot* (an adaptation of his own novel), which was confident and bravely naturalistic in the first part, was ruined by the last minutes of the film and caused the end of his activity in Iranian Cinema. However, Hashemi created a special type of naturalistic cinematography in Iran, which Seh Ghap demonstrates beautifully in terms of the atmosphere created and the relationships portrayed between the scoundrels and ignoramuses.

Saeed Aghighi

The Spring

Cheshmeh

Studio/Distributor:

Tele Film

Director:

Arby Ovanesian

Producer:

Arby Ovanesian

Screenwriter:

Arby Ovanesian (Based on the story 'Cheshmeh-ye Haftaz'/'Haftaz Spring' by Megreditch Armen)

Cinematographer:

Nemat Haghighi

Composer:

Komitas

Editor:

Arby Ovanesian

Duration:

104 minutes

Genre:

Art film

Cast:

Arman

Mahtaj Nojoomi

Jamshid Mashayekhi

Parviz Pourhoseini

Fakhri Pazooki

Shahroo Kheradmand

Esma'eel Khalaj

Hooshang Shahbazi

Faramarz Seddighi

Farhad Majdabadi

Year:

1972

Synopsis

The events of the film occur in an unnamed, remote Armenian village. A young woman who has an old husband (called Osta) has an affair with her young lover. The woman's husband's friend (Jalizban), who also loves her, finds out about the affair. The secret is revealed, and the woman commits suicide. Her husband buries her dead body in a pond in a deserted house. Her death mysteriously causes the spring in the village to dry out. In despair over the woman's death, the young lover leaves everything behind and wanders off into the desert.

Critique

Arby Ovanesian's *The Spring* (of the kind filled with water, as opposed to the mechanism) is one of the most controversial films in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema. *The Spring* is an allegorical film, loosely based on *The Spring of Heghnar*, a novel by Megreditch Armen, an Armenian novelist. By mixing the present with the past and reality with imagination, Ovanesian succeeds in transferring the poetic qualities of the novel onto the reel. The film premiered at 'The First Tehran International Film Festival' and the 'Venice Film Festival' but was not met well by the Iranian audience and film critics at the time, despite its stunning visual and narrative structure. The story and the characters were so complicated and somehow confusing for Iranian audience conditioned to the simplistic style of Iranian Film Farsi.



The Spring, Tele Film.

Some film critics felt personally offended by a said attack on Islamic tradition and values by Ovanesian as a Christian filmmaker. In their view, the director's choice of an Armenian village as the setting, made martyrs of the Armenian Christians, in contrast to the villainy of some the Muslims characters portrayed. Though it may seem a confusing plot, Ovanesian said himself that he was not interested in following a plot but rather tried to establish the almost abstract quality of the film from the very first scenes. The film is built around a dualistic viewpoint, as perceived with its themes of life and death, good and evil, light and darkness, love and hatred, innocence and peccadillo, faithfulness and disloyalty, and movement and stillness. But there is a unity between this duality. For Ovanesian, death is not the end of life but the continuation of it. Tilting up the camera on a giant tree is a metaphor for life and continuity. There are also metaphoric characters in the film. For example the old woman in black who is observing the death and life of the others, representing eternity and immortality. The importance of moral issues, such as sin and innocence, is one of the main themes in the film. The film covers the progression of complex the relationships of its characters, leading the central character (the woman) to desperation and

eventually suicide.

The tragedy of the film is the result of the conflict between love and the oppressive forces it has to encounter, which occurs because of the traditions, morals, and values that exist where the film takes place. Osta (the woman's husband) represents the traditional values of society; and if a woman is an unfaithful wife she betrays her husband and family and should thus be punished. Besides the external conflicts, there is also an internal conflict in the woman and the farmer (Jalizban) who is her second lover. They are both doomed characters who have a tragic ending. The woman combines three different identities: a mother, a wife and a lover. These identities are binned together despite their contradictions, but cannot last forever and finally they force her to kill herself. It is not just the men of the village who condemn the woman for her outrageous behaviour but also the women of the village who treat her similarly, and believe that she deserves to be punished.

The Spring is a sign of the faith and an eternal love which is reflected in the character of the woman and her lovers. The love triangle story has the potential to create a melodramatic tune in the film but Ovanesian avoids this by looking at the characters and situations with a cold neutrality. Ovanesian's obsession with Armenian culture and Christian icons is also visible. There are scenes that allegorically refer to Christian iconic figures, such as Judas Iscariot and Mary Magdalene. The woman who was condemned by the villagers for her forbidden love, and should in their view be punished, represents Mary Magdalene and her innocence, and the farmer who loves her but reveals her secret represents Judas. Ovanesian also refers to numbers, such as seven and 40, which have religious meaning in Armenian culture.

The influences of Carl Theodor Dreyer, Jean-Marie Straub, Ingmar Bergman and Robert Bresson's cinema is obvious in *The Spring*. Every single frame of the film has been designed with precision. Ovanesian's basic technique was to lock the camera in place in front of a certain scene, which has been carefully framed for complete harmony and balance, a noticeable occasion where the camera does move is when it tilts up on a big tree towards the clear sky which is accompanied by an operatic Armenian music. The music utilized within the film is atmospheric and does not follow a special theme. There are many long, static passages and the first shot (of a piece of paper on the ground) lasts just under a minute.

By pointing the camera on an object (like a piece of paper) Ovanesian encourages the audience to contemplate the image and to meditate on it rather than to accept it passively. As well as complimenting the drawn-out tempo, the camera manages to create an atmosphere with its stylistic cinematographic

technique.

The result is a film which remains obscure even to most Iranian film critics, who did not like its slow rhythm and failed to pick up on its messages. With its slow pace, Ovanesian has tried to capture the real rhythm of life, the actual time which a certain act takes in real life and memories of the past which remain with the characters. The creative use of sound is a remarkable characteristic of *The Spring* sound effects refer to specific meanings. The effect of the pendulum clock in the scene where Osta is dying, apart from its atmospheric effect, is in balance with the mysterious and ambiguous tone of the film. It also signifies the passing time for the dying man, and when it stops and is replaced by silence it symbolizes that he is finished. *The Spring* is a master work and a remarkable debut film from a filmmaker who came from a rich theatre background, and never had a chance to repeat such an artistic experience again.

Parviz Jahed

Tangsir

Studio/Distributor:

Payam Cinema Organization

Director:

Amir Naderi

Producer:

Ali Abbasi

Screenwriter:

Amir Naderi (Based on a novel
by Sadeq Chubak)

Cinematographer:

Nemat Haghighi

Composer:

Loris Cheknavian

Editor:

Mehdi Raja'ian

Duration:

113 minutes

Cast:

Behrooz Vosooghi

Parviz Fannizadeh

Jafar Vali

Enayat Bakhshi

Noori Kasraee

Mehri Vedadian

Hosein Amirfazli

Abbas Nazeri

Reza Rakhshani

Roohollah Mofidi

Year:

1973

Synopsis

Zaer Mohammad Tangsiri goes to Aghali Vakil, Abdolkarim Hajhamzeh, Abolgondeh Rajab and Sheikh Abootorab to get back the money he has given them before for investment. But they make fun of him and tell him that he has lost his money in the investment. He gets mad and decides to take revenge on them. After killing Abdolkarim Hajhamzeh and Sheikh Abootorab, he runs away and goes to town. He hides in a cafe and asks Baron Asatour's assistant, Esma'eel, to tell his family to get ready for a trip. Although Abolgondeh Rajab's house is watched by the gendarmes, Zaer Mohammad manages to shoot him to death. Finally, he joins his wife and children who are sailing away in the sea.

Critique

Tangsir is Amir Naderi's first colour, cinemascope film and an epic drama based on a novel with the same title written by Iranian naturalist writer Sadeq Chubak. In creating the film, Naderi successfully combined the twelve-page short story of *Zar Mohammed* (Rasul Parvizi) and *Tangsir* (Sadeq Chubak), a two hundred-

page novel. Although the movie was made in the framework of Iran's popular commercial cinema, thematically and stylistically it is a powerful work. When you compare the film to the book, Naderi's contributions become obvious. He delivers the story with artistic integrity and an assured sense of timing.

On the set of *Tangsir*, in the port city of Bushehr, in the landscapes of his childhood, Naderi found a way to personalize his work by relating incidents from his own life. Here Naderi comes into his own, for in depicting the frustration and repression that culminates in the brutal act of vengeance, he leaves the influences of Hollywood behind and finds his own unique expression of justice in the world of his childhood.

Tangsir's plot pivots on the practice, common in small towns, of Iranian peasants placing their meager savings with a consortium of men from the local wealthy, ruling class for investment. They are supposed to receive an occasional interest payment and may withdraw their money at any time. However when Zar Mohammed respectfully requests the return of his life savings from Bushehr's four prominent men – the mayor, the judge, the police chief and the leading merchant – they claim that his money was lost in an unfortunate trade. Zar Mohammed insists and pleads for the return of his money, but they laugh at him and throw him out. Since the men represent the law of the town, the only recourse available to Zar Mohammed is personal vengeance. In a masterful stroke, though, Naderi transforms the act of personal revenge into a universal expression of mass revenge. Selected for the 'International Delhi Film Festival' in India in 1974, *Tangsir*'s leading man, Behruz Vosoughi, received the Best Leading Actor award.

Bahman Maghsoudlou

Prince Ehtejab

Shazdeh Ehtejab

Studio/Distributor:

Tele Film

Director:

Bahman Farmanara

Producer:

Bahman Farmanara

Screenwriter:

Hooshang Golshiri Bahman
Farmanara (Based on the story
'Shazdeh Ehtejab'/'Prince
Ehtejab' by Hooshang Golshiri)

Cinematographer:

Nemat Haghighi

Composer:

Ahmad Pejman

Editor:

Abbas Ganjavi

Duration:

93 minutes

Cast:

Jamshid Mashayekhi
Fakhri Khorvash
Noori Kasraee
Valiollah Shirandami
Hosein Kasbian
Parvin Soleimani
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Directory of World Cinema
Firooz Behjat Mohammadi
Shadi
Mehri Vedadian
Mehri Mehrnia
Anik
Maliheh Nikjoomand
Mansoor Kooshan

Year:

1974

Synopsis

Khosrow Khan is the last remaining member of one of the largest ruling families of the Ghajar dynasty but now he has lost all his wealth through gambling and is suffering from tuberculosis inherited from his ancestors. At the beginning of the film, Morad his disabled ex-servant comes to him to get some money. Shazdeh remembers the past and revisits the memories of his ancestors. It is revealed that his grandfather was a despotic and brutal governor who kills Khosrow's mother with a pistol and then attacks his brother's house with a gang to get his share of the inheritance. He kills his brother's children and throws their bodies into the well. Morad, who has witnessed all these events, tells Khosrow Khan everything some years later. Instead of feeling horrified or ashamed, Khosrow seems to enjoy hearing about all the gruesome crimes even asking questions to find out more. Khosrow Khan's father was a soldier who ordered soldiers to brutally open fire on civilians during Iran's constitutional revolution. Khosrow was brought up among the women of his family and before hitting puberty, he gets involved in a secret sexual relationship with one of his grandfather's wives. But eventually the sordid secret is revealed and he is punished and tortured. Morad has been the couch driver for Shazdeh for years but he becomes disabled in a car accident (just when cars were introduced into Iran) and stops working for Shazdeh. Khosrow marries Fakhrolnesa, the woman who studies the historical books of his ancestors. She tries to make Khosrow understand that his dynasty has done nothing but sadistically kill and torture people during their rule. Gradually it is revealed that Khosrow also has the characteristics of a sadistic dictator as, after losing his power, he starts torturing his wife mentally and spiritually. He renames his maid Fakhri and tells her to spy on his wife. He investigates and beats the maid and makes love to her in front of his wife. Eventually submitting to the physical strain of tuberculosis made worse by her mental vulnerability after Khosrow's abuse, Fakhrolnesa dies. Khosrow Khan could never have a child. After his wife's death, Khosrow asks Fakhri to wear his wife's clothes and wear make-up just like her but the maid cannot play the two roles for him. Morad goes to Khosrow to inform him of the death of the family members and the last time, he informs Khosrow Khan of his own death. Khosrow Khan knows himself that he will die soon. He goes down to the crypt. Morad, finally having all the power, goes around the house and breaks all the pictures hanging on the wall belonging to the Ghajar dynasty.

Critique

The second film made by Bahman Farmanara, *Prince Ehtejab* is an adaptation from Hooshang Goshiri's modern novel, which was written using a stream of consciousness method. It has a terrifying unexpected effect from the past history of Iran and is one of the most important of Iran's new flow in cinematography. The film is the story of a part of Iran's history which is repeated in every other era in history.

Prince Ehtejab, Tele Film.



The film originates from the mind of a different generation of royal family and portrays the seemingly never-ending crimes of the Ghajar dynasty in different eras. The grandfather murdering the members of his family, the father murdering those who oppose him, and the gradual murdering of Fakhrolnesa (played by Noori Kasraei) by the son Khosrow (played by Jamshid Mashayekhi) are the sides of a triangle that encompasses the three generations of Iran's history. Khosrow, the representative of the most recent generation, seems to belong to the past and so in this new era (Pahlavi era) he has no power and is

belong to the past and so in this new era (Pahlavi era) he has no power and is reduced to gambling and revisiting his memories. His disease (tuberculosis), which is inherited from his family, and his not having a child shows his dynasty's demise, but before their complete downfall he needs to take some historical signs to the death crypt. The setting, music, and characters in this film, which is in black and white, analyze the brutality and power in Iranian culture.

There are many striking and unforgettable scenes throughout the film. The depiction of Morad's (played by Hossein Kasbian) debilitating car accident and Khosrow's reaction, the scenes of love making between the still immature Khosrow and his grandfather's wife, and the subsequent punishments they receive and the scene in which the grandfather smothers his nephew and stubs out his cigarette in his fist, are all powerfully memorable scenes in the film but there are many more. Like the tuberculosis, Khosrow's sadistic behavior is inherited from his family and both show great harmony with the hatred he feels for the people around him and the joy he has in hurting his wife, Morad, and his maid Fakhri (played by Fakhri Khorvash). As such, he is accepted as a multilateral and nefarious personality in the film.

The film was the winner of Best Tehran Film at the 'World's Film Festival', and was awarded the 'Golden Winged Ibex plaque' at the third 'Tehran International Film Festival' in 1974.

Saeed Aghighi

The Cycle

Dayereh-ye Mina

Studios/Distributors:

Tele Film
Cinema Services Developing
Center
Ministry of Culture and Art
Pishro Filmmakers Center

Director:

Dariush Mehrjui

Assistant Director:

Mohammadreza Bozorgnia

Producers:

Maleksasan Veisi

Bahman Farmanara

Parviz Sayyad

Screenwriters:

Dariush Mehrjui (Based on a story titled *The Trashcan* by Gholamhosein Sa'edi)

Cinematographer:

Hooshang Baharloo

Reza Ardalan

Editor:

M Mirfendereski

Duration:

101 minutes

Cast:

Saeed Kangarani

Ezatollah Entezami

Ali Nasirian

Esmā'eel Mohammadi

Foroozan

Bahman Forsi

Rafi' Halati

Mohammad Moti'

Ravesh Khalili

Farideh Sigaroodi

Mohammad Bakhsh

Kioomars Moshiri

Atash Khayyer

Jamshid Layegh

Marzieh Boroomand

Esmā'eel Shangeleh

ESMA EEL SHANGELI

Pari Amirhamzeh

Mahmood Sheibani

Year

1974

Synopsis

A young man, named Ali, heads to a hospital on the outskirts of the city with his old and sick father. On the doorway of the hospital, they came across Mr Sameri, one of the people in charge of supplying blood to the hospital. The father begs for money but Mr Sameri says to the father and son that if they want to become rich easily, they will have to catch up with him down the block at 6 o'clock the next day. The next morning, the father and son get on a truck which is carrying the donors to the laboratory. They do not know yet where they are headed to or why, and they do not get any answer when they ask. In the laboratory, when the father finds out that they want him to donate blood, he starts complaining. The son, however, donates blood and gets 20 tomans from Sameri in return.

Sameri asks Ali to work for him and to find donors for the blood laboratory. Ali accepts the offer and takes on the illicit job. With the help of Zahra, a nurse, and the hospital's driver, Ismaeil, Ali lives on for a couple of days by getting food from the hospital and selling it to the people in need in the deserted places. Ali's father passes away in the hospital. When burying the father in the graveyard, Ismaeil who believes Ali to be guilty for the death of his father starts beating him up in the graveyard. But Ali believes this job is a new start in life.

Critique

The Cycle, which is Dariush Mehrjui's fifth film and his second cooperation with Gholamhossein Sa'edi, was made in 1974, but due to political reasons it was not screened until 1978. The allegory used by the writer (Sa'edi) in *The Trashcan* which is the main source of inspiration for the film, is deeper and more concrete. Even the character of the main role in the film (Ali), who is an informant in the laboratory, is illustrated clearly. But because of the censorship, the espionage part is changed to Ali's ignorance towards his father's death and the quarrel in the graveyard is substituted.

The idea of figuring a poor man living on the outskirts of a city who changes from selling blood to taking other people's blood is Sa'edi's self-transformation

and applies social psychology to a deprived section of society in the city into the main plot of a rural film, the drawing of such images is Sa'edi's expertise. This time Sa'edi's character starts from a reaction, but despite in other films like *Agha-ye Haaloo/Mr. Simpleton*, *Gaav/The Cow* (1969) and *Postchi/The Postman* (1971), it does not end up destroying the character and humiliating the individual. In contrast, in a situation where corruption, destruction, and killing is the main focus of attention, he promotes and transports us to the place where the evil originates from.

The film is a new experience in Mehrjui's cinema, having a strange silence with no music throughout, a documental and factual vision towards the poverty of deprived society and a new idea of volunteers selling blood. His naturalistic wander in the outskirts of the city, hospital, and the laboratory shows a terrifying image of burgess in 1970s Tehran. Saeid Kangarani, the main role in the film whose mimic is close to Alain Delon, captures the spoiled innocence of a generation, with his tricky behaviour and smiles throughout. In the usual group of Mehrjui's actors, Ezatollah Entezami and Ali Nassirian fit into the roles perfectly. The colour film taken by Hooshang Baharlou, which was one of the rare colour films of that time in Iranian cinema, sets up the relationship of blood giver and blood taker by the dullness and dimness of the lights. Mehrjui's method of directing the film, by using excessive long shots and medium shots, expands the individual needs of the crisis in the film to the social ground.

The filmmaker's vision towards the medical doctors' society is a humiliating and critical view in which he shows the ridiculous ignorance of doctors and nurses towards the matter of selling contaminated blood. Even the opposing doctor in the film (played by Bahman Forsi) is presented as a clumsy person who is not able to fix his own car. The furtive sexual relationship of Ali with Sameri (played by Entezami), who is a pervert, completes the devil's circle of the film and is symmetrical with the killing of the chickens that are sacrificed because of their large number.

The Cycle was screened in 1978 for the first time after many years of constraint and was received warmly by the audience due to the revolutionary atmosphere of that time. It is the perfect pre-revolutionary film of Mehrjui in terms of style and expression. Like other films of that period, the tendency towards critical politics of the social layers is conducted allegorically; a way which can be traced easily and is touchable for an Iranian audience that is familiar with extensive censorship.

Saeed Aghighi

The Deer

Gavaznha

Studio/Distributor:

Misaghieh Studio

Director:

Masoud Kimiai

Producer:

Mehdi Misaghieh

Screenwriter:

Masoud Kimiai

Cinematographer:

Nemat Haghighi

Composer:

Esfandiar Monfaredzadeh

Editor:

Abbas Ganjavi

Duration:

115 minutes

Cast:

Behrouz Vosoughi

Faramarz Gharibian

Nosrat Partovi

Manoochehr Naderi

Garsha Ra'oofi

Enayat Bakhshi

Parviz Fanizadeh

Mastaneh Jazayeri

Mahboobeh Bayat

Parvin Soleimani

Saeid Pirdoost

Year

1974

Synopsis

Qodrat, wounded and tired, goes to an old neighbourhood in the southern part of Tehran. He enters his former high school to look up his old friend, Seyed. Seyed's father, who is the janitor of the high school, tells him that Seyed sells tickets in a theatre in the Lalezar neighbourhood. Qodrat goes there and finds out that the athlete of his schooldays has turned into a miserable addict. Qodrat asks Seyed to hide him out in his house. Qodrat lives with an actress of the theatre, called Fati.

Critique

The seventh film of the well-known and popular filmmaker of pre-revolutionary Iran, Masoud Kimiai, is certainly one of his best works. It is also considered to be the point of intersection between the ideals of communism and religious totalitarianism which turned into a revolution against the monarchical regime of Iran. The emphasis on the painted portrait of the first Imam of Iranian Shiites on the wall of Seyed's (played by Behrouz Vosouqi) room (the symbol of the exhausted power of mass) and his drinking scene with Qodrat (played by Faramarz Qaribian) (the symbol of armed rebellion by the communists) while wearing glasses (which constitute his ideological uniform) functions just like the famous symbol of the film's title credits; a dandelion crossing through the barbed wires. All this indicates a social conflict which has become integrated with the director's favourite subject; revenge.

Seyed represents the ignorant working class and is thoroughly under the influence of Qodrat, who is wiser and more of a seeker than he. Seyed is a drug addict and his friend Qodrat is wounded and on the run. Seyed reveals his rebelliousness and his conscious transformation by the way of sudden reactions, such as killing a drug dealer or beating his oppressive landlord (who are both symbols of the ruling puppet government and would certainly fall under the radar of social awareness of the average 1970s Iranian audience).

In a restricted society a popular film is one which portrays realities, and in its general sense, reality has often been limited to portraying the life of the working class in this society. In *The Deer*, setting and acting obey the same rule. The

sense of contempt and submissiveness of different walks of life in the form of those tenants at Seyed's house who compare their landlord with the killer of Shiite's third Imam (an embodiment of innocence in Iranian culture) also manifests itself in the affluent who distribute meat among the dwellers of poor neighbourhoods, even without stepping out of their car. Heroic adoration is one of Kimiai's favourite themes in characterization and leads to a combination of a 'western movie' style of comradeship with the 'socio-realism' of 1970s Iran, and tries for the poor and pro-justice heroes, just like in George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), to be remembered by his viewers as living tragic heroes.

In Kimiai's film, happiness could be reached only under the patronage of comradeship and tragedy. A young girl leaves her wretched house with hope of having a better future, but on her wedding day finds out that the groom is suffering from epilepsy. Qodrat as the representative of the audience's conscience becomes the eyewitness to this event through the window of Seyed's room.

The film's success at the box office and its pleasant socio-message for Iranian society overshadows the deficiency in storytelling and also the fact of Seyed's transformation in only a few minutes. The film was equally praised by both intellectuals and ordinary people. Behrooz Vossoughi was awarded Best Actor at the 'Tehran International Film Festival', but the film's producer and director were summoned to the security and information organization (SAVAK) and the version shown to the public was censored. However, this event helped to increase the popularity of the movie. In the original version, Qodrat buries his gun in a pot (as a symbol of transferring their battle to the next generation) and clearly alludes to the idea of fighting the police force as the representatives of the regime in power. One of the most important points in the success of *The Deer* could be because of the filmmaker's recognition of the typical Iranian viewer and the overcoming of his emotions and beliefs.

Seyed's constant begging to his pusher and also to a theatre actor for letting him show his power against Fati are scenes which instil great empathy with him from the viewer. Feelings of nostalgia are similarly provoked when Qodrat and Seyed go out drinking together. The epic and idealistic death of both heroes is considered to be the manifestation of the ideal of political activists in Iran three decades ago. Seyed is not a dying drug addict anymore but an avenger who seeks awareness and prefers to die at his home along with his friend in a shootout by the police, and at that very moment of choice and salvation, a pigeon sits on his shoulder. Qodrat is not a bank robber either but a communist militant fighting for justice.

As with Kimiai's previous works, the screenplay has been made up of pieces of a story which lack coherency (the scenes of Mohammad's appearance in the movie or Qodrat's dialogues about Seyed's knife, or the scenes of punching the wall are exaggerated and undramatic slogans). Between leaving an emotional impression on the viewer and close-up shooting, the director follows the first tendency and Nemat Haghighi's cinematography is light in movement, especially in Seyed and Qodrat's conversations which seem to be at a loose end. (The crane shots in Seyed's plain room are too exaggerated for such a realistic film that so successfully portrays poverty.) The film's melodic music by Esfandiar Monfaredzadeh and the well-known composition of 'Gonjeshkake Ashimashi' seems to be sufficient for complimenting emotions in this politically realistic melodrama which brings tears to the eyes of Iranians longing for words like justice and comradeship.

Saeed Aghighi

The Stranger and the Fog

Gharibeh va Meh

Studio/Distributor:

Rex Company

Director:

Bahram Beyzaie

Producer:

Mohammad Partovi

Screenwriter:

Bahram Beyzaie

Cinematographers:

Mehrdad Fakhimi

Firooz Malekzadeh

Art Director:

Iraj Raminfar

Editor:

Bahram Beyzaie

Duration:

140 minutes

Genre:

Mystery

Cast:

Khosro Shojazadeh

Parvaneh Masoomi

Manoochehr Farid

Esmat Safavi

Year:

1974

Synopsis

The people of a coastal village find an injured stranger, Ayat, in a wandering boat. He remembers that he was attacked by several people. Ra'na, whose husband has disappeared in the sea, finds a scythe in Ayat's boat. The elders of the village ask Ayat about the things he can do. Ayat can farm, fish, cut wood and build houses; but they are interested in knowing why his scythe was covered with blood. Seeing the unfamiliar scythe, he follows Ra'na to learn about the scythe, which, according to Ra'na, bears an unfamiliar sign. Ayat concludes that those who attacked him will come to look for him. He is worried, but Ra'na's quiet strength attracts him. Ra'na's in-laws are furious, and people disagree over what do with him. The elders decide that Ayat should either leave or marry a local girl. As Ayat is deciding, the camera follows the daily activities and rituals of the village. He finally decides he wants to stay and marry Ra'na. No one is sure if Ra'na is allowed to marry, but Ra'na has no desire to remain alone. She defies her brothers-in-law and tells them she will decide for herself.

Ayat who should now demonstrate his manly qualities uses his brain rather than his muscles to defeat his opponent in several competitions. The same night, he is attacked by several strangers. Fear spreads among the villagers. Ra'na's brothers-in-law and their henchmen arrest and torture Ayat to make him leave. Ra'na tries to save him by telling people that she accepts Ayat's proposal, but

now no one wants Ayat in the village. The same night Ayat escapes from his persecutors and hides in Ra'na's house, which is guarded by Ra'na's in-laws. Ra'na and Ayat make their marriage oath and spend the night together. The following day, Ra'na's brothers-in-law have to accept him. During the wedding ceremony, the lame orphan boy tells Ayat that two strangers have been looking for him. The same night wolves attack the village and Ayat encounters two men who ask him to accompany them. Ayat does not go, but then encounters a man who talks about taking Ra'na away. They fight and Ayat kills the man. When the villagers find the corpse, Ayat learns he has killed Ra'na's husband. Ra'na is now frightened. The villagers hold a purgation ritual to mourn Ra'na's husband and bewail the strange events that they associate with Ayat and Ra'na's ominous marriage. Ayat decides to build a house for the lame boy, but the appearance of five tall men stops the project. In a series of battles, Ayat and Ra'na kill the men. With every wound they inflict on them, however, Ayat also suffers. Ra'na is happy, but Ayat says he must know what is on the other side. Dressed in white, he falls into his boat which disappears in the fog. Once more Ra'na appears in black, covering her face with mud amid the mourning villagers.

Critique

The Stranger and the Fog is the first film of Beyzaie's village trilogy. As in the case of *The Legend of Tara* (1978) and *Bashu, Gharibe-i Koochak/Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1986), the film combines myth, history, folklore, ritual, and Asian and Iranian dramatic and ritual traditions to construct a series of surrealistic imagist statements about the existential, social, and cultural meaning of being human in general and Iranian in particular. By recurrently using circular *ta'ziyeh-like* gatherings in which the main characters have to perform, and by suggesting the circularity of time as a grand cycle of coming from the unknown and going to another unknown, Beyzaie approaches the sense of time and space in *ta'ziyeh* and puts this technical quality at the service of a philosophically and psychologically charged narrative.

Unlike the mainstream Iranian village films (rural melodramas) of the period, the film does not go to the extremes of idealized pastoral life, or seduced village girls and cruel feudal lords. Instead, it creates the new template of depicting an archetypal couple confronting a conservative community that has preserved its positive and negative traditional qualities. At one level, Beyzaie's deconstructive perspective confronts the stereotypes of womanhood and heroism. Ra'na's quiet strength and healthy desire for happiness confront the binary stereotypes of angelic/seductive femininity in Iranian cinema. Defying the assumed virtue of being a sacrificial widow, she confronts the ghosts of the past to celebrate an

being a sacrificial widow, she confronts the ghosts of the past to celebrate an undetermined future. The memorable scene in which Jeyran confronts her brothers to help Ra'na reconstruct her life is significant as one of the earliest expressions of anti-patriarchal sentiments in Iranian cinema. She defends Ra'na's right to remarriage and tells her brothers that her life was ruined because of their meaningless sense of honour. Ra'na's readiness to confront the five hostile strangers to save her lover also reflects a type of heroism rarely reflected in Iranian cinema. Rejecting the stereotypes of docile motherhood and shrill female bravado, she quietly puts her baby away to fight for her husband.

At the same level, Beyzaie juxtaposes Ra'na's missing husband and Ayat to deconstruct the stereotypes of heroism. Ra'na's husband, the idealized hero of the people, proves to be a violent boastful cheat; and Beyzaie's protagonist, Ayat is an unwilling sacrificial hero who has been denied the possibility of having a normal life. They are the victims of a cultural hero template that pushes them towards becoming violent hypocritical thieves or sacrificial individuals. To reflect on the process of this transformation, Beyzaie, here as in his later films, pushes his protagonist away from his normal state into an irreducibly ritualistic state where he is forced by circumstances to resist existential, religious, social, cultural or political injustice. This ritualistic paradigm which is there to enhance the emotional impact of the film and give archetypal depth to the tragic performance is fortified with the inclusion of ritual scenes and sentiments which are simultaneously celebrated and undermined. Like Siyavash, Jesus or Hessian; Ayat demonstrates his qualities and suffers for the sins of others; but unlike them, he is not aware of his destiny or willing to be sacrificed. Rather like Oedipus, it is his quest for awareness and his reluctance to endanger people that turn him into a sacrificial hero. Nevertheless, if we consider the deconstruction of the stereotypes of heroism as one of Beyzaie's main purposes, we have to acknowledge that the film undermines its own project. By emphasizing individual rather than collective transformation and creating a new kind of messianic sacrificial figure, rather than confronting the stereotype, Beyzaie reconfigures it.

Yet in its ritual nightmarish complexity the film suggests other readings and depicts human existence through Freudian displacement and replacement. Like all of us, Ayat comes from the unknown and returns to the unknown. Like a newcomer, a child, he is surrounded by the gaze of a social 'other' that reconfigures his life at every step by placing him in the middle of questioning circles of people. He then goes through several initiation rites in the competition and torture scenes and the spiritually and sexually charged unification episode. As in the ritual dance of 'Marriage in the Forest' which we see in the film, he

also has to fight with his rival to gain his beloved. He even has a social quest for helping the outcasts. Like all of us, who wish to be invincible, but have to balance our desire for eternal life with the inevitability of death and our dormant longing for oblivion and death; Ayat, the invincible hero, has to confront death and deprive himself of his five senses in his quest for gaining an awareness of life. As we see in the end, by injuring the five men, he injures himself. Ayat, therefore, is not a hero. He is one of us. The Kafkaesque forces of divine or earthly unknown that chase him wherever he is, may count as his five senses, which have made him, as a human being, capable of gaining awareness, while making him susceptible to death.

Beyzaie's film, like most of his films, is flawed. It is too long. The original soundtrack was lost, and Beyzaie's replacement is not what it should be; the make-up and costumes are not of the quality you expect; and the juxtaposition of realistic and nightmarish aspects at times prohibits the spectator from reading through several layers of meaning. Yet considering the limitations of Iranian cinema and the difficulties Beyzaie went through while making the film, it is a unique and comparatively successful attempt to create a sublime masterpiece.

Saeed Talajooy

Beehive

Kandoo

Studio/Distributor:

Cierra Film

Director:

Fereydoun Goleh

Producer:

Mehdi Mosayyebi

Cinematographers:

Hamid Mojtahedi

Fereydoun Reypour

Composer:

-- .

Varoojan

Editor:

Hasan Mosayyebi

Duration:

113 minutes

Cast:

Behrooz Vosoughi

Davood Rashidi

Reza Karamrezaee

Ezzatollah Ramezanifar

Parvin Soleimani

Ali Dehghan

Ali Sabet

Jalal Pishvaian

Abbas Nazeri

Hosein Shahab

Year:

1975

Synopsis

Agh Hosseini, who has been in prison for murder, is released with his inmate, Ebi, after seventeen years. Ebi is a defenceless, wounded antihero who has been told to commit a crime so he can get back to prison because nobody welcomes him in the outside world. Ebi and Agh Hussein meet each other one more time in a whore house and then they go to the coffee house. Next morning, Agh Hussein becomes the king of Torna game (the winner) and specifies Ebi's compulsory path. Free dining at all of those restaurants located a certain distance from the north to the south of Tehran, to redo what he was once unable to accomplish, seems to be somehow a kind of regaining of his ethical credibility. He does not accept any cheating in this game even on his own favour and he is strongly determined to prove himself in spite of being severely humiliated. He is beaten each and every time when he refuses to leave without paying. Badly wounded and drunk as a skunk, he ends in the same teahouse where he started in the first place. However at the final scene, we still see this dying hero, alive

having his hand tied to Agh Husseini's hand and heading to prison.

Critique

Beehive is one of the lost yet most glittering jewels of the street films of 1970s Iran. The third film in Fereydoon Goleh's Journey trilogy (the body's journey in the realistic and moving film *Under the Skin of the Night*, the journey of the soul in the intellectual and mysterious movie *The Mandrake*) is about a compulsory journey. *Beehive*'s terrifying and naturalistic beginning creates its own dreadful and motiveless heroic atmosphere. This intelligent introduction not only does not reveal the main verdict of the game but also portrays Ebi's (Behrooz Vousoghi) status against the conditions later enforced by Agh Husseini (Davoud Rashidi). Ebi is the loser of a wrestling match in which the winner is a dying drug addict lying on the bed of a coffee house. The filthy and horrifying atmosphere of the coffee house, their domicile, shows a clear picture of the hoodlums' parasitic life in urban society. The verdict of Torna (a kind of game played in Iran's coffee houses) for Ebi seems to be an excuse used by him to prove his identity. Mean and corrupt oldies nullify the verdict and try to turn him into a parasite.

Trying to run away from the parasitic life and to express his identity gradually becomes the main concern of the film and specifies the central character's aim. Going astray in public places like pubs, coffee houses, cinemas and whore houses, and a deserted house which is a shelter for Ebi only for one night, provides an unpleasant background presence and abnormal element in the surrounding merciless world. In spite of Ebi's yearning for justice and his serious humane challenge, the tragedy of Ebi's life avoids any epic aspect. The filmmaker has an unbiased and realistic position toward his film's desperate and lonely characters. Fereydoon Golle, who studied cinema in the United States, in a work which is a reminder of Martin Scorsese's and Jerry Schwartzberg's first movies, presents an exact and persuasive picture of the uprising of degraded bullies in an endless chain of unfair relationships and has made here one of the best movies before the Revolution.

The film starts from the day that the two main characters are released and it ends when they return to the prison during an artificial sunset at dawn. The main parts of the film that include those scenes depicting Ebi wandering in the coffee houses and restaurants happen at night. There may be no other film in Iran's cinema like *Beehive* which successfully manages to depict the night life of the city and the hidden crisis in human relationships. The night leaves destructive marks on Ebi's body but saves his soul. At the end of the film, though it seems Ebi will wind up dead, Ebi's imperative order for spirit reflects sarcasm and at

the same time there is an empathetic gaze of the filmmaker toward the disobedience of his hero.

During its public showing *Beehive* received lots of criticism and was not taken seriously. Some found it the awkward and indigent copy of *Swimmer* by Frank Perry, although this is not a good comparison. In the following decades when the films of Iranian cinema were reassessed, *Beehive*'s value revealed itself and the film found its place among the favourites of critics.

The film contains some of Behruz Vosooghi and Davood Rashidi's best acting and Varoojan's best work as a film composer, with one of the best ever Iranian songs used in a memorable scene; Ebi smashing the chandeliers in a well-known dance club in Tehran. In the next saloon, Ebi the popular Iranian singer ends one of most well-known Persian hits with the words 'call me beyond this dream hive'.

Saeed Aghighi

Still Life

Tabi'at-e Bijaan

Studios/Distributors:

Pishro Filmmakers Center
Tele Film

Director:

Sohrab Shahid-Saless

Producer:

Parviz Sayyad

Screenwriter:

Sohrab Shahid-Saless

Cinematographer:

Hooshang Baharloo

Editor:

Roohollah Emami

Duration:

93 minutes

Cast:

Z Bonyadi

Zahra Yazdani

Habibollah Safarian

Mohammad Alinaghikani

Majid Baghaee

Hedayatollah Navid

Year:

1975

Synopsis

An old railroad switchman lives with his wife in an isolated location in the north of Iran. Their son is away doing military service. One day, the old man is given a retirement notice and his job is taken over by a young switchman, and he is forced to move away, as his house is to be repossessed and given to his substitute. He becomes displeased with this but when he protests to his superiors, it is to no avail. And he resorts to drinking. Finally, he leaves his residence with his wife for an unknown destination.

Critique

The last film dissident filmmaker Sohrab Shahid-Saless made in Iran is based on a simple, gloomy Chekhovian plot. The oneline story takes place near the northern end of Iran's cross-country railways where an old track watchman has to face his retirement without understanding the change. An all amateur cast make the movie life-like and shockingly believable. The film portrays an isolated family of three whose social contacts are minimal and their worries for what lies in the future are universal. This was Shahid Sales' second feature film after moving on from stage-managed documentaries about Iran's traditional dances – a topic the talented filmmaker could not care less about – and a few experimental short movies that did not bring him the fame he desperately deserved. With very little dialogue and no music but the sound of friction between the wheels and the tracks, and very little excitement but an elderly

lady's attempts to thread a needle, *Still Life* managed to attract Iranian film buffs' attention, win international acclaim for the young director, and establish itself iconic movie clips which appear in more than a couple of post-Revolution Iranian movies. *Still Life* was subject to acclaim and received multiple awards including the 'Silver Bear' for Best Director and the 'Jury Award' at the '24th Berlin International Film Festival'.



Still Life, Pishro Filmmakers Center, Tele Film.

Behrouz Tourani

The Crow

Kalagh

Studio/Distributor:

ICDO

Director:

Behrouz Tourani

Bahram Beyzaie

Producer:

Bahman Farmanara

Screenwriter:

Bahram Beyzaie

Cinematographers:

Mehrdad Fakhimi

Bijhan Erfanian

Art Director:

Iraj Raminfar

Editor:

Bahram Beyzaie

Duration:

120 minutes

Genre:

Drama

Cast:

Parvaneh Masoomi

Hussein Parvaresh

Anik

Year:

1977

Synopsis

Esalat, a television presenter, encounters a missing person advertisement that attracts his attention. He believes he has seen the girl, but fails to remember where or when. This preoccupies his mind to such an extent that during the news, he stumbles over his words. At home Mother (Esalat's mother) notices his agitation. Then during a phone conversation between Esalat and his wife, Asiyeh; Asiyeh reluctantly accepts to join him in the weekly party of his colleague. During the party, the story of the missing girl is turned into a joke, and when an expensive ring is lost, the guests allow the host to search their

pockets. Asiyeh is furious and tells Esalat she would never come to these parties again.

Asiyeh's preoccupation is to teach at a school for deaf children, write the memories of her mother-in-law, and help her organize her boring weekly family gatherings. Mother was from an educated upper-class family, but her father went bankrupt during the late 1930s, and during the war she had to work as a nurse. Esalat discovers that the photograph and the money for the advertisement have reached the newspaper through a letter, and that the address given in the ad refers to a house that no longer exists. His friends use the newspaper photo to broadcast a missing person TV ad with Esalat's address and phone number. When trying to get home in an emergency, Asiyeh is trapped in a car and has to escape from a driver who intends to kidnap her. The frightening experience disturbs her mind, but makes her interested in the missing girl. She meets her parents in her beautiful greenhouse. They are kind-hearted and helpful, but seem to be ashamed of their poverty.

Mother and Asiyeh travel to the land of her memories, to the Tehran of the 1930s, to see places and people that no longer exist. As the narrator, Mother says that her beloved fiancé died during the war, that she had a short, loveless marriage and that she found and adopted Esalat in a chaotic hospital. Asiyeh, who is fed up with a colleague's implicit expressions of love, asks him not to leave flowers on her desk. But later she discovers that an orphan pupil of hers has been leaving the flowers to express his innocent love for her. In a moment of crisis, upset with annoying phone calls about the missing calls, Esalat's mother tears the notebook of her memories. During a weekly family gathering, Mother tells Asiyeh that she looks like her when she was young. When Asiyeh plays an old record, she is overwhelmed with memories, and when Esalat tells her that the girl has been found, she gets furious. Asiyeh feels that there is something about the girl that is too painful for her. She starts searching in the old districts of Tehran and talking to people; and finally while secretly searching Mother's private room, she realizes that the missing girl was Mother herself.

Critique

The Crow is Beyzaie's first subversion of the thriller/detective genre. The protagonist mirrors the scientific method of controlled experiment: trial and error. Facts are denied, distorted, or hidden and the protagonist needs to unravel the knots by re-examining the clues, images, old photos, street signs, and books to find out the truth. Yet the ideology of the presentation is mystic. As a product

of the fictionalization of scientific outlook and Cartesian instrumental reasoning, detective narrative organizes the hard-to-grasp clues and details of the plot to create suspense and glorify the objective mind of the detective. Beyzaie's film, however, subverts the game of intrigue and suspense by replacing the objective detective with a subjectively involved protagonist and establishing a co-relation between the core of her identity and the objects of her scrutiny. The clues/objects are provoking and disturbing. The genre is particularly sublimated when the climatic moments of discovery are turned into moments of revelation and epiphany that may change the course of the protagonist's life.

Like his later uses of the genre, in *Maybe Some Other Time* (1988), *Killing the Rabid Dog* (1999) and *When We Are All Sleeping* (2008); and unlike most Iranian films of the time, Beyzaie's protagonist is a woman; an intelligent and morally superior woman, who is confused by the behaviour of the people around her. She is characterized by compassion, forgiveness and self-control on the one hand, and inductive scrutiny, categorization and analysis on the other. The film begins with Esalat's curiosity about the missing person advertisement. But Asiyeh's honest quest to know more about Mother and then the missing girl and herself makes her the moral centre of the film so that her resistance against patriarchal conventions and inauthentic relationships reveal the viciousness of these practices. By putting her through different ordeals and juxtaposing her with other characters, Beyzaie foregrounds the type of problems that a woman faces in a patriarchal society, suggesting that the moral integrity of a society depends on the ways it treats its women and children.

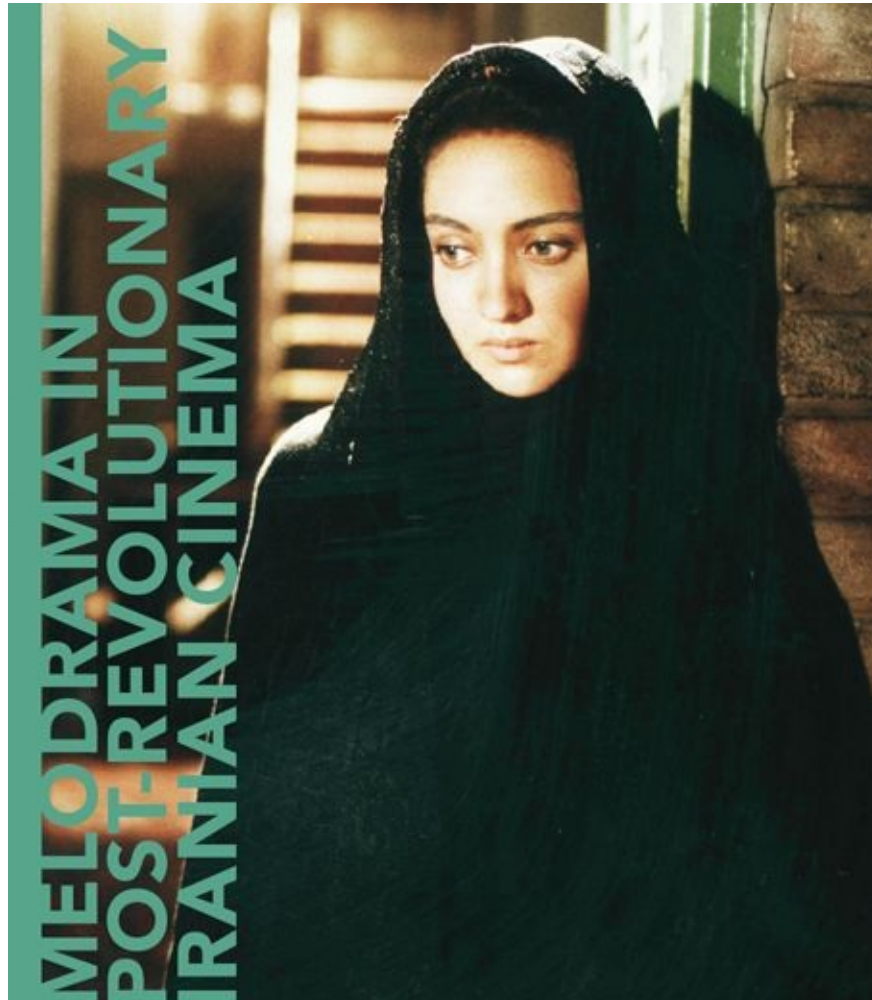
The philosophical meaning of time and space is a major issue in *The Crow*. For Mother, time and space are of the same nature. Her city, the old Tehran, is not the present Tehran; it is a city lost in memories. For Asiyeh, however, time is time, and space is space. She goes to the old districts of Tehran to see them in the present, but is also capable of imagining their past through Mother's memories. She is the bridge that relates the past to the present and fills the gap between two unknowns, the missing girl, whose youth was a victim of the Second World War and the old woman who mourns her youth. She is the one who can see the past of Mother in her present and make sense of the present by reading the past.

Another aspect of Beyzaie's attempt to refashion the roles of women in Iranian cinema and society appears in his depiction of Asiyeh's marital relationship in a world of rapid change, alienated hybrid identities, lost values and pretentious relations. Unlike her husband, the modern TV presenter, who is obsessed with reports without noticing their contents, Asiyeh's job as the teacher of deaf children makes her sensitive to signs and meanings. It is Esalat, who

embarks on finding the missing girl, but it is Asiyeh who discovers that the photo portrays Esalat's mother as a teenager. It is Esalat who is from a respected family and his name suggests authenticity, but it is Asiyeh, the daughter of a gardener, who understands the past. If the old woman, the brooding one who plays an unhappy trick on her adopted son, is the crow of the tale Asiyeh tells for her students; Asiyeh is the woodpecker that Beyzaie suggests we should all try to be, the one constantly pecking for truth. Esalat is immersed in relationships that keep him busy with superficial aspects of life: the indifferent collection and reporting of events or house parties in which the story of the lost girl is turned into a joke and guests are searched if something is lost. Asiyeh, however, is engaged in a metaphoric journey to the past, which may enable her to make sense of the present.

As in Beyzaie's previous films, background is very important. It adds symbolic dimensions to Asiyeh's quest for recovering truth from the past and projects frightening images of a culture in transition. This is particularly so in the expressionistic scene in which Asiyeh escapes from the driver. The billboard of happy female consumer, the covered faceless women near a Shiite religious relic, the shop with hundreds of clocks, the made-up faces of dolls, and old traditional buildings next to half-finished skyscrapers, all suggest the sense of living in a city ensnared in the extremes of modern and medieval mentalities, where people dangle among multiplicities of alienating extremes. The scene in which Asiyeh and Mother walk in the old Tehran is of the same nature, highlighting the interconnectedness of the past, present and future, and the misguided and conflict-ridden origins and results of Iranian modernity.

Saeed Talajooy



Sara, Farabi Cinema Foundation.

The story of melodrama in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema is interwoven with the story of women in this industry. Melodrama was the most common genre in Film Farsi cinema of pre-revolutionary Iran. After the Islamic Revolution and with the fundamental reconfiguration/Islamization of Iranian cinema, the genre experienced a brief absence from the screens before re-emerging and gradually reclaiming its status as one of the most widely produced genres in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. This chapter will examine Iran's most remarkable melodramas in a chronological order, highlighting predominant themes in each era, renowned auteurs, as well as major debates in the genre.

A note has to be made on the selection of films included in this chapter. Some of the films included here may not have been categorically referred to as melodrama. Generic identities, as most critics agree, are by no means fixed and melodrama is a genre where generic fluidity is particularly paramount. Many scholars have argued, in relation to Hollywood cinema, that melodrama goes

beyond a genre and melodramatic mode is central to much of Hollywood cinema. This essay has relied on a similar argument in its genre identification in Iranian cinema. A good number of the films mentioned in this chapter may have strong realist or socialist realist concerns that are traditionally known to diverge from the project of melodrama. However, it is their deployment of a melodramatic mode that necessitates their inclusion in any discussion of melodrama in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.

The Islamic Revolution brought with it fundamental changes to the cinematic discourse in Iran, from its politics of representation to its aesthetic modes. Melodrama was perhaps the most unsettled genre in this developing cinematic discourse. As a popular genre, melodramas of pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema usually contained abundant scenes of music, dance and nudity, which were considered by many Islamic clerics to corrupt the audiences. As a result, many Islamic clerics traditionally condemned pre-revolutionary popular cinema as a corrupt art. Thus, in the immediate wake of the Islamic Revolution, melodrama was treated with a tremendous amount of suspicion and was driven to the margins of Iran's troubled cinema.

The reconfiguration of Iranian cinema, now known as its 'Islamization phase',¹ involved a major rethinking of the industry and its objectives. The cinema that post-revolutionary cultural policy makers envisaged for the country was revolutionary, politically engaged, and committed to Islamic values. It was a cinema that reflected the realities of life for the underprivileged classes. Therefore, notions of cinema as entertainment were abandoned and the pre-revolutionary star system was denounced.

The problematic position of melodrama in the early post-revolutionary years was also due to the gynocentric nature of the genre. In the early years of the Islamic Revolution, representation of women on screen was strictly problematized as part of a more general attempt to purge Iranian cinema of its non-Islamic elements. Film Farsi melodramas deployed voyeuristic pleasure to entertain their audiences, and the cultural policy makers of the Islamic regime were determined to put an end to the treatment of women as objects of male desire. A new grammar of cinema had to gradually evolve which would realize the new regime's vision of a revolutionary, committed, and most importantly Islamic cinema.² In addition to rectifying issues of modesty on screen, this new cinematic language had to reconfigure the themes and the narrative structure of Film Farsi. Moreover, since most of the stars of Film Farsi melodramas had been either banned from screen or had fled the country, this new cinema needed new faces.

The early years of Iranian post-revolutionary cinema are little melodramatic

The early years of Iranian post-revolutionary cinema saw little melodramatic output. Despite their rather small number, melodramas of the 1980s focused on themes that were reflective of the concerns of the young revolutionary country and developed new aesthetic modes that would accommodate the social realism that was to become characteristic of Iranian melodramas in the coming decades.

One of the earliest well-made melodramas of the post-revolutionary era, *Emancipation* (Rasul Sadr-Ameli, 1982) focused on the life of an injured veteran of the Iran-Iraq war. The impacts of the eight-year war on family life featured in some other melodramas of the period, the most brilliant example of which was *Bashu, Gharibe-i Koochak/Bashu, the Little Stranger* (Bahram Beyzaie, 1986). The film was a realist melodrama about the relationship between a rural northern woman and a small refugee boy from the war-stricken south. Through its rather simple narrative, the film masterfully addressed issues of gender, race and citizenship, marking one of the strongest female presences on post-revolutionary screens thus far.

Women, although present in the melodramas of the early 1980s, were given marginal roles and had to wait for almost a decade to appear as well-developed characters that were central to the narrative. The few exceptions to this rule included Beyzaie's above mentioned film, *Bashu, the Little Stranger* and *The Mare* (Ali Zhekan, 1986). Both of these films had used melodramatic elements in combination with conventional codes of realism practiced in New Iranian Cinema. Both leading female roles in these two films were played by Soosan Taslimi, an actress who soon left the country and its cinema, never to return again.

Urban middle-class families provided a common locus for many melodramas of the period. Due to the limitations on portraying female characters, some narratives chose instead to focus on children. *Scarecrow* (Hassan Mohammad Zadeh, 1984) and *The Little Bird of Happiness* (Pouran Derakhshandeh, 1988) were both successful at deploying children to carry the weight of their plots. *The Little Bird of Happiness* focused on the problem of disability, an issue that had earlier been examined in Rasoul Sadr-Ameli's successful melodrama *Chrysanthemum* (1985).

The massive socio-political changes in post-revolutionary Iran, the uncertainty of the years to come exacerbated by a long and ugly war with Iraq, had caused many urban middle-class Iranian families to consider leaving the home country. As a result, emigration and its consequences formed another common theme of the melodramas of the first decade of the Islamic republic. Constructing emigration as a problem, these narratives would portray the equilibrium of the family disturbed by the decision to emigrate. The equilibrium would only be

restored when the condition of emigration was eliminated, either through the character's refusal to leave the home country, or through their return to the home country. *Search in the City* (Hojjat Ali Yousefi, 1984) and *Autumn Time* (Rasoul Sadr-Ameli, 1987) both construct emigration as a threat to the integrity of the nuclear family and by extension, the home country.

With Iranian society in transition from traditional family structures to modern ones, divorce became another favourite subject of the melodramas of the 1980s. The construction of the problem of divorce in melodramas like *Let Me Live* (Shapour Gharib, 1986) was very similar to their depiction of emigration. In most melodramas, the equilibrium of the family would be restored once the couple about to divorce gave up their differences and reunited. In *Helpless* (Alireza Davoudnejad, 1986), a wife leaves her husband because of his heroin addiction. She marries another man who takes care of her and her child; but ultimately returns to her ex-husband after he comes clean of his drug dependency.

Because of the genre's mainstream association, being labelled 'melodrama' has always meant much critical scepticism of Iranian films. Discussions about melodrama in Iran resonate with similar debates in the West; despite its popularity with Iranian audiences, the genre struggled to be taken seriously by critics. By the end of 1980s, what is now known as New Iranian Cinema was gradually establishing itself as a solid national cinema with strong counter-cinema and neo-realistic tendencies. In popular opinion, there already existed a dichotomy between Iran's art house and commercial cinemas. This dichotomy, however, was beautifully complicated when art house auteurs like Dariush Mehrjui and Bahram Beyzaie deployed melodramatic themes in films like the earlier mentioned *Bashu, the Little Stranger* and *Perhaps Another Time* (1988). Mehrjui's nervous romance *Hamoun* (1990) about a middle-aged man trying to write a dissertation about faith while looking back at his troubled marriage and his childhood, became a successful tale of the Iranian intellectual's failure to integrate in this fast modernizing, yet still deeply traditional society. The film achieved cult status in student and intellectual circles in Iran.

The incorporation of the codes of modesty that governed cinematic representation in Iran had initially raised fears that realism in this cinema might be seriously hampered. However, and maybe precisely because of the fundamental post-revolutionary changes to the grammar and focus of Iranian cinema, realism became a major concern for filmmakers, even in melodrama, a genre that is traditionally associated with exaggeration and excess. Social realism became a defining feature of Iranian melodrama, from early realist

melodramas such as *The Mare* to the more sophisticated films created in later years by directors such as Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Tahmineh Milani, Rasoul Sadr Ameli and later Asghar Farhadi.

By the early 1990s women had assumed a much stronger presence on cinematic screens. Limitations on what was allowed to be produced and screened were slightly eased and thus new and outrageous themes were allowed to be addressed in Iranian films. Melodramas of the 1990s featured more diversified, better-developed, rounded female characters; and the relaxation of regulations governing filmic production also allowed for the emergence of new stars. Among the first and most successful of the 1990s stars was Niki Karimi, who achieved celebrity status with the blockbuster *The Bride* (Behrouz Afkhami, 1992). Not only did the film reconcile Iranian cinema with the notion of stardom, it also re-introduced the previously taboo subject of romance onto Iranian screens. *The Bride's* success came not just because of its star appeal; the film contained the right melodramatic elements: a romantic relationship complicated by class difference, dilemma between vice and virtue, and the ultimate victory of virtue over vice. Two years after this, *The Actor* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1993) became a box-office hit; the film narrated the failures of a commercial film star, both in his professional life as well as his private life. Its straightforward narrative and brilliant acting, as well as some reliance on Akbar Abdi's own star image as a famous comedian, won the film both popular and critical acclaim and placed it in the expanding overlap between Iran's popular and art-house cinema.

The 1990s also saw the re-emergence of some directors aligned with the commercial cinema of pre-revolutionary Iran. Iraj Ghaderi, who had not been given a film permit for about ten years, made *I Want to Stay Alive* (1995), an immensely popular court melodrama that was based on the real story of a controversial court case in Iran. *The Encounter* (Mohammad Reza Honarmand, 1995) was another melodrama, the making of which was indicative of relaxed regulations in Iranian cinema. The film depicted the romance between a Muslim boy and a Christian girl set against the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq war.

Adaptations from foreign literature also provided successful melodramatic themes for Iranian melodramas. *Estranged Sisters* (Kioomars Pourahmad, 1995) was an Iranian retelling of *Das doppelte Lottchen/Lottie and Lisa* (Erich Kaestner, 1949) that won huge popularity with domestic audiences. Three years earlier, *Sara* (Dariush Mehrjui, 1993), a creative adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) had achieved critical acclaim and relative success in the box office. Despite the gynocentric trajectory that Iranian melodramas had

embarked upon in the 1990s, war melodramas were still popular. *Az Karkheh Ta Rine/From Karkheh to Rhein* (Ebrahim Hatamikia, 1992) focused on the lives of injured war veterans, their lost memories, and ideals in a post-war society and became one of the most popular war melodramas of the 1990s.

Towards the second half of the 1990s, women were becoming more and more visible in the narratives of all genres in Iranian cinema. Some of the most memorable melodramas of the period were essentially women's films, with very strong female protagonists and narratives that involved struggles that the protagonist had to go through as a direct consequence of being a woman in a predominantly patriarchal society. *Leila* (Dariush Mehrjui, 1996) focuses on the loneliness of a barren woman as she consents to her husband's second marriage. In *Ghazal* (Mojtaba Raei, 1996), a female writer's rendition of her grandmother's life gets juxtaposed with complications in her own life as she realizes her husband is having an affair. *The Bride of Fire* (Khosrow Sinai, 2000) portrays a young woman's doomed battle against the ancient traditions of her tribe that force her to marry her cousin against her will.

The diversification of female characters in Iranian cinema was largely thanks to a new generation of female filmmakers with concern for women's issues. Most notable among these were Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Tahmineh Milani and Pوران Derakhshandeh. Bani-Etemad's strong interest in social realism drove her to tackle outrageous themes like female sexuality and agency across a variety of social classes. *Nargess* (1992) located her characters among Tehran's underclass and beautifully and subtly portrayed a love triangle. *Blue-veiled* (1995) dealt with forbidden romance across age and class barriers. *Banooye Ordibehesht/The May Lady* (1998) portrayed the struggles of a middle-class single mother to reconcile her career as a documentary filmmaker with her personal life as the mother of a teenage son and a lover in a society where her relationship is viewed as taboo. Her later films, such as *Under the Skin of the City* (2001) and *Gilaneh* (2005) all combine melodramatic elements with acute social realism to arrive at some of the most memorable characters and melodramatic situations of Iranian cinema.

Tahmineh Milani started her career with commercially successful fantasies in children's cinema; however, her interest in women's issues led her to make melodramas that located women at the centre of their narrative. In *Hidden Half* (2001) a domesticated middle-aged woman reveals to her husband her eventful youth as a small town student joining a leftist student group in a Tehran university. *Two Women* (1999) focuses on the different trajectories the lives of two female students takes. One married a classmate and became a successful

professional, while the other, coming from a lower middle-class, small-town family, becomes the victim of the evil intentions of her psychotic lover/stalker.

Mohammad Reza Foroutan, the actor who starred as the psychotic lover in *Two Women*, had played a similar role in Fereydoon Jeyrani's popular melodrama/thriller, *Red* (1998). *Red* is the story of the troubled marriage of a young nurse with her psychotic super-possessive husband whom she finally kills in self-defense. While the protagonist of *Two Women* played by Niki Karimi, has little control over the actions of her psychotic lover, *Red*'s hero, played by Hedieh Tehrani, takes action and eliminates the evil threat to her life. *Red* was a major box-office hit; it established Hedieh Tehrani and Mohammad Reza Foroutan as new stars and started a trend of melodrama/thrillers involving much violence and strong female characters. Tehrani's role in *Hemlock* (Behrooz Afkhami, 2000) established her character's image as confident, relatively untouched by the events around her, seemingly strong, but deep down quite vulnerable. Inspired by *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), *Hemlock* is the story of the tragic love affair between a young nurse and a married man that ends in the suspicious suicide of the nurse.

Jeyrani's two subsequent films also followed similar story lines and were equally well-received by the audience. *Fire and Water* (2000) focuses on a prostitute's abusive relationship with her procurer, narrated from the point of view of a writer who accidentally gets involved with her. The prostitute, acted by Hedieh Tehrani, is finally murdered by her procurer. *The Last Supper* (2002) is the story of a love triangle between a university professor, her daughter, and her young student that ends in the murder of the professor and her young lover.

While tragic adult relationships were a favourite theme with melodramas of the late 1990s and early 2000s, teenage dramas also began to make an appearance in Iranian cinema. Previously a taboo subject, teenage romance and its consequences in the conservative society of urban Iran became the focus of early teenage dramas of the period. *Sweet Agonies* (Alireza Davoud-Nejad, 1999) centres on the romantic relationship between two cousins; and how the family finally learns to listen to their concerns and consent to their temporary marriage. *The Girl in Sneakers* (Rasoul Sadr-Ameli, 1999) focuses on two days in the life of a teenage girl: she gets detained for walking in the park with her boyfriend, is taken home by her parents, runs away from home, spends the whole day walking the streets of Tehran, and is finally convinced by her boyfriend to return home at the end of the day. Sadr-Ameli's defiant teenage character developed into an even more confident girl in his next work, *I, Taraneh, am 15 years old* (2002). The film narrates the story of a 15-year-old girl who gets into a

temporary marriage with her boyfriend, gets pregnant, and finally ends the relationship because of the boy's immaturity. Despite the objections of everyone around her, she manages to prove the legitimacy of her child, keep it, and support it on her own. Taraneh Alidoosti, whose brilliant performance as a teenage mom in *I, Taraneh, am 15 years old* had established her as one of the faces of the new generation of defiant teenagers in Iranian cinema, appeared next in *Beautiful City* (Asghar Farhadi, 2004). Focusing on the issue of capital punishment in Iran, the film depicts the romance gradually developing between the sister of a murder convict and his friend, as the two try to stop his execution at the age of eighteen. In addition to Taraneh Alidoosti, other young stars like Pegah Ahangarani, Baran Kowsari and Golshifteh Farahani, became the faces of young and defiant female characters in Iranian cinema.

Asghar Farhadi's next film *Chaharshanbe-soori/Fireworks Wednesday* (2006) was a very subtle melodrama that pleased the audience and critics equally well. With a well-crafted drama built around marital betrayal, the film rendered a realistic image of contemporary Tehran with its gender and class politics. The year 2006 also saw Rasoul Mollagholi Pour's hugely successful maternal melodrama called *M For Mother*. Starring Golshifteh Farahani, the film depicted a mother's sacrifices for her disabled son, whose disability was a result of the mother's exposure to chemical gases during the Iran-Iraq war.

Post-revolutionary Iranian melodramas are a far cry from their Film Farsi counterparts that had traditionally received considerable critical contempt. This is partly due to the reconfigured cinematic language that led to a general improvement in the artistic qualities of films in post-revolutionary Iran; equally significant in this development is the use of the melodramatic mode to achieve high levels of social realism, a quality that has helped the genre transcend its boundaries. The acute gynocentric turn that Iranian melodrama took from the second decade of the Islamic Revolution has also enhanced its realism, diversified its themes, as well as complicated the generic boundaries between melodrama and other genres.

Taraneh Dadar

Notes

1. Note missing
2. Note missing

Maybe Some Other Time

Shayad Vaqti Digar

Studio/Distributor:

Filmsaz

Director:

Bahram Beyzaie

Producers:

MH Farajollahi

Hushang Noorollahi

Reza Alipour

Asad Delshad

Screenwriter:

Bahram Beyzaie

Cinematographer:

Asghar Rafi Jam

Art Director:

Iraj Raminfar

Editor:

Bahram Beyzaie

Duration:

159 minutes

Genre:

Drama

Cast:

Soosan Taslimi

Dariush Farhang

Alireza Mojalal

Year:

1987

Synopsis

Working on the soundtrack of a documentary about pollution in Tehran, Modabber, a TV presenter, notices his wife in a stranger's car. He calls her to make some suggestive remarks, but she sounds indifferent. She is preoccupied with household chores and anxiously examines old photos. At home Modabber searches her wardrobe, but does not find the green dress that he has seen in the film. Kian's anxiety and her apathy to his sarcasm infuriate Modabbar. But unknown to him, she is disturbed by the familiarity of an orphanage that she has visited.

Modabber locates the owner of the car, Haqnegar, through Tehran's Licensing Agency. He has an antique shop. Kian is agitated, speaks quietly on the phone, and takes tranquilizers. Modabber gives her a green dress he has bought to see her reaction. She seems happy, but she says she is tired and wishes to sleep. He keeps asking questions, behaving like a torturer. Modabbar goes to Haqnegar's shop. The shop's basement is like a museum, filled with vestiges of the past from all over the world. He is struck by a portrait of his wife and asks for its price. Haqnegar refuses to sell it; it belongs to his wife. Modabber takes his wife out and finds two phone numbers in her purse; one is the number of National Registration Office, the other an orphanage. He keeps torturing himself with jealous thoughts. He talks with Haqnegar's wife Vida on the phone to arrange filming an interview at their house. Modabber tells Kian he thinks somebody is between them. Kian confirms by telling him she is expecting a baby. He is so bewildered that Kian thinks he does not want the baby. She utters words about a baby whom nobody wants and her fear of dogs. She has nightmares about being trapped in a greenhouse, a swinging bed, a medical centre and an orphanage.

Kian goes to her parents' house where they argue over their photo album. Modabber takes her to the antique shop, where she encounters her own portrait doubled in a mirror. She is overwhelmed with anxiety. Modabber confirms the arrangements for the interview at Haqnegar's house and takes Kian home. The same evening he faces a replica of his wife in Haqnegar's house. He calls Kian and asks her to go there immediately. When the camera crew arrives, he also asks Vida, a painter and a pottery expert, to put on her green dress. With Kian's arrival, the two women face each other in astonishment. As they make sense of the past by examining their blurred memories, the walls of the house open to let

the camera travel to a distant past when famine made their mother give up one of them for adoption. Modabber asks Kian if she wants to leave. She does. Haqnegar asks them to stay. Modabber says, 'Maybe some other time.' Outside, as a smiling Kian breathes a sigh of relief, Modabber gives her a bunch of flowers for her birthday, which she had forgotten.

Critique

Maybe Some Other Time is the second film in Beyzaie's trilogy of middle-class life. Like its counterparts, *Kalagh/The Crow* (1977) and *Killing the Rabid Dog* (1999), the forming principle is like a detective story. Facts are denied, distorted, or hidden and the characters unravel the knots by re-examining unfamiliar spaces, photos, street signs, and archives to discover the truth. Beyzaie subverts the form by replacing the detective with emotionally involved protagonists. Thus, the clues are psychologically disturbing, and the moment of anagnorisis becomes a Bakhtinian 'chronotope' which recasts the meanings of the events of the plot at realistic and symbolic levels. As Hitchcock does in *Marnie* (1964), Beyzaie violates the realistic depiction of time and space and uses metonymic close-ups of objects to enhance the sense of mystery that intrigues the spectator to read between the lines for psychological and cultural overtones.

Yet the film also carries a Kafkaesque sense of persecution by unknown forces. As Kian's nightmares suggest, she feels she is 'constantly under the gaze of others, from everywhere'. The language, the *mise en scène*, and synecdochic and metonymic camera movements suggest a surrealist layer that deconstructs prevailing beliefs about identity, reality, truth and love. Like Beyzaie's other films, the film projects a peculiar aesthetic principle, a form of stylization that some critics call theatrical or artificial. However, if we set aside our pre-assumptions about the dependency of cinematic reality on verisimilitude, towards the end, we find we have been through a life-changing experience that has presented more reality than most realistic films do. Beyzaie's insistence on turning mental images and nightmares into actual scenes and on making his dialogue as multi-layered and his action and background scenes as dense and suggestive as possible, turn his films into strong poetic statements, which communicate at various levels with different people. The actual plot may seem trivial, but suggestive parallel motifs create a master plot that addresses the totality of experience without any reductionist distortion. Thus Beyzaie's films are like musical compositions, formed on a point-counterpoint structure that introduces motifs and later inserts them into new contexts that help us reinterpret the story.

In *Maybe Some Other Time*, this parallel structuring relies on the juxtaposition of the apparent and the real. As in *The Crow*, this juxtaposition finds a meta-cinematic aspect by a self-reflexive process in which Beyzaie demonstrates how camera, photography, and the film industry have forever transformed the human sense of identity, time, space and history. The disintegration of Modabber's trust, the rising action, and even the resolution are all dependent on this transformation. So is the anagnorisis. In the last scene, for instance, in response to Haqnegars' curiosity, Modabber tells them about his wife, a significant dialogue that is doubled when the sound engineer of the camera crew replays it to check the quality. The same thing happens with the next dialogue in which Vida expresses her confusion.

Juxtaposed with the vestiges of Iran's encounter with the West in the antique shop, traffic jams and pollution, traffic signs and lights, masked people, high rise hive-like buildings, archives that preserve or destroy human identity, and modern inanimate objects that copy, reform, or reflect the human face or body; this self-reflexive process foregrounds the vicissitudes of an imported modernity whose models of being become disturbing when confronting radical cultural reactions. This is a world where cars do not let people cross the streets and answering machines fail to alleviate human suffering, where reality can be rewound, checked and reshaped by film editors, where the camera is 'a reliable witness'. This is a world of cameras, sunglasses and mannequins, whose uncanny presence augmented through synecdochic detailing, high-angle shots and close-ups question the possibility of transforming human identity by changing human appearance. The film, thus, offers a critique of the use of force or cultural stereotyping to change the middle class after the Revolution.

The looming fear of being an adopted child has made Kian anxious and unstable, particularly because her pregnancy entails the responsibility of shaping another person's identity when she is not yet sure of her own. This crisis of identity is a constant feature of Beyzaie's works. Rooted in a breach with the past triggered by imposed definitions, displacements or replacements; the crisis is usually resolved when the protagonists reconstruct the narratives of their identity by reconstituting their personal or national pasts, and reshape their lives by dedicating their energy to creative, constructive or educational work.

Kian is the only female protagonist of Beyzaie's works who does not work. Yet she has been trying to find work in an orphanage, and her double, Vida, has found fulfilment in creative work. When Modabber takes her to the antique shop, close-ups of ancient objects are inserted into the middle of the images of her encounter with her other halves. The inserted objects signify a history of power and war in which people, particularly women, are absent. Here she encounters a

painted portrait doubled in a mirror, signifying the two absences of her life: the mother that is her unknown past; and the sister that is her unused creativity. The film builds this history of silence and absence into Kian's character. Though she is doing everything to find her true identity, the plot chases her husband rather than her, a kind of action which is not common in Beyzaie films. The treatment also suggests the conditions of life and cinema at the time of production. Kian and Vida represent the condition of middle-class women when they had disappeared from Iranian cinema. Kian is what she is because the system has so distorted her representations that she no longer knows who she is.

Saeed Talajooy

Time of Love

Nobat e Asheghi

Studio/Distributor:

Green House Film

Director:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Producer:

Abbas Randjbar

Screenwriter:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Cinematographer:

Mahmoud Kalari

Art Director:

Mohammad Nasrollahi

Editor:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Duration:

75 minutes

Genre:

Drama

Cast:

Shiva Gereede

Abdolrahman Palay

Manderes Samanjilar

Aken Tunj

Year:

1991

Synopsis

Shot in Turkey, *Time of Love* is a romantic trilogy that chronicles the consequences of a love triangle between a woman, Ghazal, and two men – her husband and her lover who remain unnamed, from three perspectives as events are configured differently in three different versions presented back to back. The roles of the two men alternate depending on the version, as they take turns being either the husband or the lover. Time and space are transcended as characters travel back and forth between life and death from one parallel universe to the other. The first two versions end tragically with murders, death sentences and suicides, while the third version ends with no clear resolution, as Ghazal marries one of the men but confesses that she is still in love with the other. The husband runs after him but he finds the mysterious old man who has been ‘haunting’ the trio instead. The old man finally admits that he too is in love with Ghazal.

Critique

Time of Love is Makhmalbaf’s ninth feature film and the first of what he calls his ‘third period’. It has received little attention but it is important in understanding the shift that the director made artistically and ideologically at this time of his filmmaking. Makhmalbaf describes this period as one during which he chose to explore themes from a relativist perspective in contrast with his previous phases which were dogmatic and absolutist. Makhmalbaf, a very religious man, was an anti-shah militant in his youth and spent four years in prison prior to the Islamic Revolution. After he was released in 1979, he made several films that supported the regime, but at the end of the 1980s, his ideas began to change, and this is

expressed in the films he made during the 1990s and onwards. This does not mean however, that he is no longer religious, as he has said: 'I am more religious now than I was earlier. But my idea of God has become broader'. The director frequently quotes a fable by Rumi to explain his relationship to relativity: The truth is a mirror that shattered as it fell from the hand of God. Everyone picked up a piece of it, and each decided that the truth was what he saw reflected in his fragment rather than realizing that the truth had become fragmented among them all.

This illustrates that his idea of relativism differs from the absolute relativism that can be created by western postmodernism. It is rooted in spiritual concerns because the existence of God is not questioned. His use of imagery and ideas from mystical Persian poetry in his later films is nonetheless an indication of this more open approach towards spirituality. *Time of Love* is the first film in which this is apparent. The unconventional narrative structure, the use of the aesthetic codes of Persian poetry, and the manipulation of the soundtrack are formal strategies that the director uses to convey his ideas.

Another fable by Rumi, 'The Three Fish' is a possible source of inspiration for this film. This poem, like the film, divides its narrative into three parts, has three variations on the same story and three main (fish) characters. This tripartite structure is constantly reinforced in the film by triangular patterns; the love triangle, the trio of child musicians, Ghazal's (played by Shiva Gereede) mother's reference to her 'three experiences' of love, and so on. Showing these different perspectives is how Makhmalbaf engages with alternate realities. Images of the sea and of fish abound in the film, as in Rumi's poem. The ocean, the sea, and fish are all important symbols in mystical poetry. The ocean symbolizes God, and humans are drops of water who long to be reunited with the ocean. Fish also represent humans who can only survive inside the ocean.

Countless other elements in the film are inspired by Persian poetry. The name of the main female character for example (Ghazal) is the name given to short love poems. There are several birds in cages, which is a recurrent symbol that represents the soul trapped inside the human body longing to return to God. The feeling of unsatisfied longing and an unending quest for love that is embodied by the characters in the film is recurrent in mystical poetry and often expresses the soul's longing to be reunited with the Beloved (i.e. God). Human love is seen as practice for divine love, and the beloved is often a metaphor for the Divine. This is an important part of the Persian literary tradition as expressed in stories such as *Yusuf and Zulaykha*. In this story, Zulaykha longs for Yusuf's unrequited love until she understands that what she is really looking for is God's love, as might

be the case for Ghazal. The characters of this film can be seen as references to Zulaykha before she reached her state of illumination. Perhaps because none of them are able to reach this state, the film never resolves its conflicts. Another symbol in the film that expresses this spiritual immaturity is the children who are always playing in the street, or just walking by in the frame at any given moment.

Makhmalbaf has spoken of his interest in other religions and how they have shifted his outlook on life and filmmaking. His trips to India and Hindu mysticism were great influences. Traces of this are present in this film, as the characters seem to 'reincarnate' from one version to the other, and there is an image of Jesus on the wall of the court room. Makhmalbaf also conveys his ideas by manipulating the film's soundtrack which he often mutes or renders inaudible by disruptions, such as a loud train passing by at crucial moments. The value of silence (because words cannot express the love one feels for the Beloved, as this sentiment is beyond the limits of language) is a recurrent theme in Rumi's poetry. *Time of Love* may not be a completely relativistic film, but perhaps it was made purposely in this way to avoid what happens when relativism is applied too radically: it becomes an absolute. Makhmalbaf was able to circumvent this trap while still expressing his spiritual concerns.

Gilda Boffa

Sara

Studio/Distributor:

Farabi Cinema Foundation

Director:

Dariush Mehrjui

Producers:

Hashem Seifi

Dariush Mehrjui

Screenwriter:

Dariush Mehrjui

Cinematographer:

Mahmood Kalari

Composers:

Philip Glass Kamkar Band

Editor:

Hassan Hassandoust

Duration:

103 minutes

Cast:

Niki Karimi

Amin Tarokh

Khosro Shakibayee

Yasaman Malek-Naseer

Year:

1992

Synopsis

Sara is the story of a little woman's struggle in a man's world. Sara's husband Hessam (Amin Tarokh) is diagnosed with a rare disease, curable only in Germany or Switzerland. Somehow, Goshtasb and Sara are the only ones who are informed of the gravity of Hessam's illness and need for immediate treatment. Goshtasb, a colleague of Hessam with a dubious financial track record offers help to Sara. Faced with her husband's fatal illness and her father's death, pregnant Sara is left no choice but to borrow a large amount of money from Goshtasb. Knowing Hessam's strict aversion to a life built on loans and mortgages, Sara decides to keep the loan a secret from her husband. She forges her father's signature on loan certificates she gives Goshtasb, and undertakes three years of underground (literally) swing and embroidering wedding gowns to repay the loan with interest. Towards the end of her loan payments Seema – a potential candidate to replace Goshtasb's position in the bank under Hessam's management – triggers Goshtasb to blackmail Sara to influence her husband's decision, or to face the consequences of revealing her secret. Pressured under the weight of her signature forgery and fear of Hessam's rage, she tries to change

her husband's decision to take disciplinary action against Goshtasb, but does not succeed. Goshtasb extends his extortion to corner Hessam with implications of Sara's forged loan certificates, jeopardizing Hessam's upcoming promotion at the bank. Lashing out at Sara, Hessam exposes his misogynist views of his wife. He declares that he will let her stay in the house to keep up appearances for the sake of his career, but will not let an unfit woman like her raise their daughter. However, Seema – an ex-girlfriend of Goshtasb who had left him for a richer man in order to afford taking care of her poor family – rekindles their romance and convinces Goshtasb to leave Hessam and Sara alone. Relieved by the safety of his career, Hessam wants to go back to the happiness he had before with Sara. Awakened to the selfish nature of her disrespectful husband, Sara decides to leave him and the little woman, and learn to stand on her own two feet.

Critique

In an interview with *Majaleh Film*, Mehrjui insists that *Sara* is a family drama about one individual: a rebel woman (similar to the woman of *Hamoun* [1990] and *Banooye Ordibehesht/The May Lady* [1992]) in a particular traditional setting. Unmistakably, this film is void of the grand philosophical and social questions that *Hamoun* and *Banoo* beg. Mehrjui admits that with the banning of *Banoo* from screens, and cold reception of his non-commercial sketches by producers, he chose a topic 'that was more suitable for the atmosphere of the time, and could be realized within existing constraints'. This is perhaps why in this film the individuals are not caught in the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, materialism and spiritualism. Instead, the protagonists in *Sara* are defined in their relation to money: hard cash. Sara's (played by Niki Karimi) husband is a bank director, and Goshtasb (played by Khosro Shakebayee) is a corrupt bank employee. Sara's secret is about a loan she needed, to pay the costs of saving her husband. Seema (played by Yasaman Malek-Nasr) has betrayed her lover for money and is now taking his job because she needs money again. This film is about materialism; about objects. Despite the simplicity of the story, the film is not a cliché narrative and many stylistic and formal elements distinguish it as a highly aesthetized film.



Sara, Farabi Cinema Foundation.

Close-up shots are an example of the interaction of formal and stylistic systems within the narrative. Because this film is about the material realities of an ordinary family, Mehrjui has intended a central role for 'things' tangible. Props such as food, dishes, pearls and gowns, fabrics, cash, shoes, children (Goshtasb's, Sara's and Seema's young sisters) and the elderly (Aunti and Seema's old mother) who need to be fed, are as central to the story as are the illnesses that cost (those of Hesam's and Seema's mother), and health (Sara's eyesight), and happiness (Seema leaving Goshtasb, Sara keeping a secret) that pay those prices. Mehrjui constructs his film in a traditional setting where Sara struggles. Mehrjui takes the narrative through Tehran's bazaar; sets Goshtasb's aggression against colourful carpets, depicts Sara's agony as she wanders in front of glaring jewellery stores under rows and rows of white wedding gowns, through the corridors of Tehran traditional economy. Mehrjui explains that choice of close-ups was not only aesthetic but also formal, intended to emphasize objects as characters. He mentions the influence of Foucault's *Les Mots et Les Choses/English as the Order of Things:* 'During the day, one handles many objects. These objects have their own characteristics which influence the actions and behaviors of our characters'. Therefore, close-ups on frying food, choosing vegetables in a store, pushing a hand into a shirtsleeve,

sewing pearls and stones on white satin, transpire an aesthetic quality that also defines the traditionally feminine yet strong character of Sara.

In addition to close-ups, the editing and cinematography of the film gives this simple family drama its aesthetic rhythmicity. Like objects, time serves both a narrative and a formal function in Mehrjui's films. Using long takes and long shots, many sequences of the film are dedicated to Sara rushing in long passages, through bazaar, hospital corridors, bank corridors, the alley leading to her house, Tehran traffic, the house yard and basement stairs. If a dissolve is introduced in the movement, it is to give the film a rhythmic structure that juxtaposes Sara's delicate femininity in the stresses of time and the city. Mehrjui and his editor Hassandoust have paid particular attention to a 'mathematical' montage interleaving movement and stillness, both in relation to camera movement, and the movement of actors.

Sound and lighting are other aspects of *mise en scène* stylization. The sound of hands touching fabrics, chopping food, washing; the sound of characters footsteps, the clothes they wear, the ticking of the clock, the frying chicken and simmering stew, and especially the breathing of Sara as she runs endlessly between house chores and the city landscape, function in lieu of a mood score – which is entirely absent from the film. Like many other Mehrjui's films, *Sara* is shot under low-key lighting. The lighting on Sara's face, while bringing out the pronounced features of classical beauty of Niki Karimi, isolates her in a deeply dark background that emphasizes her loneliness in her troubles. Here again, Mehrjui exploits the red and black fadeouts – which admittedly are adopted from Bergman's cries and whispers – to communicate the mood and feelings of the character.

Sara is intended to be a simple story about a woman, who breaks from the isolation of her traditional male-dominated society, and gains her self-esteem in the process. The film is constructed linearly and with the formula of a classical film. It is the stylistic mastery of Mehrjui that gives it its avant-garde edge. In 1993, *Sara* won the 'Crystal Simorgh' for Best Screenplay in the 11th 'International Fajr Film Festival'; the 'Golden Seashell' of the 'San Sebastian International Film Festival' in Spain; and the 'Audience' award of the 15th 'Nantes Three Continents Festival' in France. Niki Karimi received the 'Silver Seashell' at the 41st 'San Sebastian International Film Festival' in Spain for acting in role of *Sara*. The screenplay is based on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879).

Najmeh Khalili-Mahani



Leila, Peyman Film.

Leila

Studio/Distributor:

Peyman Film

Director:

Dariush Mehrjui

Producers:

Faramarz Farazmand Dariush Mehrjui

Screenwriter:

Dariush Mehrjui (Based on a short story by Mahnaz Ansarian)

Cinematographer:

Mahmood Kalari

Composer:

Keivan Jahanshahi

Editor:

Mostafa Kherghehpoush
Directory of World Cinema

Duration:

102 minutes

Cast:

Leila Hatami
Ali Mosaffa
Jamileh Sheikhi
Mohamad Reza Sharifinia
Turan Mehrzad
Amir Pievar
Shaghayegh Farahani

Year:

1996

Synopsis

With the clash between tradition and modernity having occupied a place on world's consciousness for centuries on end, the plot of *Leila* not only addresses, but strikingly articulates this conflict. Reza and Leila, the young newlywed couple which take centre stage in the story, aspire to a typically modern existence: they are university trained, literate and eagerly subscribe to all the latest technologies. Yet the prestige and stability that this progressive attitude brings, and thus the allure of modernity itself, is soon eroded, as upon realizing that Leila is infertile, Leila's mother-in-law unleashes the force of tradition, and disrupts the marriage.

No scheme is too underhand for Leila's scrofulous mother-in-law, as we witness her machinations to persuade Reza to take a second wife who would be able to bear him a child, and hence maintain the family lineage. Unfortunately for Leila, polygamy is very much legal in Iran. Reza, in love with his wife and happy in his marriage, feels no need to consider a second one, but his good intentions are undermined by his mother, who through secretive visits, impresses the opposite opinion on Leila. She so forcibly avows to Leila that Reza is

desperate to have children that Leila submits to her mother-in-law and agrees that Reza take a second wife. However, whilst Leila has technically consented to this, her interior voice-over monologues and her escalating emotional turbulence reveal that she never truly accepts this. And thus, the film bewails the corruption of this young couple's once pure and impenetrable love; as their relationship unravels, we are reminded of the image of delicate petals falling away from a red rose.

Critique

Since the success of his film *Gaav/The Cow* (1969), which is seen as the first important Iranian art film, and the film which marked the beginning of the Iranian New Wave, Dariush Mehrjui has established himself as a vital presence in contemporary Iranian cinema. Though his career has been inextricably linked with his ongoing battle with censorship, and embracing a western intellectual influence, Mehrjui has more recently made films centring on strong female characters, the best of which is arguably *Leila*. In *Leila*, Mehrjui fuses an array of the most promising elements from his previous films – philosophical-moral issues, a western approach to gender, the formal qualities of an art film, and a controversial topic – leading to this film being hailed as his 'post-Revolution masterpiece'.

Through his careful aesthetic style, Mehrjui creates an environment that fully exposes how inescapable Leila's deference is. As Leila's mother-in-law begins her emotional assault, the two women find themselves in a wholly conspiratorial setting. As they walk around the pond, isolated from the rest of the company, Reza's mother's matriarchal influence weighs heavily on Leila. No one is able to challenge the mother-in-law; Reza's attempt is weak, emphasized by the fact that it is denied screen presence, and it is only rendered to us second hand.

Similarly, Leila's rebellion is silenced, and consequently only manifests in the physical details, which Mehrjui draws attention to. In this way, there is a palatable tension between Leila's apparent behaviour and her internal defiance. Her anger is conveyed to us as she dramatically breaks the pearl necklace that her mother-in-law hoped to appease her with. Representative of the manacles and pressures of society, as the necklace is shattered, the camera's focus on the pearls falling into the sink and onto the floor, stresses that this is the 'breaking point', the limit to Leila's tolerance.

Furthermore, Mehrjui utilizes an aesthetic of distancing, making explicit Leila's efforts to sever her connection to the familial dilemma. So whilst she has given her permission for Reza to take another wife, she makes her unhappiness

with the situation fully clear, alienating herself from the rest of the characters. Frames often show Leila alone, or in darkness, and Reza's question – 'Tell me, why have you turned cold to me' – is indeed a pertinent one, as Leila lies in bed, her upper body entirely covered in shadow.

Throughout the film, our sympathies lie with Leila, as Mehrjui subjectivizes formal elements of the film. As Reza's second marriage takes place downstairs, the camera cross-cuts between the celebration, and Leila alone in the upstairs part of the house. With the shots of the wedding party taken from an upper-floor high angle, the audience view the 'revelries' through Leila's eyes. Meanwhile, the mother-in-law is immediately assigned a villainous role. Not even ten minutes of the film have elapsed when, eschewing the fact that it is Leila's birthday, the mother-in-law directly talks into the camera, divulging that she wishes to see Reza's son by next year. This rather Brechtian device, predicting the lamentable turn of events, readies our compassion for Leila. But of course, it can be ascertained that she receives her comeuppance, as when the second wife Parvin remarries an old suitor, the mother-in-law is ironically now the one sidelined, left alone in the dark with a crying baby girl (much to her chagrin) on her lap.

There is much to warrant an optimistic reading of the film's ending, as the last scene mirrors the first scene, (the picnic feast at which Leila and Reza first met), thus evoking a happier time, free from complications. Thus, the viewer is encouraged to believe that there is a second chance for the couple. Reflecting on the existence of Reza's new daughter, a sense of hope pervades in the final freeze frame, as it closes on Leila's smiling face.

Najmeh Khalili-Mahani

The May Lady

Banooye Ordibehesht

Studio/Distributor:

Peiman Film

Director:

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad

Producers:

Jahangir Kosari Alireza Ra'isian

Screenwriter:

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad

Cinematographer:

Hosein Jafarian

Composer:

From the works of Okanor

Editors:

Masoomeh Shahnazari

Mostafa Kherghehpooch

Duration:

88 minutes

Cast:

Mino Farshchi

Mani Kasra'ian

Golab Adineh

Fatemeh Motamed Arya

Atefeh Razavi

Nayyereh Farahani

Baran Kosari

Leila Mo'ini

Ramin Rastad

Year:

1998

Synopsis

Frough, a 42-year-old single mother and a documentary filmmaker is successful in her film career, but faces problems in her private life. She is divorced and thinking about starting a new relationship with Dr Rahbar, a widowed man living with his daughter. But Frough's teenage son Mani is reluctant to accept his mum's relationship with another man in the absence of his father. This

results in a covert war of nerves between mother and son. Forough's life changes drastically when she meets Dr Rahbar. He proposes to her to get married but she finds it hard to accept.

In the meantime Forough's latest commission is to make a documentary film on 'the ideal mother'. She surrounds herself with videotapes on which women talk about the social problems they experience, such as the painful consequences of the war with Iraq. Meanwhile, her son is put in jail for being in a birthday party and fighting a *basiji* (a member of Iran's paramilitary force) and she tries to set him free. The differences with Forough's feelings become painfully apparent. While making the film, she experiences an upheaval and overcomes her hesitation about marrying Dr Rahbar.

Critique

The May Lady is completely different from Bani-Etemad's previous works. Her previous films were based on the renovation of real places and consisted of long chapters that in each of them time and place continuity has been kept. But in *The May Lady*, Bani-Etemad has tried a form of edited cinema and her film has been made based on the interweaving of three groups of pictures and a combination of these pictures with the inner monologues of the film's protagonist and the voice of the man who is in love with her and writes her letters. As a whole Bani-Etemad's new work could technically be evaluated positively. This centres on the continuity of the pictures; the transmission from one group of pictures to another is so smooth and justifiable.

Besides she has done a good job in her choice of cast and style of directing. There is no over-acting from her amateur actors; however it does not mean that do not act. Here there is a good combination of the use of the appearance and incognito of the amateur actress and her ability to act so delicately and sensitively. Particularly, Mino Farshchi has been successful in playing those special moments in the life of a career woman who is involved in an emotional crisis. The film shows her tiredness and weakness and the typical life of a female filmmaker, like Forough behind camera, while doing household chores or driving. Her relationship with her son (Mani) comes across as real and caring, especially in the scene when Forough is so exhausted that she goes to sleep on the sofa and Mani takes her shoes off.

At a deeper level, Bani-Etemad's inability to elevate social issues to a humane and philosophical level leads to the film's weakness. The contrast between the character's private life and her maternal role on the one hand, and her career as a film director on the other, is never put in to question seriously. This is also true

for the contrast between her comfortable life and the women who are the topics of her films; in other words the main contributors to her success. The autumn atmosphere of the story is in concordance with the woman's poetic and romantic mental status.

The director's ability in this film is remarkable but from a dramatic point of view it is considered a weak one. From the story's events it is not at all easy to understand how this woman can make up her mind about the continuation of her relationship with the man (Dr Rahbar) she is in love with and then come to a clear and definite conclusion. Dr Rahbar's very poetic tone in his letters to his beloved prevents us from recognizing his real intentions and the existing problems in their relationship. Their conversations never turn into a dramatic force in their relationship, which highlights their inability to make choices and makes Frough's anxieties real. Although the high volume of female interviewees' videos discussing their problems, are relevant to Frough's maternal status, they do not reveal Frough's feelings towards these issues and the destitute people. We never find out what she thinks about her video's subjects. Does it ever happen that she hates them or wants to continue her own life and get away from them for a while? Does living a rich life provoke guilt – are these women just there to help her make money and reach prosperity? *The May Lady* never questions such issues and that is why any real sense of crisis and psychological disturbance is never fully felt in this film.

Simplifying complicated issues is the main flaw of the film. For instance, it could be asked whether the sanctification of the mother that the film is based on, contradicts with Frough's right to fall in love and enjoy her own personal life that has been granted to her through her career as a filmmaker. *The May Lady* does not explore the complexities of such issues.

Robert Safarian

As Simple as That

Be Hamin Sadegi

Studio/Distributor:

Sooreh Cinema Development
Organization

Director:

Seyyed Reza Mir-Karimi

Producer:

Mohammadjavad Noroozbeigi

Screenwriters:

Seyyed Reza Mir-Karimi

Shadmehr Rastin

Cinematographer:

Mohammad Aladpoush

Composer:

Mehran Malakuti

Editor:

Seyyed Reza Mir-Karimi

Duration:

97 minutes

Genre:

Melodrama

Cast:

Hengameh Ghaziani

Haleh Homapur

Nayere Farahani

Mehran Kashani

Nastaran Ali Hamdam

Year:

2005

Synopsis

Tahereh, a traditional middle-aged woman lives with her husband Amir and their two children in Tehran. She is a housewife who devotes her life to looking after her family but instead she gets little attention from her workaholic husband and her demanding children. Amir is getting prepared for an International

Architectural competition, which encounters great sensitivity, because he is competing with foreign participants. Tahereh tries to make a peaceful atmosphere for him at home, while their daughter's trip on one hand, and their neighbour's wedding ceremony on the other, causes some difficulties for them. Tahereh has almost no time for herself, and the stress of her life has been taking a heavy toll on her. She has welfare, but she has little to comfort her mind and spirit. As a result she starts to think about leaving her family but she does not have the time to run away, and begins slipping closer to the point of emotional collapse.

Critique

As Simple as That, is a simple, attractive, and brave piece of Iranian cinema with a narrative that is predominantly based on a female character. Tahereh (Hengameh Ghaziani) is a traditional housewife who seems to have a good and comfortable life, but she is suffering from an affliction unknown to us. She appears very calm and collected but she fell into depression. A perfect housewife, a kind and lovely mother and a sympathetic neighbour, her dignified behaviour and nature and her sad equanimity resemble aspects of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's characters. It is a stylistically poetic study of boredom, loneliness, and the alienation of traditional Iranian women in modern Tehran. Tahereh is desperate for a change and has a plan to retrieve her life. So writing poetry is a way for her to get some kind of tranquillity in her boring life. There are a number of indications that this film is influenced by the work of Daruish Mehrjoui, particularly *Leila* and *Sara*, for example, its depiction of the many insipid and routine chores of a traditional woman in a modern society.

The narrative structure of the film is very simple and linear without any complexity. Time and place continuity has been kept and just like classic plays its story happens in one day. It is a simple story that contains no ups and downs. No external conflict exists as the main struggle occurs inside Tahereh. Tahereh is in a dilemma of whether to leave her house and husband or just carry on the life she has. Although cinema offers many ways to show a character's interior crisis, Mir-Karimi, has not applied them. One poem notebook and a few poems told by her are not enough to show her intimate feelings. It is also unbelievable that a housewife who has just started attending poetry class is able to recite Haiku like in a film by Kiarostami. Although the scene where Tahereh is waiting on the roof between the white sheets while it is snowing is similar to one of her poems, it does not make us feel that the snow exists inside of her. We do not really know what is going on inside this depressed and bored married woman

and what causes her anxiety. Her afflicted face and sudden cries, all indicate her secret pain and grief yet we do not know what causes this depression. Apparently stomach ache, poverty, and unemployment is not her pain.

Tahereh's intellectualism is not the same as Antonioni's or Bergman's intellectual characters who are suffering from identity crisis and self-estrangement. She is a typical housewife allocating all her time to cooking and looking after her children and husband. Rarely does it happen that she gets a chance to think of herself. Watching TV and listening to radio programmes are her only hobbies while she is involved with household chores and cooking during the day. Maybe the simplest way to show her inner feelings could have been the use of a voice over technique so we could hear the train of Tahereh's thoughts over the pictures, but perhaps Mir-Karimi believed this to be inadvisable for a traditional woman such as Tahereh.

In the first part of this film we see Tahereh alone at home, and in the absence of her husband and children she has taken enough time to focus on the details of her life and to introduce her character. But on the arrival of her children and at the end of the film when her husband enters the story, Tahereh's close connection with the audience is ruptured. The director's overemphasis on the couple's local dialects has caused a great damage to the film, because it is not relevant to the cold and grieving atmosphere and injects comic affection into the film's atmosphere. The idea of using a handheld camera was very brave and not only has it facilitated working in the narrow space of the flat but also has skilfully managed to inspire the sham sense of weariness in daily life. Hengameh Ghaziani (a newcomer actress) in the main role is outstanding and her performance is one the best performances ever seen in Iranian cinema after the Revolution (she won the award for Best Actress at the 'Fajr International Film Festival').

Parviz Jahed

Friday Evening

Asr-e Jom'eh

Studio/Distributor:

79 Cinema Organization

Director:

Mona Zandi Haghighi

Producer:

Jahangir Kousari

Screenwriter:

Farid Mostafavi

Cinematographer:

Hosein Jafarian

Composer:

Fardin Khalatbari

Sound Recordist:

Behrooz Mo'avenian

Editor:

Sepideh Abdolvahab

Duration:

76 minutes

Cast:

Roya Nonahali

Hanieh Tavassoli

Mehrdad Sedighian

Ramin Rastad

Shokooh ZandiHaghighi

Narges Safdarian

Roya Javidnia

Jaleh Sarshar

Mohammadreza Mansoorian.

Year:

2005

Synopsis

Sogand is a single mother who is rejected by her parents because of having a

baby illegally. Working as a hairdresser at home, she earns money and raises her 15-year-old son (Omid) independently. The contrast and differences between Sogand and her son has caused him to turn into a rebellious and vicious young man. Sogand leaves his son who has been thrown out of school with Hadi who is a mechanic. Even though there is an age difference between Omid and Hadi, Omid becomes friends with Hadi and confides in him. One day when Sogand is getting her customers ready, she becomes very disturbed when a newcomer named Banafesheh enters and it becomes evident that Banafesheh is her sister. Banafesheh tells her that their father is very ill, and wants to see Sogand after all these years. Sogand tells Banafesheh to go away, but she is insistent to return her sister to the family once more.

Sogand creates an imaginary father for her son and makes him believe that his father has gone to Japan to work and the fact is veiled as a secret for fifteen years. At the time when Sogand reveals the truth to her younger sister and to her son, she is confronted with a harsh reaction from her son who has been waiting for years for his father to come back from Japan. Omid ends up at the reformation and training centre and Sogand is caught between staying or leaving.

Critique

Friday Evening is Mona Zandi's debut feature film and like other films made by Iranian female filmmakers in recent years, it deals with some taboos and red lines which are defined by Iranian film censorship in terms of social affairs; such as rape, betray, abortion, prostitution, running-away women and homosexuality. *Friday Evening* has broken some taboos and over passed the red lines in Iranian cinema by focusing on incest and the traumatic story of a woman (Sogand) who is raped by her uncle. The fact that a woman has a son which reminds her of the trauma of rape is a terrifying and painful story which has never been depicted in Iranian Cinema.

As a former assistant of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Mona Zandi adopts the same realistic style and social approach towards the lives of the lower-class families in Iran which is the main characteristic of Bani-Etemad's films. Although the film lacks the exciting actions and peaks and crises, the great processing of the film gets the audience involved. This is done without wasting much time on episodes, talking too much or exaggerating. Zandi wisely does not show Sogand's father and her cheating boyfriend (Nader), who have determinant roles in the development of the story. The relationship between the lonely mother and the bad tempered and wicked son is developed very well; however, the relationship reminds one of the mother and son relationship in *Banooye Ordibehesht/The*

May Lady (Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, 1998).

Zandi's work experience as a film editor, has taught her how to cut footage crucially, therefore the rhythm and tempo is precisely appointed. For instance the scene where the two sisters meet each other and Banafsheh insists Sogand return to the family is immediately cut to a scene where Omid is eating in a cafe and discussions are going on about Omid's going back home. The camera movement and the *mise en scènes* are designed very well especially in the last sequence where in penitentiary Omid's back is to the camera and looking toward a window. Then Sogand comes in and stands beside him talking. This is a very well designed *mise en scène* that shows the dramatic situation of Sogand and his son.

At the 'Women's Filmmakers Festival in Cologne' ('Feminale') in 2006 where *Friday Evening* was shown, Zandi mentioned that in order to get permission to show the film in Iran, she had to cut some scenes like epilating and Sogand's wearing a wig. In reply to this question, why women in Iran are shown as covered even at home, Zandi said, 'Hijab or covering the hair in Iran is a law and all the filmmakers are obliged to observe this law. Therefore, all the women in Iranian films are covered even in their homes.' *Friday Evening* was finally released in December 2010 after a four year ban in Iran thanks to the new cultural policy of Ahmadinejad's government.

Parviz Jahed

Fireworks Wednesday

Chaharshanbe-soori

Studio/Distributor:

Boshra Film

Director:

Asghar Farhadi

Producer:

Sayed Jamal Sadatian

Screenwriters:

Asghar Farhadi Mani Haghighi

Cinematographer:

Hossein Djafarian

Art Director:

Hossein Majd

Editor:

Haydeh Safi-Yari

Duration:

102 minutes

Genre:

Drama

Cast:

Hedye Tehrani

Taraneh Alidoosti

Hamid Farokhnezhad

Pantea Bahrami

Mehran Mahram

Year:

2006

Synopsis

On the first day of her new job as a cleaning lady, Rouhi, a young woman about to be married, finds herself in the midst of a crisis in the home where she is to work. The woman of the house, Mojdeh, has accused her husband Morteza of infidelity with a neighbour, something he vehemently denies but which the perceived knowledge she has gleaned from spying leads her to fervently believe. Whether true or false, the accusations and suspicions cause an increasingly marked rift in their marriage, and Rouhi is drawn further and further into their turmoil and recriminations, as she is torn between husband, wife, and their young son.

Critique

Fireworks Wednesday is the third feature by Asghar Farhadi, and marks a dramatic change from his earlier films *Raghs dar ghobar/Dancing in the Dust* (2003) and *Shah-re ziba/The Beautiful City* (2004). Where these films were variously built around isolated, alienated and oppressed men, *Fireworks Wednesday* (co-scripted by the director Mani Haghighi) features a naive, unassuming, happy-go-lucky female protagonist, Rouhi, who must navigate the maelstrom of a middle-class home and the disintegration of a marriage and a family. What unites Farhadi's burgeoning oeuvre, linking this film with his earlier features (and shorts), is its use of a single protagonist who anchors the narrative and acts as a door into and a mirror on an increasingly complex and fragmented world. Like Dostoevsky's titular idiot, he depicts insular, microcosmic worlds that come into focus through the contrastive consciousness of a character who remains an outsider looking in.

This fracture in action and focalizing perspective in *Fireworks Wednesday* is but one of a series of parallels and mirror images that structure and animate its narrative. Chief in this regard is the 20 March timeline of the film's action. Like Jafar Panahi's debut *Badkonake sefid/The White Balloon* (1995), *Fireworks Wednesday* is set on the cusp of Iran's New Year holiday festivities on 21 March, and similarly uses the backdrop of this impending celebration to throw the central drama into sharp relief. It is a national rebirth and new beginning, but also a personal one for the young protagonist Rouhi, who is about to embark on marriage and a significant new chapter in her life. But the world she stumbles into revolves only around endings, around finality and closure. The lives of the couple that she comes to clean for are as broken and disordered as their flat, something that is ultimately further offset by the proliferation of celebrations in the city outside, a literal explosion of fire and fireworks to match the figurative pyrotechnics taking place behind not so-closed doors.

In the annals of Iranian cinema, certainly its prestigious art cinema, films about couples and marriage have been relatively rare, with either men or, much more common, women occupying a narrative and thematic centre. Slightly but perceptibly, this has begun to change in recent years, with films like *Gagooman/The Twilight* (Mohammad Rasoulof, 2002), *20 Angosht/20 fingers* (Mania Akbari, 2004) and *Party* (Saman Maghadam, 2000) focusing on the complexities of relationships in modern Iran. Generally the line of inquiry and locus of drama and conflict in these works involves tradition and the complex gender politics of Iranian social specificity. *Fireworks Wednesday*, by way of contrast, largely forgoes such an examination; instead stressing the universality of the desperate situation that is depicted, wherein the personal feelings and

emotions of the couple Mojdeh and Morteza revolve almost entirely around those that are fundamentally human: anger, betrayal, shame and personal humiliation. Indeed, as if to underline the challenge inherent in this film to Iranian social customs, Farhadi and Haghghi include a running motif centred on Rouhi's chador. The narrative begins with a lightly comic scene featuring the protagonist and her fiancé on a motorbike, during which said headscarf becomes trapped in the wheels and almost causes an accident whilst they are driving. Subsequently, Mojdeh borrows the same chador when she follows Morteza to work and confronts him in the street; and it is this particular detail that most angers her husband, to the extent that he behaves unlike himself and openly beats and shames her in public.

Here, then, is another prominent mirror image at the heart of the film: that of comedy and tragedy connected by the item of traditional headwear. The notion of the oppressiveness of Islamic tradition is thus raised only to be questioned and problematized, as a significant contributory factor in marital discord. This it does by way of, respectively, the comedy of the former scene and the uncharacteristically violent outburst in the latter, the fact that Morteza's public display contrasts with his private self.

Ultimately, as the motif of spying early in the film indicates, *Fireworks Wednesday* is about knowledge – of oneself, of others, and of the symbiosis between the two: how one's social, inter-personal interactions and relationships colour personal feelings and identity. From this point of view, the film's pensive, ruminative final moments are especially apposite. They posit two distinct post-scripts, two variant visions in which the respective futures of the different characters are tentatively poised, balanced as they are on what each person believes about, and has emotionally invested in, their partners. It is a fitting denouement for a film that subtly challenges preconceptions, perceived knowledge, of modern Iranian cinema and indeed modern Iran, its traditions, society and customs.

Adam Bingham

Mainline

Khoon bazi

Studio/Distributor:

Cinema 79

Directors:

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad Mohsen Abdolvahab

Producers:

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad Jahangir Kosari

Screenwriters:

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad Mohsen Abdolvahab

Cinematographer:

Mahmoud Kalari

Art Director:

Zhila Mehrjui

Editor:

Sepideh Abdolvahab

Duration:

78 minutes

Genres:

Drama

Drug addiction

Cast:

Baran Kosari

Bitra Farahi

Bahram Radan

Masoud Rayegany

Year:

2006

Synopsis

Sara is a young, middle-class woman, engaged to Arash, a young professional Iranian living temporarily in Canada. But while she awaits his return, the film takes us on a dark journey into Sara's heroin addiction and her mother's quest to

takes us on a dark journey into Sara's heroin addiction and her mother's quest to save her. During this journey, which moves from the wealthy high-rises of northern Tehran, into the seedy backstreets of the city and finally into the countryside near the Caspian sea, Sara's mother Sima is faced with difficult choices that may compromise her own moral code. To what lengths will she go to protect her daughter?

Critique

Mainline is the second feature collaboration between veteran female filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Mohsen Abdolvahab (the first was *Gilaneh* [2005]). Like Bani-Etemad's film *Zir-e poost-e shahr/Under the Skin of the City* (2001), *Mainline* addresses the debilitating effect of widespread drug use on Iranian society. However, unlike the previous film, which was set amongst a homeless community of misfits living on the margins of Tehran, this film features the rising urban middle-class, a sector of Iranian society who have until recently been infrequently represented on screen. Given Iran's strict censorship regulations, which among other things prevent the depiction of illicit behaviour, such as drug taking and prostitution, the film is daring and confronting, directly depicting scenes of drug taking and strongly suggesting that Sara (Baran Kowsari) sells her body to feed her drug habit.

Mainline also signals a slight departure from Bani-Etemad's signature style of gritty social realism in preference for what could best be described as 'artful realism'. Accomplished cinematographer, Mahmoud Kalari who has worked with most of the greats of Iranian cinema including Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Abbas Kiarostami, Tahmineh Milani, Dariush Mehrjui, Majid Majidi and Jafar Panahi has provided this film with a highly unique but utterly contemporary visual style. Shot predominantly with a handheld camera in almost black and white, Kalari allows just a touch of colour to seep into the image at crucial moments. The rather confronting use of extreme close-ups of Sara's drug-worn face helps to deeply connect the viewer with her suffering, and with her mother's desperate attempts to protect her from society and herself. Furthermore, the use of these extreme close-ups are also clear evidence that Iranian censorship regulations, which ostensibly prohibit the use of the female close-up, can and are being successfully challenged by Iranian filmmakers. In fact, Bani-Etemad and Abdolvahab brazenly and cleverly flaunt censorship regulations (particularly those prohibiting female dancing and physical contact between unmarried men and women). The opening credit sequence features Arash (Bahram Radan), who after opening the window blinds in his apartment, is seen joyously waltzing to

Johan Strauss II's 'Blue Danube' against the backdrop of Toronto's dense cityscape. His companion, a life-size female doll, is dressed in a white wedding dress, draped with a feather boa, her long dark hair flowing as they spin.

As with many of her other films, Bani-Etemad keenly reminds her viewers of such prohibitions, while creatively working within them. In many ways, this sequence serves as a guide to reading the film. The act of opening the blinds corresponds closely with the film's aim of exposing the serious drug problems facing Iranian society. The prominent place occupied by the CN Tower in Toronto's cityscape is reminiscent of Tehran's own Milad Tower, a small detail that enables a visual parallel to be drawn. This in turn suggestively prompts the viewer to read the act of 'lifting the blinds' as metaphorically applicable to Iran, rather than simply in terms of the literally represented Toronto. Additionally, the doll that hangs lifelessly in Arash's arms foreshadows the fate of Sara, his bride-to-be, who is eventually so ravaged and drained by her drug use that her body bears a close resemblance to this lifeless avatar. This homology is further reinforced as the camera pulls back to reveal that the scene we have been watching is a video played on a television screen. It is watched by Sara, who wears the feather boa, and the same wedding dress can be seen draped across a nearby sofa. Sara and her mother (Bita Farahi) continue the dance until the music changes tempo and the first of many close-ups of Sara reveal a hint of the darkness that will infuse the remainder of the film.

Michelle Langford

Song of Sparrows

Avaze Gonjeshk-ha

Studio/Distributor:

Majid Majidi Film Production Company

Director:

Majid Majidi

Producers:

Majid Majidi Javad Noruzbegi

Screenwriters:

Mehran Kashani Majid Majidi

Cinematographer:

Turaj Mansuri

Composer:

Hossein Alizadeh

Editor:

Hassan Hassandoost

Duration:

96 minutes

Genre:

Drama

Cast:

Mohammad Amir Naji

Reza Najie

Hossein Aghazi

Maryam Akbari

Kamran Dehghan.

Year:

2008

Synopsis

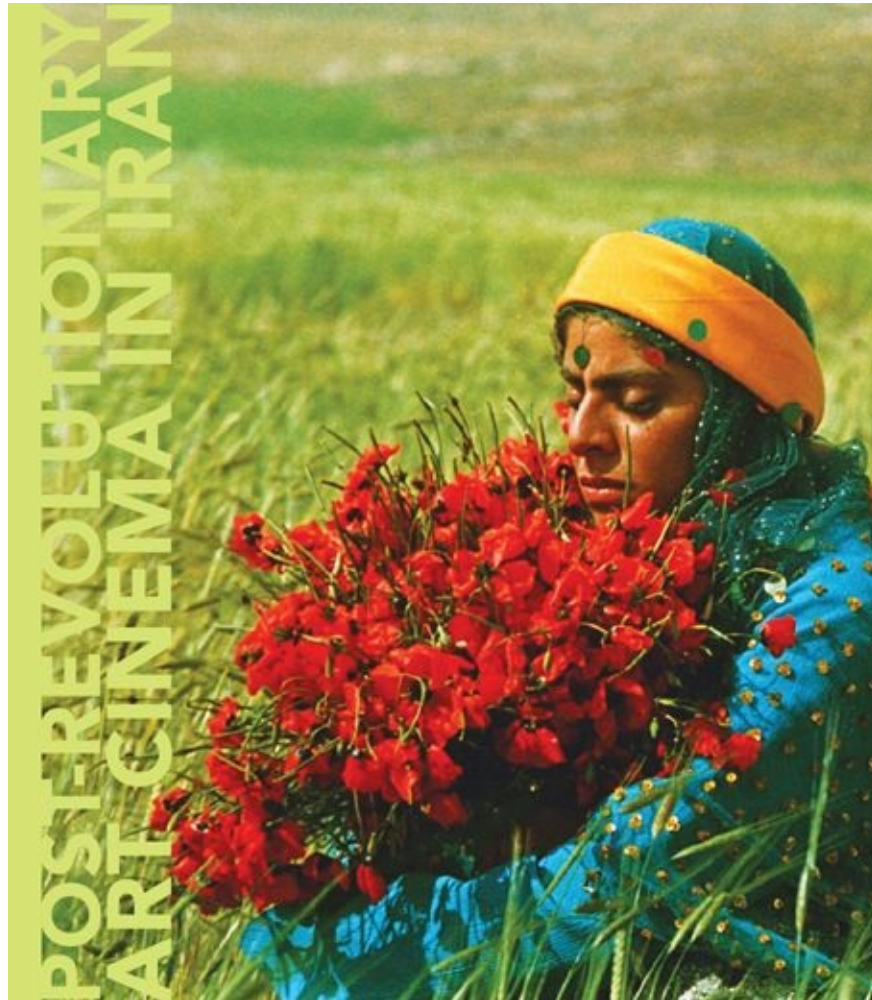
Karim is a good and simple man working in a farm with ostriches somewhere in the countryside of Iran. Because of his mistake one of the ostriches escapes and the company fires him. On a trip to Tehran he finds by coincidence, work as an illegal automobilist/driver. Although he found work again Karim's wife and daughters seem quite displeased, for his character seems to be changing. Karim is no longer the kind and virtuous man he used to be when working on the farm. Gradually the father's corruption starts affecting the rest of the family as well. When Hussein's plan to become a millionaire fails, Karim understands their error and a return to his previous self is premeditated.

Critique

From its symbolic title, the song of the weak, small birds to the beautiful cinematography, Majid Majidi's *Song of Sparrows* carefully portrays the fragile existence of the working class and the unspoiled world of the Iranian countryside. Karim is yet another Antonio Ricci from *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) in the history of Iranian cinema. After losing his work he does wrong, just like Antonio who desperately wants to replace his stolen bicycle and steals someone else's. Majidi's film is no doubt neo-realist, like so many Iranian films; its main difference from the narrative of *Bicycle Thieves* leans on the contrast between urban and pastoral life. For Majidi there are still reserves of morality and innocence in the almost mythical, for Iranian cinema in deep Iran. We should not forget that the transfer of Iranian villagers to the urban centres was not a smooth one, both culturally and practically. Majidi talks in his film about situations that the average Iranian has either experienced or heard of. The change in Karim's character, his moral decadence, if we can use such an extreme term, comes gradually. Majidi engineers a crescendo where the protagonist is exposed through his new work to the circumstances that will change him, the ugly face of the city. The contrast, supported by both narrative and cinematography, between Tehran and the Iranian countryside is so great that it indirectly cites religious notions of hell/paradise. On the one hand we are being offered a delightful, almost romanticized image of a little village and on the other a crowded, grey-brown Tehran. Following the neo-realist dogma Majidi uses amateur actors, and this increases the film's fidelity and its claim of a real life quality. Majidi's actors are the real, authentic working-class heroes leaving their village for the corrupting environment of Tehran.

Song of Sparrows is also quite different from the emotional and sugary sweet films that made him famous, inside and outside Iran, like *Children of Heaven* (1997). Apart from its ending that leaves us with some hope for Karim and his family, the filmmaker still retains his humanitarian stand in the way he treats his protagonists but there is a decisive shift towards a less pleasant social agenda. Not that his other films were not occupied with the social but with *Song of Sparrows* it seems as if his career is passing towards maturity with darker and more 'adult' subjects. For a director that was raised in a middle-class family in Tehran his portrayal of his own city but from a working-class perspective is indeed very revealing of his intentions and political position.

Nikolaos Vryzidis



Gabbeh, MK2 Productions,
Mykanend, Sanaye Dasti Iran.

The Revolution that began in Iran in January 1978 and that transformed the country from a monarchy into an Islamic republic had far-reaching consequences for the country's cinema. Even during the almost two years when the protracted process of change was taking place (Iran was officially declared a republic in April 1979, but a new theocratic constitution and subsequent appointment of Ayotollah Khomeini as supreme leader did not take place until December of that year), the cinema was singled out for criticism and frequently violent vilification. In particular, it was attacked for its perceived role in supporting the modernizing (that is, westernizing) projects of the incumbent Shah's regime, as a result of which it became commonplace across the country for theatres to be burned down. Almost 200 cinemas were destroyed before Iran finally became a republic, including one incident in Abadan that left 400 dead. By 1980, a mere 256 remained in the country.

As such, the period immediately following the creation of the Islamic republic saw sweeping changes in the film industry. The importing of foreign films was curtailed, and indigenous productions were subject to increasingly stringent review and censorship, from conception through to script and completed work. The significance of this creatively-impooverished and institutionally-unsettled period of around four years was manifold. New measures intended to facilitate and support local production were quickly put into effect, and consequently the number of films produced in Iran almost tripled between 1983 and 1986. In addition, the type of films being made began to be shaped and influenced by official directives and practices. In particular, films of quality (both with regard to content – those characterized by Islamic themes and values – and technical level of production) became prevalent. And it was this scenario that saw a number of new directors emerge, as the creation in 1983 of the Farabi Cinema Foundation offered government support for those producers willing to invest in emerging filmmakers' first features.

Although intended to bolster production and mobilize support for Khomeini's republic, this particular social and industrial milieu fostered a generation of primarily new filmmakers who revolutionized Iranian cinema through innovations in form and style, and very quickly placed it at the forefront of International filmmaking. The very strictures placed by the government on cinematic representation had a direct effect on this new aesthetic, as they were forced to approach their subjects and themes obliquely, indirectly, through inference and allusion: through, in effect, the poetics of an Aesopic cinematic language comparable to Eastern bloc countries in the wake of the Second World War.

Consequently, there appeared in Iran an art cinema 'New Wave', a title borrowed from the similarly designated groups in France, Japan, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere that continued to appear throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. It is an amorphous, divisive term, as many contest and disagree over its boundaries, salient features, constituent directors, even its duration. But what can be much less open to question is the fact that the New Wave represented a break from prevailing norms; a cinema of transgression in which new, frequently radical, modes of representation became dominant. Thus, whilst films such as *Khaneh siyah ast/The House is Black* (Forugh Farrokhzad, 1962); *Gaav/The Cow* (Dariush Mehrjui, 1969); Sohrab Shahid-Saless's *Yek Etefagh sadeh/A Simple Event* (1973) and *Tabiate bijan/Still Life* (1974); and *Ragbar/The Downpour* (Bahram Beyzaie, 1971) are significant, in many ways groundbreaking, for what may be termed their poetic naturalism that laid the foundations for the Iranian

nouvelle vague;¹ nonetheless the most marked break came in the wake of the Revolution. It was at this time that a dialectical relationship became increasingly apparent between the popular genre cinema that throughout the 1980s and shortly thereafter became increasingly populated by formulaic melodramas and crime thrillers, and the art cinema that was swiftly becoming internationally renowned.

Thus, the true Iranian art cinema should be identified as a post-revolutionary movement, a cinematic new beginning as marked as that which took place in society. The directors that comprise this revolution in filmmaking can now be seen to encompass three distinct generations. From the first, and in addition to the aforementioned precursors of post-revolutionary art cinema, there is Abbas Kiarostami, Khosrow Sinai and Amir Naderi. From the second, the generation to begin their careers immediately in the wake of the Revolution, there is Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi, Majid Majidi and Abolfazl Jalili. And subsequently, a third generation can be identified in figures such as Samira Makhmalbaf (daughter of Mohsen), Rafi Pitts, Mohammad Rasoulof, Marziyeh Meshkini (wife of Mohsen Makhmalbaf), Maziar Miri, Asghar Farhadi and Bahman Ghobadi. Collectively, these films and filmmakers have thoroughly reinvented Iranian filmmaking, and their work has secured their country's place among the major national cinemas in the world.

The best known and most acclaimed of all the above directors, Abbas Kiarostami, began his career making short films at the age of 30 in 1970. However, he only came to prominence in the 1980s when his films *Mashgh-e Shab/Homework* (1989), *Nema-ye Nazdik/Close-up* (1990) and especially *Zendegi va digar hich/Life, and Nothing More...* (1992) were screened to great celebration at international film festivals. As a director and prolific screenwriter (he has written scripts for several notable directors, especially Jafar Panahi and Alireza Raisian), Kiarostami can be considered the most important post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaker, one whose mature style in his feature films beginning with *Khane-ye doust kodjast?/Where is the Friend's House?* (1987) encompasses the defining facets of the post-revolutionary art cinema of Iran.

Chief amongst these facets is a marked convergence of fiction and documentary modes of filmmaking. The fact that several pre-Islamic films (Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* and Saless' Sohrab Shahid-Saless's *Still Life* in particular) had themselves affected a new cinematic language in the manner of Italian neo-realism, highlights a certain sense of continuity between pre and post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. However, with the exception of early post-revolutionary films like *Davandeh/The Runner* (Amir Naderi, 1984), this

paradigm of realist filmmaking does not satisfactorily characterize or define Iranian art cinema throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and thereafter into the new millennium. Neo-realism's chief tenets – stories drawn from actuality, location shooting, use of non-actors, de-dramatized, episodic narrative structure – offer a model of realism in contrast to the production values of mainstream entertainment (as prevalent in pre-Second World War Italy, and indeed Iranian melodrama of the 1940s and 1950s, as in mainstream Hollywood), but they do not necessarily owe a great debt to documentary filmmaking. In contradistinction, many post-revolutionary filmmakers have produced films that do entail such a debt: that make concrete narrative and thematic play with the salient techniques of both forms to progressive, almost experimental, ends.

To this end, two broad categories of films are discernible. On the one hand are works such as Kiarostami's *Close-up, Life, and Nothing More...* and *Zire darakhatan zeyton/Through the Olive Trees* (1994); *Daan/Don* (Abolfazl Jalili, 1998); *Sib/The Apple* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998); *Gagooman/The Twilight* (Mohammad Rasoulof, 2002); and, supremely, *Nun va Goldoon/A Moment of Innocence* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1996). These works conflate feature and documentary modes to the extent that the line between the two becomes blurred, indeed is often fundamentally problematized, thus calling into question the very foundations upon which either mode is predicated.

The greatest example, Makhmalbaf's *A Moment of Innocence* (which was shown in an unprecedented 46 film festivals around the world), grew from a chance meeting at a casting call between the director and a policeman whom he had earlier stabbed during his revolutionary activities as a youth in an underground anti-shah militia in the 1970s. They agreed to collaborate on a film – to each coach an actor who would go on to portray him as a young man in a recreation of the infamous violent episode – and the film itself is concerned with these respective stories, as two perspectives on the past are brought to light throughout rehearsals. It thus sets itself up as a documentary, following the respective directors as they prepare to film, and subsequently as they re-enact the stabbing of the policeman. However, Makhmalbaf continually complicates the picture by moving seamlessly (both between and within scenes) into staged material from what one presumes to be the finished work of the film within the film – the reconstruction of the stabbing. Makhmalbaf even narrativizes this textual confusion by having the actor playing his younger self unable to separate fiction from reality, breaking down as he does whilst shooting because he cannot bring himself to stab a person.

This method of what critic Mark Cousins calls 're-entering reality' (Cousins

2004: 442) had already formed the basis of an earlier film by Abbas Kiarostami, one that also made use of an incident in the life of Mohsen Makhmalbaf. *Close-up* concerns the actual case of a man named Sabzian who was imprisoned for impersonating Makhmalbaf and ingratiating himself with a family whom he told would be the subject of his next film. Kiarostami had the real imposter and family act out the story upon the former's release from custody, and this is merged with actual footage from his trial (which the director extended by questioning Sabzian himself). Factual and staged material thus become increasingly indistinguishable, culminating in a final scene in which Kiarostami films a meeting between Sabzian and the real Makhmalbaf as though he himself were stalking them. He follows and shoots them at a remove, with faulty sound further distancing the viewer and leaving them unable to hear the details of their conversation, as though this joyous moment for Sabzian cannot be intruded upon and captured on film.

The confluence of variant modes of filmmaking in Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami's films, their unstable textual and generic identities, then becomes an objective correlative to the protagonist's particular situation. Both the policeman in *A Moment of Innocence* and the imposter in *Close-up* have a relationship to the cinema that entails a blurring of boundaries, with each immersing himself in the assumed role of director to the extent that it consumes his life in what both men hope will be a therapeutic experience (Sabzian sees Makhmalbaf's work as directly about his life, whilst the policeman wants to use the movie to follow-up something dear to his life that factored in the original incident: when a young woman would stop every day to ask him the time). Thus, these works are about characters who themselves struggle to untangle reality from fantasy from the movies, and the films' own indistinct boundaries reinforce this notion in the strongest terms.

Abolfazl Jalili's *Don* offers a variant example of this sub-set. Like a majority of this director's films, it is about children, and follows a young protagonist through his day-to-day struggles and existence. A number of post-revolutionary filmmakers have centred their work on childhood protagonists. Working for Kanoon (Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults) (IIDCYA), Kiarostami had already focused almost all his shorts, documentaries, and features prior to 1990 on children; whilst Jalili and Majid Majidi have built their respective oeuvres around young characters. Elsewhere, a majority of the significant Iranian directors in the post-revolutionary art cinema (Mohsen and Samira Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi, Marziyeh Meshkini and Bahram Beizai) have each made at least one film centred on children and childhood, something Panahi

explains by noting that such films are officially regarded not only as about but also for children, and are thus less subject to review and censorship.

However, they can also be construed as particularly apposite subjects for a national cinema that was, in the post-revolutionary years, experiencing a period of figurative rebirth and youth. And as such, a number of works take their narrative cues from the childhood protagonists they follow; none more so than *Don*, which can stand as representative of Jalili's oeuvre in its culling of the ghost of a narrative entirely from what appear to be documentary fragments of the titular protagonist. There is a palpable physical distance to the film that, complimented by its overtly repetitive structure, precisely mirrors the turbulent life and mission of the nine-year old. That is, it is largely constituted of those moments one would expect a feature film to elide, or at least incrementally condense in the service of dramatic momentum, in particular the arduous work he undertakes and his seemingly endless walks to and from his various meetings and interviews.

Don revolves around the young protagonist's attempt's to find work and especially to enter into education, attempts that are repeatedly frustrated by the various authority figures he meets due to his lack of a birth certificate. It is thus about identity, about the literal search for a secure sense of self; and the documentary form, with its connotations of a directly captured slice of life; of reality, acts precisely as a record of the character, of the quotidian aspects of his turbulent life crystallized for posterity as a document of someone who would otherwise remain invisible. This is particularly in evidence in the aforementioned interviews, which, like the famous detention centre scene in *Les quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959), are shot in static medium close-ups in an exact appropriation of an official record of events. It also throws into contrast the emphasis on scenes of walking elsewhere in the film, which when juxtaposed become redolent of a life in transit, one unstable and unsettled with no fixed home or sense of belonging. As such, for Jalili the blurred distinction between fictive and discursive forms arises directly from the potential of crafting a narrative from life, from reality, and of imbuing the latter with the order, the structure, the directly denotative power, of the former.

In contradistinction to the above fictive/discursive model (in particular to Jalili and *Don*), there is a different group of films that propose a contrastive paradigm of manipulating both fiction and documentary cinema. Instead of obliterating the dividing line between the two forms, works such as *Ta'm e guilass/Taste of Cherry* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1997); *Takhté siah/Blackboards* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 2000); *Lakposhtha parvaz mikonand/Turtles Can Fly* (Bahman

Ghobadi, 2004); *20 Angosht/20 Fingers* (Mania Akbari, 2004); and the films of Jafar Panahi, establish a dialectical relationship between them. In these films, fiction is set against documentary in a pervasive narrative and thematic dichotomy in which, rather than bleeding into one another, their textual distinction serves significant ends. Kiarostami offers the most potent example in his 'Palme d'Or' winning *Taste of Cherry*, which follows its suicidal protagonist right up to the moment of truth, before echoing the end of both *Close-up* and *Through the Olive Trees* by explicitly denying his audience a significant moment for the character. In this instance, Kiarostami simply cuts away to end the film with grainy behind the scenes footage of the director and his cast on location during shooting.

The implication here is one of a fundamental questioning of narrative, its limitations and its artistic tenability: indeed, ultimately, its inability to capture the complexities of lived experience and human subjectivity. Kiarostami can offer the precise phenomenological details of a protagonist's ceaseless quest (as he had already done in both *Where is the Friend's House?* and *Life, and Nothing More...*). But just as his character here never questions himself, so the director seems to imply that he too cannot delve into his mind, elucidate or represent his thoughts, the manifold and myriad determinants on action and reason, behaviour and identity. Such a concrete delineation on his part would, it is implied, rob the character of his potency and the chance for the audience to invest of their own selves in his plight. The protagonist himself in fact seems vague and unaware of his motivations in acting as he does; there is simply process in his life; and unlike the process of making films as depicted in the closing moments, it is a journey without a destination.

For Kiarostami, then, there is a gulf between life and cinema, just as in *Taste of Cherry* there is a gulf between a character and a filmmaker, a signifier and signified. The antinomy present in the denouement thus reflects an opposition between living and storytelling (something also apparent in films like *Gabbeh* [Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1996] and *Niwemang/Half Moon* [Bahman Ghobadi, 2006], and reflects the order of the latter set against the amorphous, uncontainable, indeed ultimately unrepresentable nature of the former. It is a paradigm that has fed into subsequent generations of Iranian artcinema directors. Samira Makhmalbaf, for example, in her second film *Blackboards*, subtly recasts the very same precept. This picture has generally been described as demonstrating a documentary sensibility, but in fact requires more careful clarification than this broad designation can offer. Certainly her use of non-actors and early digressive structure can be construed as discursive, concerned as

it is with depicting the quotidian routines of travelling teachers in the remote mountainous regions around the Iran/Iraq border. However, rather than exhibiting a *cinema-vérité* aesthetic, it has a marked feeling of classicism; certainly in its analytical editing, which follows the continuity principles of shot/reverse shot, 180°-axis of action, and point-of-view cutting. It also increasingly adheres to a cause and effect feature narrative model, following a single protagonist through a crisis (a lack of employment) that sets in motion a journey with a definite goal (to obtain work and money) that takes this character through stages of conflict and, ultimately, resolution when he successfully completes his 'mission' and guides the refugees he is leading back to the Iraq border.

This dialectical relationship becomes increasingly redolent of an irreparable clash within the narrative between order (the classical order of plot structure equated with the stability sought by the protagonist) and the disorder associated with his actual itinerant existence. It is also a model that applies to the work of Jafar Panahi. In his films, similarly fictive, quasi-classically-designed quest narratives unfold in an approximation of real time, as though caught on film by a documentary crew charged with following a character for only a certain period and no longer, observing the obstacles that litter their path; that, it is implied, could litter any path for anyone in Iran. There is thus a discernible friction between forms embedded within Panahi's cinema, to the extent that films like Jafar Panahi's *Badkonake sefid/The White Balloon* (1995), *Dayereh/The Circle* (2000) and *Offside* (2006) can be approached as documentaries on and about fiction, about the making and the meaning of feature films in a country such as Iran. They are records of films made and struggles overcome in the process. They are, ultimately, about filmmaking itself; and as such conform to arguably the most salient paradigm of art cinema, one exemplified by Godard, Resnais, Fassbinder, Fellini, Wajda, Wenders, and almost every major European director since the 1960s: that of self-reflexivity, a probing of the power and the potential of the medium.

The post-revolutionary art cinema of Iran is fascinating for the extent to which it appropriates the tropes of the canonized European art cinema at a time when most major European countries are no longer producing directors who work in this manner and to this model. Indeed, it appears that only on the margins of the continent (Iran, Turkey, Spain, Portugal, Russia, etc.) are there still filmmakers exemplifying this once prevalent paradigm. And as such, as arguably the most celebrated and distinctive, Iran provides a fascinating test case in the definition of a national cinema, of what exactly constitutes the artistic and cultural identity of an industry and a collective body of works. With the continuing emergence of

idiosyncratic new directors, it is an example that shows no signs of abating.

Adam Bingham

Note

1. Note missing

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Close-Up

Nema-ye Nazdik

Studio/Distributor:

Institute for the Cognitive
Development of Children and
Young Adults (IIDCYA)

Director:

Abbas Kiarostami

Screenwriter:

Abbas Kiarostami

Cinematographer:

Ali Reza Zarrindast

Composers:

Ahmad Asgari
Mahammad Haghighi

Editor:

Abbas Kiarostami
Changiz Sayad

Duration:

100 minutes

Genre:

Docudrama

Cast:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Hossain Sabzian
Abolfazl Ahankhah
Mahrokh Ahankhah
Monoochehr Ahankhah

Nayer Mohseni Zonoozi
Haj Ali Reza Ahmadi
Abbas Kiarostami (voice-over)

Year:

1990

Synopsis

This dramatized documentary narrates the real-life story of a man, Hossain Sabzian, who impersonated a popular Iranian cultural icon, director Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Hossain befools a family into believing him. The family accepts to star in his new film as they are convinced Hossain is Mohsen Makhmalbaf. The film mixes re-enactments of real incidents, interviews with the people involved and documentary footage. We follow the logical sequence of the facts, from the fraudulence of the family by Hossain to the revealing of the truth and finally his trial in a real court room. At the end of the film Hossain meets Mohsen Makhmalbaf in a very touching scene which better illuminates the humanism of the film and its intentions.

Critique

Close-up, as the Iranian title has been translated in the West, was the film that made Abbas Kiarostami famous outside Iran. This almost neo-realist docudrama unfolds the case study of an underemployed printer's assistant that tries to regain his self-confidence by impersonating Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Above all though, it is a cinematic essay about the medium, its power, and the prestige that accompanies the work of a filmmaker in Iran.

The narrative of *Close-up* is a very interesting pastiche comprising of re-enactment, interviews and authentic documentary footage. All of the characters are portrayed by themselves, Makhmalbaf included. The story reminds us of Vittorio De Sica's emblematic *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (1948), but reinvented through the documentary-like cinematic style. With his innocent fraud the poor loner tries to reclaim what life has deprived him of; just like the protagonist in De Sica's film steals a bicycle in order to replace the tool of work taken from him in the beginning. Abbas Kiarostami however seems unsatisfied with providing his public with a realist representation of the story; he prefers to claim that he has filmed reality. The interviews become supporting

evidence and the court scene the apotheosis of Kiarostami's 'cinema of reality'. In a way the artist proposes an alternative approach to the realist narrative, which is most of the time a product of extreme artifice; and he succeeds. The naturalist photography, hand-held camera, and the minimalist sophistication of the cinematic style support the director's 'filmed reality'.

The film reveals the prestige and awe framing the figure of the filmmaker in modern Iran. Poor Hossain does not choose to impersonate a prince, millionaire, or state authority but a popular director. He finds a solution to his existential drama by pretending to be Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Kiarostami's questioning in the interviews and interference during the actual court proceedings vividly underline the power and authority that the figure of the director has at his disposal. From a western point of view the filming inside a real court room during a trial and the role of Kiarostami in the interrogation of Hossain seems almost surreal. One cannot even imagine that a director could be enjoying so much freedom in a court in the West. Therefore *Close-up* could be also interpreted as a celebration of Iranian cinema and its successful course throughout the years. It is also a piece of experimentation that prognosticates the director's future artistic directions, which will be fully unveiled with *Ten* (2002). Finally, it is highly indicative of how much Kiarostami's film is loved by the caste of the internationalized art-house cinema that Nanni Moretti, the egocentric enfant-terrible of Italian cinema, has directed a short film about the premiere of *Close-up* in his Roman theatre.



Close-Up, Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA).

Nikolaos Vryzidis

Life, and Nothing More...

Zendegi va digar hich...

Studios/Distributors:

Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults
(IIDCYA) (Kanoon) Pandora Film Facets Multimedia Distribution Mongrel

Media Director:

Abbas Kiarostami

Producer:

Ali Reza Zarin

Screenwriter:

Abbas Kiarostami

Cinematographer:

Homayun Payvar

Art Director:**Composer:****Editors:**

Abbas Kiarostami
Changiz Sayad

Duration:

95 minutes

Genres:

Drama Art film

Cast:

Farhad Kheradmand
Buba Bayour
Hocine Rihafi
Ferhenderh Feydi
Mahram Feydi
Ziya Babai
Mohammad Reza Parvaneh

Year:

1992

Synopsis

A father and his son arrive in the rural Iranian region of Rostam-abad in the wake of an earthquake that has left the area in ruins. Finding the main road into the village of Koker where they are heading full of traffic, they turn onto a mountain road, but have to keep asking directions as they are unsure of the way. The man, a film director who is returning to the site of his previous film, *Khane-ye dost kodjast?/Where is the Friend's House?* (1987) to see if his young actor has survived the earthquake, picks up and talks to a number of people caught up in the tragedy, including several who had acted for him, all the while continuing his search for the elusive boy.

Critique

Life, and Nothing More forms the centrepiece of what has variously been termed Abbas Kiarostami's 'Rostam-abad' or 'Koker' trilogy (after the area of rural Iran in which they were shot). Preceded by *Where is the Friend's House?* and followed by *Zire darakhatan zeyton/Through the Olive Trees* (1994), it occupies the heart and soul of this extraordinary conceptual tripartite in that its status as a so-called paradowumentary (discursive work with a thinly fictional framework) binds together the earlier and later, more overtly fictive, films. Its portrait of indefatigable community life in adversity offers a contrast to the picture in *Where is the Friend's House?* of generational conflict and divide in the name of education; whilst its exploration of the ethics and responsibilities of the filmmaker in relation to real life, especially tragic subjects, sets in relief the repetitive, tiresomely quotidian details of the craft that are emphasized in *Through the Olive Trees's* fictional look at this film's production.

Furthermore, *Life, and Nothing More...* can also be taken as a succinct condensation of Kiarostami's oeuvre as a whole. The father and filmmaker returning to the place where he shot his previous film, travelling around mountain roads and villages on an opaquely motivated quest observing the life before him and interacting only in a prescribed way with those he meets, is a prototype for a number of later Kiarostami travellers who question others but never themselves. In addition, like the protagonists in such subsequent films as *Ta'm e guilass/Taste of Cherry* (1997), *Bad ma ra khahad bord/The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) and especially *Shirin* (2008), the father here spends the majority of the film merely watching from a distance, something captured in a multitude of extended shots taken from inside the car looking out at the people he passes and the landscape he traverses. He is therefore both a denotative filmmaker and a connotative spectator, analogous to us the film viewer; and Kiarostami highlights this fact by distancing his extra-diegetic audience in another series of repeated set-ups: in this case, extreme long shots of the car navigating its way through tight, often perilous mountain hills and slopes. These shots become redolent of detachment and objectivity, and as such foreground our own position outside the film, looking in on, and implicitly asked by the director to probe and question, the father's actions (as in the extended final shot when he ignores a man's cry for help during his rush to follow a lead on the boy).

The fulcrum of *Life, and Nothing More...*, then, is its narrativization of looking, both with regard to the man's trajectory residing in a quest: a looking for; and also to the correlative of watching: a looking at. It thus questions the interaction of film and reality, but also fundamentally what it means to stand

apart from something, someone, and to observe them, and asks what the distance inherent in such a proposition entails. In this, the father is explicitly contrasted with his young son, contrasting the former's questioning and ostensibly cold manner with the young boy's instinctive recognition of the vitality of the human perseverance and communal activity he sees before him. The son's desire to partake in this activity, his wish for immersive action, is also juxtaposed with his father's spectatorial stance, a point that is crystallized in the penultimate scene when the boy's desperation to watch a football game (one that will serve to unite those caught up in the catastrophe) clashes with his father's belligerent belief that it is morally questionable to watch sports at such a time of turmoil and bereavement.

Coming after both his documentary *Mashgh-e Shab/Homework* (1989) and the feature *Nema-ye Nazdik/Close-up* (1990), in which Kiarostami overtly inserted his own frequently jarring, anomalous presence into the pro-filmic diegesis, *Life, and Nothing More...* goes one step further. It presents a portrait of the director away from the order and controlled environment of the film set and instead thrust into the chaotic disorder of life at its most destructive and unpredictable, most uncontrollable. This is another salient theme in Kiarostami's oeuvre – the fracture between reality and fiction, life and narrative, watching and acting – and it further marks out *Life, and Nothing More...* as a seminal film in a seminal career.

Adam Bingham

Hello Cinema

Salaam Cinema

Studio/Distributor:

Amoon & Green Film House

Director:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Producer:

Abbas Randjbar

Screenwriter:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Cinematographer:

Mahmoud Kalari

Composer:

Shahdad Rohani

Sound Recordist:

Nizan Kiyai

Editor:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Duration:

75 minutes

Genres:

Art film Docudrama

Cast:

Azadeh Zangreneh

Maryan Keyhan

Feyzolah Ghashghai

Shaghayegh Djodat

Mohsen Makhmalbaf,

Year:

1995

Synopsis

Mohsen Makhmalbaf places an ad in the newspaper for people interested in his new feature film celebrating the first hundred years in the history of cinema. His call for actors is proven extremely successful as 5,000 people, from all walks of life, queue outside his house where the auditions are taking place and unexpectedly a riot erupts. After the atmosphere calms down the auditions begin. Reality and fiction in this film are sometimes hard to separate. And this notion, cinema is life and life can be filmed, penetrates the whole of the film. With the variety of characters appearing for the audition, Makhmalbaf's docudrama offers a representative sample of Iranian society and the position of cinema in it. It is

yet another Iranian film touching on the issue of the power of cinema and the prestige surrounding the figure of the director in Iranian society.

Critique

Makhmalbaf's *Hello Cinema*, shot in 1994, pays tribute to cinema's centenary and to the pioneers of the medium, the Lumière brothers. Makhmalbaf has produced a supposedly non-fiction feature film documenting his surrounding reality, just like the first shorts films by the Lumière brothers who used an archaic visual narrative for exactly the same purpose. There is no doubt however that the Lumière films, belonging to the archaeology of cinema today, are not comparable to *Hello Cinema*. Makhmalbaf's film bears many layers and serves many different intentions. The narrative vehicle of the auditions, underlining the enduring cinephilia in Iranian society, facilitates the artist's course to fictionalized social documentary, a *cinéma vérité* ensemble on contemporary Iran. And from that platform Makhmalbaf endeavours a concise portrayal of Iranian society, the position of women in it, and the role of cinema on the re-fashioning of the social stereotypes. This departure from fiction could be seen as a response to the other famous Iranian docudrama, Abbas Kiarostami's *Nema-ye Nazdik/Close-up* (1990). With the experience of participating in *Close-up* Makhmalbaf chose again to reflect on the power of cinema in Iranian society, with a fiction film pretending to be a documentary. In a way the biggest differences between the two films are the dissimilar cinematic strategies and agendas proposed by Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf.

Naturally for Makhmalbaf, the position of women in Iranian society is an important issue. However, desperation, the need for self-realization or emancipation, seem to be among the imperatives of the whole of Iranian society in *Hello Cinema*: an elderly man with broken dreams, a woman searching for love and freedom, a man that thinks he resembles a Hollywood star, two girls with artistic ambitions. The latter when asked by Makhmalbaf whether they would prefer to be artists or humane answer with conviction: 'Why should we choose? Artists must be humane.' In this film where fiction, reality and the myth of cinema coincide, the girls' answer claims authenticity. But yet is evident that the director believes in the power of cinema, the power of its manipulation and prestige in contemporary society serving the right purposes. In the eyes of Makhmalbaf cinema should be a precious tool of communication in the hands of the humane.

Finally, *Hello Cinema* is a very interesting meditation on the potential, future and power of cinema. It may be true that its unpolished image and repetition can

tire at times, especially the fans of Makhmalbaf's usual cinematic style. Nevertheless, it is this scruffy surface that offers the cinematic space for such an experiment.

Nikolaos Vryzidic

Gabbeh

Studios/Distributors:

MK2 Productions
Mykanend
Sanaye Dasti Iran

Director:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Producers:

Khalil Daroudchi
Khalil Mahmoudi
Mostafa Mirzakhani

Screenwriter:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Cinematographer:

Mahmoud Kalari

Composer:

Hossein Alizadeh

Editor:

Mostafa Mirzakhani

Duration:

75 minutes

Genres:

Art film
Allegory

Allegory

Fantasy

Cast:

Abbas Sayah

Shaghayeh Djodat

Hossein Moharami

Rogheih Moharami

Year:

1996

Synopsis

As part of their daily routine an aged couple go to wash their *gabbeh*, an elaborately decorated Persian rug. Coming out of the rug a young woman, named Gabbeh, she mysteriously appears to help them clean it and narrates her story of denied love. The young woman belongs to the clan whose history is represented in the 'narrative' of the rug. The film follows the young woman's and her clan's story. The backbone of the film's tale is Gabbeh's love for a man she is not allowed by her father to marry, the mysterious rider who always follows their caravan. The film is an allegorical tale about the position women in Iranian tradition and nature. Its dogma of feminine emancipation seems to be leaning on the axiom of the natural colourfulness of life.

Critique

Mohsen Makhmalbaf's disappointment on the practices and ideology of the Iranian regime from the late 1980s onwards has had an inevitable impact on the course of his cinematic career. The formerly favourite 'child' of the Iranian Revolution was now keeping his distance from the regime, especially after the Iran-Iraq war. Makhmalbaf had fallen into disfavour, some of his films were banned, and most of his proposals to the Iranian government were being rejected as politically suspicious. When a handcrafts company asked from him to make a documentary, that would improve the sales of gabbeh-type rugs, Makhmalbaf presented a proposal the government found desirably apolitical. Finally Makhmalbaf would have produced a film that was not meant annoy the regime, a film about a clan of rug-makers from southern Iran. Indeed the viewers of the film are being carried away by the fantasy world of the film and its impeccably-crafted imagery. This was the first Makhmalbaf film to be distributed in the

created imagery. This was the first Makhmalbaf film to be distributed in the United States, winning as well quite a few awards in the international film festivals of Tokyo, Singapore and Catalonia.

On the surface *Gabbeh* seems like a traditional bedtime-story. From our point of view though it is a political allegory, a poetic protest against the black and grey 'social costume' tailored for women in Iran by their government. It is therefore yet another film occupied with the women's rights agenda; a trend in Iranian cinema which, as Abbas Kiarostami has also stated, cannot be easily resisted. The rug's design becomes a narrative device, the platform for the filmmaker to unfold his socio-political agenda. The exhilarating use of bright colours in the film's representation of the Iranian landscape and especially in the female protagonist's costumes is a political statement, following the 'aesthetics is politics' mode. Sharply contrasting with the conservative colours approved by the Iranian government for women's clothes, *Gabbeh's* colourfulness challenges the post-revolutionary concept of traditionalist femininity. The coupling of the Iranian landscape together with women and their clothes dyed with naturally-derived dyes communicates Makhmalbaf's message: colour is part of nature and Iran's culture is closely connected with the land's nature. This notion becomes particularly evident in the beautiful representation of the Iranian landscape. Also the debate against arranged marriages, a practice surviving still in contemporary Iran, is opened with young Gabbeh's love for the mysterious horseman as the epicentre of the film's narrative.



Gabbeh, MK2 Productions, Mykanend, Sanaye Dasti Iran.

The film's biggest success though is not its socio-political agenda in disguise, that by-passed state censorship, but the fact that its metaphors and visual language appealed to an international, not only Iranian audience. The awards and its international distribution testify to that. In this way Makhmalbaf, like Jafar Panahi and other directors critical of the regime, secured funding from the West for his next films. For a director that was not eager to compromise in the later period of his career with the Iranian government, films like *Gabbeh* guaranteed his artistic independence and exile.

Nikolaos Vryzidis

Taste of Cherry

Ta'm-e Guilaas

Studios/Distributors:

Abbas Kiarostami Productions CiBy 2000

Institute for the Cognitive

Development of Children and
Young Adults (IIDCYA) (Kanoon)

Director:

Abbas Kiarostami

Producer:

Abbas Kiarostami

Screenwriter:

Abbas Kiarostami

Cinematographer:

Homayun Payvar

Editor:

Abbas Kiarostami

Duration:

95 minutes

Cast:

Homayoun Ershadi

Abdolrahman Bagheri

Afshin Khorshid Bakhtiari

Safar Ali Moradi

Mir Hossein Noori

Year:

1997

Synopsis

The hero in *Taste of Cherry* is a 50-year-old-ish man named Mr Badii, who is driving around the hilly outskirts of Tehran in search of someone who will bury him if he succeeds at committing suicide – he plans to swallow sleeping pills – and retrieve him from the hole in the ground if he fails. Over the course of one afternoon he picks up three passengers and asks each to perform this task in exchange for money – a young Kurdish soldier stationed nearby, an Afghan seminarian who is somewhat older, and a Turkish taxidermist who is even older.

The soldier runs away in fright, the seminarian tries to persuade him not to kill himself, and the taxidermist also tries to change his mind but reluctantly agrees to the plan because he needs the money to care for his sick child. The terrain Badii's Range Rover traverses repeatedly is mainly parched, dusty, and spotted with ugly construction sites and noisy bulldozers, though the site he has selected for his burial is relatively quiet, pristine and uninhabited. They arrange that the taxidermist will come to the designated hillside at dawn, call Badii's name twice, toss a couple of stones into the hole to make sure he is not sleeping, and then, if there is no response, shovel dirt over his body and collect the money left for him in Badii's parked car.

Later that night Badii emerges from his apartment, drives in the dark to the appointed spot, and lies down in the hole. We hear the sounds of thunder and rain and the cries of stray dogs, then the screen goes completely black. In an epilogue we see Kiarostami at the same location in full daylight, with his camera and sound crew filming soldiers jogging and chanting in the valley below. Homaoun Ershadi, the actor who played Badii, lights and hands Kiarostami a cigarette just before Kiarostami announces that the take is over and they are ready for a sound take. The shot lingers over the wind in the trees, which are now in full bloom, and over the soldiers and filmmakers lounging on the hillside between takes, before the camera pans away to a car driving off into the distance. To the strains of a Louis Armstrong instrumental version of 'St. James Infirmary' (1928), the final credits come on.

Critique

Kiarostami generally receives credit for producing, writing, directing, and editing his features. But as I discovered during our conversation, none of his last several features were scripted. The dialogue was generated mainly by Kiarostami working alone with his nonprofessional actors, yet none of them had a clear sense of the overall film – so a great deal of manipulation was involved, on several levels.

Most of the dialogue in *Taste of Cherry* occurs between Badii and his three passengers, but none of the actors ever met during the filming, apart from Ershadi and Abdolhossein Bagheri, who plays the Turkish taxidermist (they have a brief second meeting outside the museum where the taxidermist works). Kiarostami filmed each actor alone, sometimes without any of his crew present, sitting in the passenger seat while Ershadi or himself drove with one of the other actors as a passenger. Like a novelist inhabiting each of his characters, Kiarostami thus 'played' all these people off-screen, soliciting on-screen

dialogue and reactions from each actor through a series of ruses; when he wanted the actor playing the Kurdish soldier to express amazement, he told me: ‘I started to speak to him in Czech. At another point, when I wanted him to look afraid, I placed a gun in the glove compartment, and asked him to open it for a chocolate.’



Taste Of Cherry, Abbas Kiarostami Productions, CiBy 2000, Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) (Kanoon).

There is a troubling ambiguity about such methods that interferes with the image of Kiarostami as a ‘simple’ humanist – which generally means a blood brother of Vittorio De Sica or Satyajit Ray, two other middle-class directors who worked with impoverished actors – though I hasten to add that a feature-length French documentary about Kiarostami shows many of his former actors greeting him with obvious respect and affection. In *Taste of Cherry* one clear if subliminal effect of his working with each actor in isolation is the creation of a powerful sense of solitude that is felt throughout the film prior to the exhilarating camaraderie of the epilogue, regardless of whether Badii is alone or with someone else. Yet Kiarostami’s determination to set this film exclusively in exteriors, in terms of what we hear as well as see – refusing to enter the museum or Badii’s flat and leaving the windows of Badii’s Range Rover wide open – inflects this sense of solitude with an equally strong and continuous sense of being in the world. Consequently, though the film unfolds inside the most

private space imaginable – the dark recesses of an individual consciousness bidding farewell to life – it perceives life itself almost exclusively in terms of public and social space. This places viewers on the same existential plane as the hero, contemplating the prospect of their own solitary death in the public space of a theatre. It also places them on the same plane as each of the passengers, contemplating the question of how they might respond to such an entreaty from a stranger.

Most of Kiarostami's plots are illustrations of simple ideas – especially apparent in his wonderful didactic shorts for children such as *Dow Rahehal Baraye yek Massaleh/Two Solutions for One Problem* (1975) and *Be Tartib ya Bedoun-e Tartib/Orderly or Disorderly* (1981) but no less evident in the parable-like stories of most of his fiction features. In *Taste of Cherry* – where the mission is the hero's extinction, and the comedy is subtler, apart from a few lines of the Turkish taxidermist – the tone is atypically sombre. Prior to the epilogue, the action is limited to a single day and evening, but gradually this brief span of time comes to represent the expanse of an entire life, with Badii's passengers representing three successive stages in that life. (Their professions are equally evocative, and their nationalities, like the Armstrong number at the end, help to spell out how multicultural and international this Iranian movie is.) Few films are more attentive to the poignancy of time passing and the slow fading of daylight, so that everyday details over the day's progress – from field workers cheerfully lifting Badii's car out of a rut to a bulldozer emptying dirt and rocks, from a plane's wispy exhaust trail in the sky to a glimpse of schoolchildren running around a track – register increasingly as small signs and epiphanies in an existence that is about to be extinguished.

The closest thing Kiarostami has to a visual signature might be termed the cosmic long shot – used to humorous and philosophical effect in the closing sequences of *Zendegi va digar hich.../Life, and Nothing More...* (1992) and *Zire darakhatan zeyton/Through the Olive Trees* (1994), where our distance from the characters and what they are saying turns their destinies into abstract puzzles, spaces to be filled by our intuition and invention. *Taste of Cherry* is punctuated throughout by shots of this kind, including distant overhead shots of Badii's car moving across the hills, usually while he is conversing with a passenger – but the sound of their dialogue always remains in the foreground, recalling long-shot-like panels in comic books accompanied by dialogue bubbles. Like the coexistence of private and public space or the frequent framing of landscapes through car windows, this fusion of distance with proximity is part of the way Kiarostami gives enormous weight to the simplest everyday moments.

I have never met a filmmaker who qualifies as less of a cinephile than Kiarostami. Though filmmaking recurs as a subject throughout his work, this has more to do with his relation to the world as a filmmaker than to his relation to cinema per se. The history of Iran cannot be matched up precisely with the history of the West, however much we may wish to establish points of contact and convergence. For that matter, the state of the western world at mid-century reflected in the innovations of Bresson, Tati, Godard, Rivette, and Antonioni cannot be matched up precisely with the state of the planet at the century's end reflected in the innovations of Kiarostami and others. Insofar as *Taste of Cherry* is a response to the 1990s more than a response to the history of cinema, it has more in common with Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Nan guo zai jian, nan guo/Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996) and Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet's *Cezanne – two other beautiful recent films about the obliteration of the landscapes of urban outskirts – than it does with *L'avventura* or *Playtime*, which deal respectively with the loss of values and the renegotiation of public space. Kiarostami's narrative elisions and his sense of time passing remind me of those films only because those films are part of my world and my vocabulary for understanding it.*

A colleague who finds *Taste of Cherry* 'excruciatingly boring', objects in particular to the fact that we do not know anything about Badii, to what he sees as the distracting suggestion that Badii might be a homosexual looking for sex, and to what he sees as the tired 'distancing strategy' of reminding us at the end that we are seeing a movie. From the perspective of the history of commercial western cinema, he has a point on all three counts. But Kiarostami could not care less about conforming to that perspective, and given what he can do, I cannot think of any reason he should care. If Kiarostami had wanted us to empathize only with Badii's suicidal impulses, he might have told us more about the man. But this would have interfered with his desire to have us empathize as well with Badii's three passengers, who know as little about this stranger as we do – the film is concerned with their dilemma as well as his. The possibility that Badii might be cruising for sex is not lost on one of the first pedestrians he addresses from his car (who threatens to bust his face); whether this occurs to Badii is less clear, but he is plainly a man so deeply sunk in his own grief and so alienated from others that the question is academic.

The most important thing about the joyful finale is that it is the precise opposite of a 'distancing effect'. It does invite us into the laboratory from which the film sprang and places us on an equal footing with the filmmaker, yet it does this in a spirit of collective euphoria, suddenly liberating us from the oppressive

solitude and darkness of Badii alone in his grave. Shifting to the soldiers reminds us of the happiest part of Badii's life, and a tree in full bloom reminds us of the Turkish taxidermist's epiphany – though the soldiers also signify the wars that made both the Kurdish soldier and the Afghan seminarian refugees, and a tree is where the Turk almost hung himself. Kiarostami is representing life in all its rich complexity, reconfiguring elements from the preceding 80-odd minutes in video to clarify what is real and what is concocted. (The 'army' is under Kiarostami's command, but it is Ershadi – an architect friend of the filmmaker in real life – who passes Kiarostami a cigarette.) Far from affirming that *Taste of Cherry* is 'only' a movie, this wonderful ending is saying, among other things, that it is also a movie. And we do not have to remember all of the lyrics of 'St. James Infirmary' to know that death is waiting for us around the corner.

Jonathan Rosenbaum

(This is a short version of Jonathan Rosenbaum's review first published in the *Chicago Review* on 29 May 1998.)

The Pear Tree

Derakhte Golabi

Studio/Distributor:

Farabi Cinema Foundation

Director:

Dariush Mehrjui

Producers:

Dariush Mehrjui Faramarz Farazmand

Screenwriter:

Dariush Mehrjui (Based on a short story by Goli Taraghi)

Cinematographer:

Mahmoud Kalari

Composer:

Philip Glass, 'Mad Rush'

Sound Recordists:

Jahangir Mirshekari Sasan Bagherpour

Editor:

Mostafa Kherghehpooch

Duration:

115 minutes

Cast:

Homayoun Ershadi

Golshifteh Farahani

Mohammad Reza Shaban-Noori

Nematollah Gorji

Sassan Bagherpour

Jafar Bozorgi

Shaghayegh Farahani

Maryam Moghbeli

Maliheh Nazari

Year:

1998

Synopsis

A well-known, middle-aged author Mahmoud Shayan who is suffering from writer's block, goes to his secluded family country house in Damavand in north Tehran to finish his next novel. All the trees in the Damavand orchard have borne fruit, except for a particular pear tree. The tree is a reminder of the bittersweet childhood of Mahmoud and his love and infatuation towards his 14-year-old female cousin known only as Mim, a tomboy and perky teenage girl who is nonetheless a ravishing beauty. Mahmoud is constantly interrupted by his asinine aged gardener reminding him that the pear tree has failed to bear fruits that year, but he is lost in his thoughts and preoccupied with reminiscences of Mim.

The story flashes back to the late 1940s before the political crises of the 1950s when the young Mahmoud and Mim met in Damavand orchard, but fell apart since the girl went away. During this time, Mim studies acting abroad, and the writer gets involved in political activities. As Mahmoud's infatuation increases, his adolescent dreams soar to creative, religious and erotic heights. That

adolescent girl of long ago – or the memory of her – becomes the muse that inspires him. Later on, Mim dies in a car accident, and the only thing that remains of her for the writer is the memory of her.

Critique

Dariussh Mehrjui's semi-autobiographical film *The Pear Tree*, is the story of Mahmoud (played by Homayoun Ershadi), a renowned writer and intellectual who is suffering from writer's block and struggling to complete his next novel. It is a haunting account of childhood and adolescence that reminds us all of the power of memories. Goli Taraghi's short story at first glance may not seem an appropriate piece for a film adaptation because it is essentially a self reflective, lengthy monologue by the narrator, a lonesome bewildered writer, rather than a dramatic piece of work. But for contentious director Daruish Mehrjui, it had the potential to convey his philosophical views and cinematic obsessions and resulted in one of the most poetic films to have been made in the history of Iranian cinema.



The Pear Tree, Farabi Cinema Foundation.

Although it is a film that is based on a literary work it hardly has any affiliation with its original source. Mehrjui's creativity in literary adaptation and his cinematic vision separates *The Pear Tree* from Goli Taraghi's short story and makes it very much a cinematic one and one that is very personal to the director. *The Pear Tree* is divided into three sections: The first happens in the present-day and shows Mahmoud isolating himself in his countryside house in Damavand struggling to write his new novel. His surroundings remind him of his bittersweet childhood memories and his beloved Mim (played by Golshifte Farahani). The second part which is narrated through flashbacks, portrays Mahmoud's love memoirs with Mim; and the third part relates to his political activities and his affiliation with the 'Todeh' political party. Mahmoud was a former Marxist and an idealist intellectual set on changing the world and the political situation in Iran, but now disillusioned by politics, he has developed an almost nihilistic attitude towards life and the world around him.

Mehrjui constructs these three parts in a well structured narrative form, yet in the third act things can seem somewhat cheesy and preachy. The portraits of the iconic figures of the communist and Todeh party leaders is the most stereotypical device used by Mehrjui to introduce Mahmoud's political identity. It is easy to find some similarities between the character of Mahmoud and Badi'e, from Kiarostami's *TA'M-E GUILAAS/TASTE OF CHERRY* (1997). Both are lonely and depressed characters and appear suicidal. Whilst Kiarostami never gives us clear information about Badi's background and his motives, Mehrjui's nihilistic character is clearly explained through his past experiences as conveyed within the film. Even though he never directly indicates that he is suicidal, in one scene one of his former students ask of him 'is it true that you are constantly thinking of death these days?'

Mahmoud hears the approaching footsteps of his mortality and becomes aware of the passing of time, which results in him wanting to achieve something worthwhile, thus differentiating him from Kiarostami's character in *TASTE OF CHERRY*. He looks for the answers to his philosophical questions in the darkness of the pear garden. He, like Guido, Fellini's iconic character in *8½* (1963), has had his literary creativity stifled due to age and going through negative experiences. He is surrounded by the nostalgia of time, location, affection and childlike pleasures, which intensify his passiveness.

Mehrjui portrays Mahmoud's internal journey and psychological challenges beautifully, and finally takes him to a new situation and allows for his eventual relief. Mahmoud pays no regard to the destiny of the old pear tree in the garden and is reluctant to even listen to the aged gardeners and follow the ritualistic method to try and recover the tree's fertility. We see his arrogance and degrading

attitude towards the aged gardener during the film, but he gradually develops within his internal journey, and at the end of the film finds solace under the pear tree and reconciles himself with his surroundings. The final scene which shows him sitting under the tree on a moonlit night was extremely well shot and could not be improved on. In fact Mahmoud successfully manages to tell us his new story – his autobiography – throughout the film, and recovers from his hollowness and despair.

The infertility of the pear tree is clearly a metaphor for the writer's block and his abortive struggle in life. Working under pressure and heavy censorship, makes it inevitable for Iranian filmmakers to resort to allegory, metaphors and symbols to elaborate their points. Dealing with some sensitive political and social issues implicitly has become one of Mehrjui's stylistic characteristics. By employing a floating camera and a slow pace of editing, and using the voice-over technique and masterfully interwoven scenes from the past and the present, Mehrjui has succeeded in capturing the memory of a past which remains with the film's main character.

His high level of competence with the art of cinema allows him to adapt the poetic nature of Goli Taraghi's short story for the screen. The inclusion of beautiful long shots of Damavand Mountain and other remarkable sights, and the slow movement of the camera through the garden and trees, creates an exotic atmosphere that you will not be able to experience by reading the book. The transitions such as colour fading and short dissolves have become a staple of Mehrjui's style which are suited to their formalistic purposes, rather than narrative devices. Mehrjui's creative use of sound in *The Pear Tree* is also worthy of mention. As much as Mehrjui is aware of the aesthetics of image, he also has control over the sound elements of the film and the dramatic effects they can have. For instance, in scenes when his camera tracks onto a person's face and frames them in close-up, he uses silence to poetic effect and also penetrating into the persona of the figure.

The writer's voice-over tells us of the proceedings of the film in the first person, and this forms a key narrative element and interferes frequently during the film. By this Mehrjui shows his affiliation with literature and at the same time manages to successfully externalize the inner feeling and emotions of the protagonist, and establish a close connection between him and the audience. The use of voice-over is a cinematic technique derived from literature and often applied in works where the story and themes are centred around those with a psychotic disposition. In *The Pear Tree*, this technique is not meant to be disturbing, but rather has several applications, such as introducing the setting

and time of the story and informing the audience of the protagonist's outlook and personality, thus attempting to make the audience sympathize with him. It also, most importantly, gives the film a poetic and literary tone. The other application of this technique is that it facilitates a shift between the past and the present, but turning back the clock is precisely what this character has trouble doing. On the other hand, the writer who is facing a writer's block is finally able to tell us his story with ease and without having to think about it.

Even though this technique has its limits, namely it does not allow the audience to find out or hear about anything not directly experienced by the protagonist, by overlapping voices which is purely cinematic and cannot be achieved in literature, the audience is able to hear the inner voice of the protagonist, along with the sound effects and other voices which are distinguishable yet in the background. For instance, in one scene where the camera moves towards the writer's face we hear him say: 'If only time wasn't so hurriedly passing. I wish that I were 12 again discovering Damavand garden with all of its dead, something unachievable. Fat chance... I wish I could sit with Mim and once again catch a whiff of her sneakers,' while hearing Mim's laughter over this image.

Mehrjui's minimalistic approach is also noticed in the film score. In *The Pear Tree*, there is a recurrent theme played out on the piano which represents the love between Mahmoud and Mim, and is repeated as a motif throughout the film. But in addition to this there are also some traditional Persian songs played in the background which help intensify the sense of nostalgia and romance throughout the film. *The Pear Tree* is very cunningly rendered, with colour playing out a significant role in the film. The colours are very sharp and realistic in the present scenes but at the point when the film is portraying Mahmoud's childhood and love story, it becomes washed out and almost sepia appearing. The whole sequence that plays out Mahmoud's past political activities in late 1950s Tehran during the Shah's *coup d'état* against Dr Mosaedegh's national government, is filmed in black and white very much resembling the archive footage and newsreel of the time.

Mehrjui's emphasis on props and objects found within the scenes, and the features of the human body comprise his cinematographic style influenced by that of Robert Bresson.

His extreme close-ups of the hands, face and eyes of Mahmoud, the aged gardener, and Mim can be considered as examples of this. *The Pear Tree* is one of the most erotic films made in Iranian cinema after the Islamic Revolution, with films with such themes being rare and few and far between. Erotic films

have often been subject to censorship and legal restraints on screening on the grounds of obscenity and vulgarity since the Revolution in Iran, but this film was able to make it to its release thanks to the relaxation of censorship regulations under President Khatami's time in office.

Mehrjui has succeeded in masterfully creating the erotic moments of the story and the inner passionate and sexual feelings and desires Mahmoud has for Mim in a restricted and oppressed atmosphere through his cinematic approach. The summer afternoon sleeping scene is one of the most beautiful, poetic, and erotic scenes in Iranian cinema. There is an air of passion, temptation, and lust buoyant in the room. The continuous and wearisome noise made by the old fan is the only sound effect of the scene.

Mahmoud is lying next to Mim with his gaze set on her bare foot which is out of the white sheet, and we can pick up on how enjoyable he finds this. The lighting, the close-ups of Mim's sweating face and lips, and the sound of her slow breathing, are other elements that help to create an erotic scene. The scene ends with a reddish fade out when Mahmoud stretches his hand to grab Mim's. A scene that could have been regarded as subversive in Iranian cinema, but as already mentioned, was saved due to the ease up on the censorship regulations of that time. I should also refer to another scene which has an implicit erotic meaning, the scene where Mahmoud puts on Mim's sneakers.

The Pear Tree won the 'Silver Hugo' award at the 'Chicago International Film Festival'.

Parviz Jahed

The Wind Will Carry Us

Baad Ma ra Khahad Bord

Studio/Distributor:

MK2

Director:

Abbas Kiarostami

Producers:

Abbas Kiarostami

Martin Karmitz

Screenwriter:

Abbas Kiarostami

Cinematographer:

Mamoud Kalari

Composer:

Peyman Yazdanian

Editor:

Abbas Kiarostami

Duration:

118 minutes

Cast:

Behzad Dourani

Farzad Sohrabi

Shahpour Ghobadi

Masood Mansouri

Masoameh Salimi

Bahman Ghobadi

Noghre Asadi

Ali Reza Naderi

Year:

2000

Synopsis

The hero of *The Wind Will Carry Us* is a man from Tehran named Behzad who drives with a camera crew of three to a remote Kurdish village clinging to the sides of two mountains. There they secretly wait for an ailing 100-year-old woman named Mrs Malek to die, apparently planning to film or tape the exotic traditional funeral ceremony they expect to take place afterwards, as part of which some women mourners scratch and scar their faces. Behzad spends most of the movie biding his time in the village, circulating a false story (involving buried treasure) about the reason for his presence and chatting with a few locals

– mainly a little boy named Farzad, the old woman’s grandson, who serves as his (and our) main source of information about the village.



The Wind Will Carry Us, MK2.

Whenever Behzad’s mobile phone rings he has to drive to the cemetery on top of a hill overlooking the village to pick up his caller’s signal. (The first call he receives is from his family in Tehran, and we discover that by waiting for the old woman’s funeral, he will miss a funeral in his own family; all the subsequent calls are from his producer in Tehran – a woman like the producer in Kiarostami’s *Zire darakhatan zeyton/Through the Olive Trees* [1994]). At the same location he periodically chats with Youssef, a young man digging a deep hole for unstated ‘telecommunications’ purposes (most likely an antenna tower). Behzad tells Youssef more than once how lucky he is not to be working under any boss, and after glimpsing the retreating figure of the digger’s 16-year-old fiancée Zeynab, who brings him tea from time to time, Behzad endeavours to meet her in the village by asking to buy some fresh milk from her family.

Critique

In the 7-minute title sequence, occurring roughly halfway through the film, Behzad (played by Behzad Dourani) is directed to a cellar lit only by a hurricane lamp, where Zeynab obligingly milks a cow for him. Over the course of a long

take from a stationary camera, Behzad remains off-screen while Zeynab is filmed mainly from behind, though we can see her hands milking the cow. He idly flirts with her and casually remarks, 'I'm one of Youssef's friends – in fact, I'm his boss.' He also speaks to her somewhat condescendingly about Forough Farrokhzaad (1935–67) – a writer of erotic feminist poetry who is widely regarded as Persian literature's finest woman poet and Iran's greatest twentieth-century poet.

It is important to stress that this poem has never been censored in Iran, and even though Farrokhzaad remains a controversial figure – in part because of scandals involving her volatile love life – she is so adored that there would surely be a public outcry if any of her poetry were suppressed. (Most Iranians refer to her affectionately as 'Forough'.) Another scene in the film briefly and quite incidentally shows us a pair of fornicating cows, yet no Iranian I have spoken to has suggested that this detail might be worrying the censors. In other words, it appears that they consider the viewer's imagination more dangerous than anything that is seen, and for this reason they find the erotic atmosphere in the cellar unacceptably provocative. It is a scene with echoes in Behzad's encounters with an older woman who runs a local cafe and some local women he photographs, all of whom seem to see him as an invader and his car and camera as weapons.

In the title sequence of *The Wind Will Carry Us* absences define presences in numerous ways. In fact, many major characters in the film – including Mrs Malek, Youssef, and all three members of Behzad's crew – are never seen. Most of the sequence unfolds in semi-darkness, and it is not until the very end of it, after Behzad leaves, that we get to see Zeynab's face in broad daylight, and then only from a distance. (Her refusal to show him her face, even when he asks her to, is obviously a way of resisting his aggressive behaviour.) Kiarostami's reasons for leaving things out probably have little to do with censorship and a great deal to do with the viewer's imagination – not to mention an understanding of what human presence consists of in film, particularly when microphones play at least as important a role as cameras in the overall design. (Kiarostami spent months working on this film's sound track, which is every bit as creatively selective – and therefore composed – as the images; he told me he studied Robert Bresson's films for guidance.) Furthermore, Kiarostami's insistence on throwing us back on our own resources – refusing to take us into the village houses, for instance, except for the scene in the cellar where we can barely see anything – means that we have to become navigators of his elliptical spaces along with Behzad. (In one exterior scene, viewed from a balcony, Behzad

accidentally drops a green apple to Farzad (played by Farzad Sohrabi), who is on a lower level; it rolls this way and that on a magically unpredictable course – a zigzagging pattern repeated throughout the film, effectively charting the opening shot as well as the last. The recurrence of such patterns in Kiarostami's work from the path in *Khane-ye doust kodjast?/Where is the Friend's House?* (1987) to the kicked spray can in *Nema-ye Nazdik/Close-up* (1990) – amounts to a directorial signature.) The TV antennae that dot the village help us realize that these people are no more beyond the reach of media than the media people are beyond the reach of the village. The key point is that they speak different body languages, occupy different time frames, and utilize power quite differently. For instance, the villagers often deferentially refer to Behzad as 'the engineer', and in some ways Kiarostami seems amused by their automatic respect for him as he is by Behzad's equally automatic indifference to most of their concerns.

I began by describing contemporary Iranian cinema as the most ethical in the world. The particular ethics of *The Wind Will Carry Us* consist largely of Kiarostami reflecting on his own practice as a 'media person' exploiting poor people: Behzad may be the closest thing in Kiarostami's work to a critical self-portrait, at least since the hero in his highly uncharacteristic 1977 feature *Report*. The most obvious marker of this auto-critique is Behzad's cruelty when, during a moment of angry frustration, he kicks a turtle onto its back and leaves it stranded, though the turtle manages to right itself as Behzad drives back down the hill. A far more telling, if subtle, moment occurs just before the title sequence, when Behzad asks Farzad to fetch him a bowl to carry the milk he is about to get from Zeynab, though the boy keeps insisting he is too busy and wants to get back to his work in the fields. The full ethical resonance of this scene is likely to pass unnoticed by viewers unfamiliar with Kiarostami's shooting methods – he often works without scripted dialogue, directly interviews his nonprofessional actors himself, and then incorporates their responses into dialogue between his fictional characters. (The line between documentary and fiction in his work is almost always ambiguous.) Part of this movie's vitality is that it feels as up-to-date as the post-election fracas in Florida – Behzad and his crew waiting for the old woman to die recalls the spin doctors impatiently awaiting recounts and judges' decisions while telling us what they presume we are thinking. (Speak to any stranger about what is going on and you are likely to find yourself in sympathetic accord, regardless of how each of you voted; but turn on the TV and you will see angry partisan squabbling and name-calling and endless accounts of our alleged impatience.) The faulty technology of the city slicker – Behzad's recalcitrant mobile phone – also calls to mind our flawed balloting machinery. Both induce a frenetic, contorted, slapstick dance in us as

we try to overcome our helplessness in the face of the machines that rule our lives.

By concentrating on the death of a century-old woman in the year 1999, Kiarostami also seems to be making some sort of millennial statement – something that possibly means less inside Iran, which has a different calendar. By comically divvying up his world into media ‘experts’ and peasants – moguls with cellular phones and ordinary working people – he is raising the issue of who owns this world and who deserves to.

Is there any more pressing and relevant global issue at the moment? This is the film’s major theme, though I hasten to add it is not the only one. One of the major themes of *Ta’ m-e Guilaas/Taste of Cherry* (1997), Kiarostami’s previous feature – mortality in general and the process of being buried in particular – returns here as a secondary theme, along with the equally relevant motif of birth. (A human thighbone, found in Youssef’s hole and carried around for a spell by Behzad, functions as a highly suggestive prop.) Uniting all of these themes is poetry – lines from Rumi and *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* as well as Forough Farrokhzaad – which sometimes appears to be the biggest thing the characters have in common.

With the possible exception of a doctor on a motorbike – who exudes warm and familiar folk wisdom with a little more facility than I would have liked and reminds me a bit too much of the Turkish taxidermist in *Taste of Cherry* – Kiarostami’s reading of what separates the media savants from the farming people generally avoids sentimentality and Cant. One reason for this that I have already suggested is that Behzad remains a troublingly equivocal figure, a hero we can neither accept nor reject wholeheartedly. The very fact that we are watching a film places us in some respects on his side and against the villagers, whether we want to be there or not, so Kiarostami works overtime attempting to rectify that balance and show us things Behzad is unlikely to notice.

Perhaps the most impressive of these things is the village itself, with all its intricate interweavings, ambiguities and declivities – it is an architectural marvel both as a subject and a backdrop. *The Wind Will Carry Us* offers an intricately constructed spatial world that is as breathtakingly beautiful, as various, and as cosmically evocative as a Brueghel landscape – a world teeming with diverse kinds of life and activity – and it teases us whenever we want to get to know this world better, seducing and evading us at the same time.

Jonathan Rosenbaum

(This is a short version of Jonathan Rosenbaum's review first published in the *Chicago Review* on 8 December 2000.)

The Deserted Station

Istgah-e Matrook

Studio/Distributor:

Ima Film

Director:

Alireza Ra'isian

Producer:

Hosein Zandbaf

Screenwriter:

Kambozia Partoee (Based on a short story by Abbas Kiarostami)

Cinematographer:

Mohammad Aladpoush

Editor:

Hosein Zandbaf 88 minutes

Cast:

Leila Hatami

Nezam Manoochehri

Mehran Rajabi

Maliheh Nazari

Mahmood Pakniat

Year:

2001

Synopsis

On a pilgrimage to Mashad, a couple's transportation breaks down in the middle of the desert, far from any major town. While the wife is waiting in the car, the husband, a photographer, seeks help at a nearby village and encounters a teacher

who offers to help. Women and children are the only inhabitants of this strange deserted place, without any men, save the teacher. Whilst the husband and teacher go off to find a spare part in the nearest town, the wife takes over teaching lessons in the village. Before the men's return, the wife who is desperately longing for having a child, wanders in the village and tries to communicate with women and children living in the village. At the end of the day, when the car is repaired and the couple is ready to get back on the road to continue their journey, the children help to bring a new hope and life into the wife's heart.

Critique

The Deserted Station is another production of Iranian art-house cinema directed by Ali Reza Ra'isian, who is among the new generation of Iranian filmmakers influenced by Kiarostami's cinematic style. Ra'isian made this film based on a script by Kiarostami yet despite similarities on a base level, it is different to Kiarostami's work from a thematic aspect. The film's simple story and pacing might lead an audience familiar with the Iranian cinema to assume that this is yet another insipid, talkative movie which will leave them feeling bored and exhausted by the time they leave the theatre. And while the *Deserted Station* does not fall short of accordance to this presumption, it nevertheless manages to tell the story in a gripping manner with a faint air of suspense and intrigue.

The film concentrates on the familiar elements and imperative features of new Iranian cinema, such as a poetic flow and documentary aesthetics. Utilization of nonprofessional actors for the main roles (except for that of Leila Hatami), uncertainty, ambiguity, open-ended storytelling, and in particular leaning on two peoples' dialogue for plot and character exposition, are other cinematic elements that Ra'isian borrows from Kiarostami's cinema. Leila Hat-ami's role in this film (for which she was granted the Best Actress award at the 'Montreal World Film Festival'), her acting style, as well as her character's loneliness and infertility, is reminiscent of her performance in Dariush Mehrjui's *Leila* (1996).

The photographer in the film is a typical modern, urban middle-class Iranian who has not found his real identity yet and is wandering between modernism and tradition. He is not able to fix a relatively small problem without the aid of others, taking photos and useless curiosity in other's lives is the only thing he is able to accomplish. Ra'isian's fatalistic approach is conveyed through the doomed characters of the film, such as the photographer's wife who suffers from infertility, and the paralyzed girl in the village, as well as the dull lives of the other children in lesser part, to enhance emotional impact and aid in the portrayal

of a world where people are fated to an unfortunate life.

The remote village is a cursed unknown place, motionless and undeveloped; its only visitors are travelling salespersons or those who may become stranded. The cinematography of the landscapes of the desert is spectacular but the film suffers from some serious weak points and undeveloped ideas. For example, in the scene where the couple's car hits a deer (a scene seemingly based on David Lynch's *The Straight Story* [1999]) and its sudden breakdown is contrived and implausible. Sometimes we see a truck loaded with soldiers passing on the road and apparently the only one who is able to see them is the photographer. Even though this might indicate a particular concept, it does not resonate well and seems to be an imposed idea.

Parviz Jahed

Bitter Dream

Khaab-e Talkh

Studio/Distributor:

Touba Film

Director:

Mohsen Amiryousefi

Producers:

Mohsen Amiryousefi Roohollah Baradari

Screenwriter:

Mohsen Amiryousefi

Cinematographer:

Bayram Fazli

Editor:

Mohsen Amiryousefi

Duration:

87 minutes

Cast:

Abbas Esfandiari
Mohsen Rahimi
Delbar Ghasri
Yadollah Anvari
Asghar Kazemi

Year:

2004

Synopsis

Esfandiar is an old man who washes the dead at the mortuary, and after forty years of working as an undertaker, now he feels that the time of his death has come. Esfandiar is the head of the cemetery, and he feels very powerful, and for this reason he sees everything through his television. With his camera, he also notices the most secretive things about the people around him. Everyone fears him. He is very clever and accounts for everything, so much that he can even cheat the angel of death. The characters working at the cemetery each have different encounters with one another, but in front of Esfandiar they are tamed and obedient. Esfandiar is even despotic towards his students who want to learn the methods and customs of washing the dead bodies. One day, whilst preparing a burial service, he is taken ill. Might he too be mortal?

Critique

Mohsen Amiryousefi's debut feature film, a dark comedy about the human condition of a traditional man with simple concerns in the modern world of today, seems to be different from films produced in contemporary Iranian cinema, with its purpose finding success at international film festivals. Although the film has some familiar characteristics of new Iranian cinema, such as a documentary-look with nonprofessional casting, there are other elements which differentiate it.

Amiryousefi's satirical outlook, non-linear narrative, and shadowy characters is extraordinary in Iranian cinema. *Bitter Dream* depicts the simple life of Esfandiar, an aging mortician, in nineteen episodes. By choosing Esfandiar's point of view as the first person narrator, the director has successfully managed to penetrate the character's internal world and portray his dreams and

nightmares. The film was shot in an old cemetery in the ancient city of Sedeh (currently known as Khomeini Shahr) which is 800 years old, with few characters (one grave-digger, a female mortician and a halfwitted young man who burns dead people's clothes), all of them non-actors playing their own roles in real life.

At the beginning of the film, a report (just like a routine state TV report) is broadcasted on TV about Sedeh's ancient cemetery, and shows a mason sitting in front of a camera telling the history of the place. We get to know all of the film characters one by one through this report. They all appear in front of the TV camera and after introducing themselves begin to criticize Esfandiar and his behaviour. They are displeased with him and claim that he has mistreated them. Then the camera pulls back and shows Esfandiar at home watching TV, and through a live contact via a cell phone threatens the young man whose job it is to burn the clothes of the dead.

Television plays a crucial function in the narrative style of the film; its interactive relationship with its viewer is used by the filmmaker in an innovative way, and its role is more than just a simple entertaining medium, it actually serves as a means of articulating the conscience of the lead character. By means of the television, the director makes intervals and builds the mosaic frame of his film according to what's going on in and out of the TV screen. In fact it reflects the true image of Esfandiar and the people around him. Esfandiar's position as a traditional man who belongs to the old world with a limited knowledge about television and his reactions to what he sees leads to a satiric and grotesque situation even though we can still have our psychoanalytical interpretations, according to Freud and Lacan's theories.

Although the film location is restricted to a cemetery and its personnel isolated because of their job, *Bitter Dream* is not totally abstract and separated from the contemporary world. In the episode of Azrael, the angel of death and the elderly man, Esfandiar's dialogue with Masseur has obvious alluding to Iran's today events: Esfandiar: 'What's up?' Masseur: 'Nothing. Cost of living is high. Everyday meat and bread becomes more expensive. Tomorrow one will be hanged. Two stepped on a mine. One couple wanted to go to Karbala illegally.'

But the movie is distinctively focused on death and fears of facing the angel of death. Because of his job, Esfandiar is aware of death more than any body else. But this awareness does not cause him to give up his materialistic concerns and stop oppressing his co-workers and abusing them. When Delbar (a widowed mortician whom Esfandiar is in love with) brings him some food and wants to make a call to her daughter, he asks for the fee of washing four dead bodies in return for the phone call. Esfandiar who has lived all his life in such a dreadful

world finds himself as co-worker and fellow of the angel of death. He is strongly scared of death and is haggling over his life with the angel. In one scene, he is sitting next to him near a grave and we see Yadollah, a grave digger, whispering a song with the gist of 'to be or not to be' alluding to the graveyard scene in Hamlet. Esfandiar desperately says 'What a life... our existence doesn't make sense', to which Yadollah wickedly says, 'Particularly yours!'

Bitter Dream indicates a kind of strong and destructive cynicism which makes it clearly distinguishable from the common cheap Iranian comedies. The surreal scenes related to Esfandiar's nightmares and anxieties; in the bathroom when he begins to see his own burial service broadcast on TV, and in the final frightening scene where Esfandiar awaits his death and prepares his own funeral, are the two brightest scenes in the film. Mohsen Amiryosefi, with his previous experiences in making short films, takes a big step in his first feature film which is a foretelling sign of an illustrious and creative career to come. *Bitter Dream* achieved 'Mention spécial jury Caméra d'Or, Prix Regards Jeunes', at the 'Cannes Film Festival' in 2004. It also won the 'FIPRESCI Prize' at the 2004 'Geneva Film Festival' and the 'Golden Alexander' for Best Film at the 'Thessaloniki Film Festival' in 2004.

Parviz Jahed

At Five in the Afternoon

Panj-e Asr

Studio/Distributor:

Makhmalbaf Film House

Director:

Samira Makhmalbaf

Producer:

Meisam Makhmalbaf *Screenwriter:*

Samira Makhmalbaf (Based on a story by Mohsen Makhmalbaf)

Ebrahim Ghafoori *Composer:*

Mohammadreza Darvishi (Based on traditional Afghan music)

Editor:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Duration:

105 minutes

Cast:

Agheleh Rezaee

Abdolghani Yusef-zay

Marzieh Amiri

Razi Mohebi

Gholamjan Gardel

Halimeh Abdolrahman

Bibigol Asef

Jeram Kazagh Mina Anis

Year:

2002

Synopsis

The film focuses on the improved situation for women in Afghanistan after the collapse of the Taliban, and follows the life of Noghreh, a young girl who goes to school, against the will of her fanatically religious father. At school, besides teaching the Koran, new arguments are set forth and the teacher asks her students what they want to do when they grow up. Each student gives a different response and in between all, Noghreh answers that she wants to become the president of Afghanistan, and with this wish, she must face and overcome multiple struggles through her life. Idolizing political figures such as Benazir Bhutto and Indira Gandhi, she sets out to learn more about them. She asks around, but even Afghans who have lived in Pakistan for years are unable to fulfil her intrigue. In the end, Noghreh meets a young poet who wishes to aid her in becoming president.

Critique

After the international success of *Sib/The Apple* (1998), and *Takhté siah/Blackboards* (2000), Samira Makhmalbaf made her third feature length film

At Five in the Afternoon based on a script written by her renowned father Mohsen Makhmalbaf, set in post Taliban Afghanistan. The film was met with relative success and won the 'Jury Prize' at the 'Cannes International Film Festival' in 2003.

In this film, Samira Makhmalbaf tries to make a firm and audacious statement against antiquated religious thinking and the fundamentalist and pro-violence interpretation of Islam. The film is the emancipating voice of women fed up with the oppression of the ignorant outlook and values of Taliban-ism and the anti-feminist beliefs which come hand in hand. Noghreh is among those who take the opportunity to reclaim these rights and counter repression in the supposedly free post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Noghreh is at odds with the traditions that still remain in the country, the most prominent being her father who gives no regards to the rights of women, and bears strong religious convictions. He has forced her to attend Koran study sessions, but once her father drops her off at the Maktab (Islamic religious school), she sneaks out through the other gate, takes off her burka, puts on her white high heel shoes, holds an umbrella above her head, and strolls towards the school in which Afghan girls dare to speak in front of the principle about their actual hopes and future. In response to the school principal, she replies that she wants to one day become the president of Afghanistan, and this in a society that not long ago, deprived them of their most basic social rights.



At Five in the Afternoon, Makhmalbaf Film House.

Samira aptly demonstrates in this film that even though the Taliban are dead, the Taliban way of thinking is alive and strong among the people, both young and old. Through the indications she makes, Samira tries to make the roots of this way of thinking known to the audience. There are explicit references to verses of the Koran, in which God has identified men as the guardians of women, or has declared men superior to women. The film, however, does not stop at this subject, but looks at other areas as well. Throughout the film, we are provided with a picture of the devastation rife in the war-torn country; drought, hunger, poverty, homelessness, and vagrancy have driven people to the edge and wiped away all their human qualities. In one scene particularly reminiscent of neo-realist cinema, an old couple who have stolen one of Noghreh's chickens refuse to admit the theft and take a false oath.

Like Samira's previous works, *At Five* creates a fusion of the styles and structure of poetic storytelling with the gritty realism of a documentary, enhancing the humanistic approach of the film. Samira's sexual concerns are also noticeable, as they had been in *The Apple* and *Blackboards*. She puts great emphasis on the feminine qualities and the sexuality of her film's main female character, and in addition to her thoughts, she tries to take a glance at her feminine world, and through a metaphorical and symbolic expression, depicts her innermost feelings and erotic desires; desires which have been severely

repressed in the closed, Taliban-stricken, religiously suppressive Afghan society. In a scene which takes place in the ruins of an old palace, by using very simple audio elements such as the sound of a horse's steps, wind, water drops and of a woman's high heels, Samira has managed to create a surreal and erotic atmosphere that is at odds with the violent and masculine world outside the palace.

It seems that in this film, Samira has been greatly influenced by Federico García Lorca's poems and his poetic and surrealistic visions. The film's title echoes a recurring verse from Federico Garcia Lorca's poem, 'Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejia' (1935), which describes the tense and deadly atmosphere of civil-war-stricken Spain. The film develops a sombre atmosphere of tragedy, death and despair concurrent to this verse. Also of note are the metaphorical and symbolist aspects, separate from the titular poem. For example, the stress put on the wheels of the cart, which are slowly moving towards no-man's land, indicates to the lengthiness of the democratization process of Afghanistan and its uncertain outlook. The buckets hanging over Neghreh's shoulders make her look like an angel and a purveyor of justice, who wants to extend her feminine compassion to the oppressed people of Afghanistan.

Samira Makhmalbaf's film manages to advance several steps in the execution and flow in comparison to her previous work, *The Apple* and *Blackboards* and she continues to establish her place as one of the leading female Iranian directors with this film.

Parviz Jahed

It's Winter

Zemestan Ast

Studio/Distributor:

AMA Media

Director:

Rafi Pitts

Producer:

Mohammad Mehdi Dadgar

MOHAMMAD MENUI DAUGOO

Screenwriter:

Rafi Pitts (Based on the story 'Safar' by Mahmoud Dowlatabadi)

Cinematographer:

Mohammad Davoodi

Art Director:

Malak D Khazai

Hossein Alizadeh Mohammad Reza Shajarian

Editor:

Hassan Hassandoost

Duration:

78 minutes

Drama Art house

Cast:

Mitra Hadjar

Ali Nicksolat

Saeed Orkani

Hashem Abdi

Zahra Jafari

Naser Madahi

Safari Ghassemi

Year:

2006

Synopsis

In a low, pale light, the camera alternates between close-up framings of two silent, middle-aged men. The first, Mokhtar (Hashem Abdi), hangs his head with his facial features disappearing in a dark pool of shadows. The second looks ahead ruefully, his eyes welling with tears, as he puffs on a cigarette. After the latter closes and padlocks a set of wooden doors – we learn subsequently that he is being forced to close his place of business – the film cuts to a wintry, blue-tinted exterior twilight. The film then cuts to a telephoto composition of Mokhtar trudging through the thick snow covering the sidewalk. A voiced-over male

singer (Mohammad Reza Shajarian) can be heard announcing: 'They won't return your greeting... for their heads are ducked into collars.' Having returned home, Mokhtar is asked, 'What are you doing here?' The gentleman explains to his wife Khatoun (Mitra Hadjar) and the family matriarch (Safari Ghassemi) that he plans to go abroad where employment is plentiful, hoping someday to send for Khatoun and their daughter (Zahra Jafari). With the sun low on the horizon, Khatoun and the little girl send Mokhtar off at the train station stop and the steam from the locomotive swallows up the snow-covered platform.

Truck headlights become visible in the pitch black night. A clean-cut, thirty-something gentleman with hair slicked back, Marhab (Ali Nicksolat), asks for food and lodging at a remote roadhouse. In the morning, he joins a young man, Ali Reza (Saeed Orkani), who is seated alone. The pair strike up a quick friendship, with Ali Reza eventually helping Marhab find work in his garage, though only after the latter scours the town for employment, ultimately finding (unskilled) work as a window-washer. In the meantime, Khatoun is employed as a seamstress in a factory, having yet to receive word or financial assistance from her departed husband. The single Marhab notices Khatoun as they cross paths in the rail yard beside the latter's home, and again as the comely married woman rests her head, sleeping against the bus window. (Throughout this section, Pitts cuts frequently between Marhab and Khatoun at their respective workplaces.) After seeing Khatoun unsuccessfully negotiate a price for a child's red sweater, Marhab attempts to curry favour with the married woman by purchasing the item for her daughter. Though the young girl beams as she looks at the knit top, her grandmother objects to the gift exclaiming that the girl has parents.

Shortly thereafter, however, a police car arrives at Khatoun's remote country home with Marhab looking on from the adjacent rail yard. Marhab correctly speculates that her husband has died, prompting an unsuccessful meeting between the single man and the widowed woman (where Khatoun demands to know why he is following her). Following another typically indeterminate period of time, Marhab borrows money to buy Khatoun a rug, which he delivers to her house, carrying the long, heavy object over his shoulder. In the next shot, we see the two grinning and laughing in a telephoto composition at the bus stop. The film then cuts to the pair as they wait for their marriage license, and again, as they cross the train tracks on foot. Nonetheless, Marhab subsequently has a falling out with his employer (Naser Madahi) leading the impetuous male lead to state that he will look for work elsewhere as long as he receives compensation for his unpaid work.

It is winter again, and the now unemployed Marhab tells his friend that he intends to go abroad to find work. Returning home, Marhab packs a bag

intends to go abroad to find work. Returning home, Marhab packs a bag, repeating the scene of Mokhtar's departure. Outside, a man stares at the house in the dark. Back at the roadhouse, Marhab laments his fate that, having finally settled down, 'after a rough, homeless, restless life', he must again go in search for work. A one-legged man soon arrives at the same location, prompting the proprietor to complain about this latest arrival, and to relate his unenviable personal history. In the daylight again, under another thick snowfall as Marhab waits at the train station, the disabled gentleman throws himself in front of the arriving train off-screen. With the train now stopped, Marhab must decide whether he will board the train or return to his wife and stepdaughter across the railroad tracks.

Critique

For his archly mythic fourth feature *It's Winter*, writer-director Rafi Pitts adopts a supremely elliptical storytelling strategy that threads together a series of chronological narrative events and interstitial moments, whose temporal inter-relationships are rarely specified – that is, Pitts rarely lets us know how much time has passed between his film's scenes. In characteristically art film terms, Pitts refuses to utilize dissolves, on-screen titles, and in most instances even establishing shots to mark the varying temporalities between his sequences; instead, it is left for the viewer to speculate on the duration of the narrative gaps after the new sequences commence. *It's Winter* accordingly represents a maximal art-house economy, a film built of a series of illustrative, glossed details. *It's Winter* spends a minimal amount of time in the diegetic world it has created.

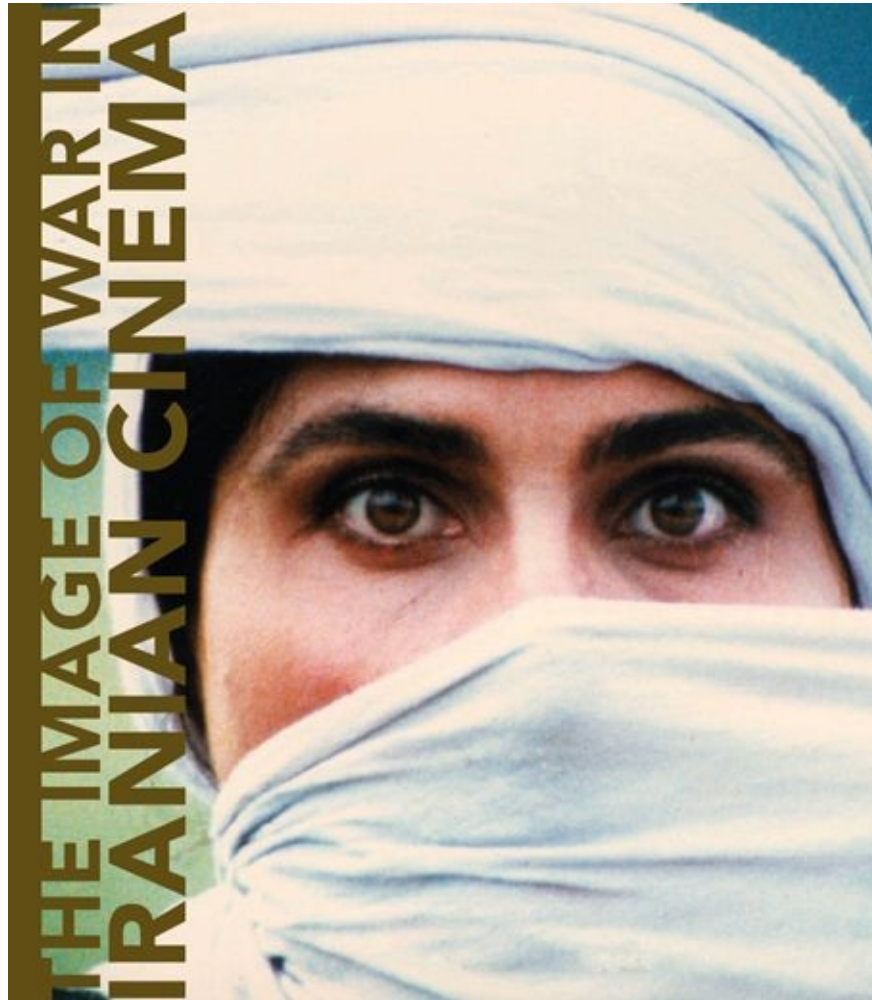
Then again, the film reveals a material abundance through its lyrical imagery. In its opening moments, for instance, where again we see Mokhtar shuffling through the thick snow that buries the sidewalk, the damp flakes collect on the toes of his boots. Following a cutaway to an overcast landscape with the same heavy snow accumulating on crisscrossing black branches as a group of squawking blackbirds take flight, Pitts cuts to Mokhtar examining the landscape with the thick flakes sticking to the back of his black wool coat and raven hair. We also watch as Mokhtar stirs a boiling pot of tar, ladles the smoldering substance with a small bucket, and spreads the syrupy liquid across the stone foundation. As such, Pitts emphasizes extreme heat to contrast with the throbbing cold that distinguished the previously noted set-ups. In sum, *It's Winter* creates a very strong feel for the tactile experience of its natural environment. Hence, Pitts's film paves the way for Argentine art-house director

Lisandro Alonso's expressly sensorial *Liverpool* (2008), whose credits in fact thank Pitts directly.

Of course, these same landscapes express meaning mimetically as well: as the snow falls on Mokhtar as he walks beside the deserted highway, we feel the full force of his despair following the loss of his job. Pitts and director of photography Mohammad Davoodi further accentuates his melancholy, along with that of wife Khatoun and later Marhab, through the near ubiquitous use of blue filters that provide the film's images with their cold tone. In this respect, *It's Winter* signals its substantial debt to the art cinema of its co-country of origin, France.

Much of its recognizably Iranian character, on the other hand, issues from the predominance of absences that mark the film, from Mokhtar's emigration to the story elisions that characterize the narrative. Ultimately, this latter storytelling structure and the film's related visual evasions (such as the extreme long-shot maintained by Pitts during Khatoun's inaudible conversation with the police) serve to allegorize life in a nation where so much remains hidden from view. It also relates Pitts's work to that of his countrymen Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi, who each share a similar emphasis on visual and narrative absences, along with a concern for the Persian woman. Khatoun's more existential plight does indeed structure *It's Winter*, even if the narrative is focalized more frequently through the equally mythic experiences of her husbands. Where Marhab in particular is allowed to express his feelings directly, Khatoun's remain unspoken; they provide the film with a structuring absence.

Michael J Anderson



Bashu, the Little Stranger, Utopia Distribution.

The emergence of the war genre in Iranian cinema demonstrated how movies were efficient at presenting the mood of a country. The Iran-Iraq war began when Iraq invaded Iran on 22 September 1980 following a long history of border disputes. Although Iraq hoped to take advantage of revolutionary chaos in Iran and attacked without formal warning. The war came at a great cost in lives and economic damage – a half a million Iraqi and Iranian soldiers as well as civilians are believed to have died in the war with many more injured and wounded; but brought neither reparations nor change in borders. The conflict was often compared to the First World War because tactics included large scale trench warfare, manned machine-gun posts, bayonet charges, use of barbed wire across trenches and on no-man's land, human wave attacks, and Iraq's extensive use of chemical weapons against Iranian troops and civilians as well as Iraqi Kurds. Despite calls for a ceasefire by the United Nations Security Council, hostilities continued until 20 August 1988. The last prisoners of war were exchanged in

2003. The great impact of the war on Iranian society was reflected in every aspect of life, and steered Iranian cinema in a new direction, with the depiction of ground, air and sea battles, as well as the bombing of cities and Iraq's use of chemical weapons.

One of the major Iranian cinematic experiences was the production of numerous war documentaries by institutions such as the Art Department of the Islamic Relations Organization and the Islamic Republic of Iranian Television. Simultaneously the Iran motion industry recognized a certain moral duty in an era of national emergency. There was not a heritage of war film in Iranian cinema and hence the films adhered to a written/unwritten guideline for a specified interpretation of military life, and complied with accepted standards of dignity and propriety. The early war films attempted to adjust the Iranains' mentality toward the necessity of combat and delving into the proof necessary for war. In this period the action combat films became popular among young audiences. *Paygah-e Jahanami/A Military Base in Hell* (Akbar Sadeghi, 1982), *Oghabha/The Eagles* (Samuel Khachikian, 1984), and then *Gozargah/Passage* (Shahriar Bahran, 1986) were particularly successful in the box office. These films about special combat forces became the model for the commercial war films to come: action as entertainment, morale-booster and simultaneously the glorification of death. Thematically, these films were strongly anti-Iraqi and demonstrated the Iraqi forces as men who are not religious as opposed to Iranian forces. It portrayed the Iraq army as sadistic tyrants, but it does, however, show them as an incapable enemy. At the same time combat scenes presented a special challenge in Iranian cinema and promoted its special effects craft. Since the enemy symbolized a spiritually evil force, the films tended to base significant action on the premise of any good person's response to the oppressive atmosphere of the war situation; hence, even a small battle represented a whole war.

Increasingly war movies became more and more dependent on the armed forces for expensive props: planes, ships, tanks, and so on. The army's aid to Iranian cinema in the form of these materials came with stringed attaches. The role of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in the war became the subject of a number of films; a military body, this was one of the strongest institutions to be produced by the Islamic Revolution, and was a primary instrument in promoting goals. The character most readily identified with the Iranian war genre was the Revolutionary Guards fighter: a very calm man with a beard who speaks sincerely and is ready to die to rally support for his ideology/religion (Islam). He was humbled in his presence and understood his isolated disposition and the

chain of command changed from an orderly military ranking system to the ritualistic worship of martyrdom. All these emphasized that the metaphoric equation of war with religion, gender, and ideology was inevitable. Films such as *Janbazan/Bravados* (Naser Muhammadi, 1981) demonstrated the cooperation between the army and the Revolutionary Guards during the war through the relationship of two old friends on either side. In *Parchamdar/The Stranded Bearer* (Shahriar Bahrani, 1985) the Guards fights the enemy both at the front and in the cities. They were also active in the war-stricken cities of *Balami be Suye Sahel/A Boat Towards the Shore* (Rasul Molaghlipour, 1984) and in the battleground of *Ofogh/Horizon* (Rasul Molaghlipour, 1988) and in *Ensan va Aslahe/Man and Weapon* (Mojtaba Ra'ie, 1988).

At the peak of the war, many films were made in which ordinary, simple men go to the front voluntarily, encouraging the younger generation to join the battle. *Rahaei/Deliverance* (Rasul Sadr-Ameli, 1983) and *Hesar/Fence* (Hijjatolah Seif), *Do Cheshm-e Bisu/Two Semi-Blind Eyes* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf), *Zang-e Aval/The First Bell* (Nezam Fatemi), *Ma Istade'im/We Are Standing* (Akbar Hor) and *Sarbaz-e Kichak/The Little Soldier* (Saeed Bakhshaian), all made in 1984, depicted the anger, the religious and patriotic stirrings, and other 'gut feelings' of the ordinary citizen.

Gradually, Iranian war films dealt with new stories. Most were based on the actual experiences of their young makers who had served in the military or the Revolutionary Guards and endured war first hand. Ebrahim Hatamikia, Rasul Mulagholipur, Hossein Ghasemi-jami, Kamal Tabrizi, Jamal Shurjeh and Javad Shamaghdari were notable among this group of filmmakers. One of the first films to take a new approach was *Dyar-e Asheghan/Lover's Place* (Hassn Karbakhsh, 1983). It told the story of a young man of no particular convictions or beliefs, who at the end of the film volunteers for military duty, believing the war will purify the soul. Years later some films, particularly from the post-war era had a clearly defined difference of themes in war movies. They placed human motives under a microscope, representing a journey of self-discovery through war. Ebrahim Hatamikia is the best known of these filmmakers. His three films, which also explore the religious themes, *Hoviyyat/Identity* (1986), *Dideban/The Scout* (1988) and *Mohajer* (1990), were highly praised by Iranian film critics. *Identity* is about a young, irresponsible man who is mistakenly identified as a wounded soldier. Having witnessed the bravery and sacrifices of others, he undergoes a moral and personal transformation. Hatamikia was concerned here, with the religious identity that was forged during the war. In *The Scout* and *Mohajer*, he effectively portrayed human beings in the heat of battle

against the background of personal adventure. The core of these films did not develop directly from the physical disasters of wartime but rather from the attitude of the main character/characters with the situation of war. But again, the central theme was martyrdom in the service of faith.

In these films the lonely fighter denounces all material possession and earthly desire to find salvation in martyrdom. *Obur/Crossing* (Kmal Tabrizi, 1988) and *Cheshm-e Shishei/The Glass Eye* (Hossein Ghasemi-jami, 1991) were exemplary of such films, in which the hero transforms concepts such as loyalty and sacrifice into a spiritual journey. Audiences witness the loneliness and pain of separation from his family and loved ones, but victory for him did not necessarily mean returning home alive. Both films beautifully and poetically captured the heroism and bravery of the men who fought there – and does so without impassioned speech or gushing patriotism.

Kilometer Five/The Fifth Kilometer (Hijatollah Seif, 1980), offered a more realistic portrayal of war, avoided the usual worship of action films, and did not glorify the war. But *Bashu, Gharibeh Koochak/Bashu, the Little Stranger* (Bahram Beyzaie, 1983) was a landmark film to explore the effects of the war. It is the tale of a boy who has lost his family in war-torn southern Iran and escaped to the peaceful of north. There, the dark-skinned, foreign-speaking boy was homeless and alone. Controversially, he was taken under the wing of a stern farming woman of two, played by Sossan Taslimi, whose husband has gone to war. The film remained a sincere, sometimes shattering, and often courageous attempt to depict the scars of war through human relationships. The splendid performance of Adnan Afravian, an ordinary young boy from the war-stricken regions of southern Iran, as the trapped, intelligent refugee torn between racism, war and love, epitomized all that was best in Iranian cinema in this decade. It was the humanist, anti-war and anti-racist sentiments of the film that kept it from the screen for three years.

The post-war films became more and more cynical about the effects of war. *Abadaniha/Abadians* (Kianish Ayari, 1993) was seen through the eyes of a young boy from a war-refuge family living in Tehran and focuses on his father's struggle to provide for his family during the war. The film follows a young father's increasingly desperate search through the maze of streets in Tehran for the man who stole his car, the source of his livelihood. A quest which forces them to question their prides and values. The man is pitted against an entire city of nameless and insensitive faces during the war and the boy symbolizes the innocence that can be endangered during this period.

Masud Kimiaie, through *Dandan-e Maar/Snake Fang* (1989) illustrated the

harsh way of life experienced by young immigrants who had come to Tehran during the war. The film was about the lives and loves of the socially excluded, but it was also about Tehran during the war whose poor areas are portrayed as a dilapidated wasteland of stagnant water and tiny dwellings. The film draws the audience into the frightening private world of a young refugee woman from war-stricken provinces in a car through an infernal Tehran. Some films looked sensitively at the veteran's agonizing experience of the military/civilian culture clash. In *Gorohban/The Sergeant* (Masud Kimiai, 1991) the main character should deal with the challenges of restarting his life and returning to the family he left behind. And the man in *Vasl-e Nikan/Union of the Good* (Ebrahim Hatamikia, 1992) faced his own obsessions in becoming a civilian again after many years in combat. Both films focused on how the military men were affected by war and illustrate the stark contrast between their relatives and their post-war personalities.

Az Karkhe ta Rhine/From Karkhe to Rhine (Ebrahim Hatamikia, 1993) is about a war veteran who is suffering as a result of the chemical weapon invasion during the war. He is sent to Germany for treatment (the film is shot entirely in Germany) and meets his sister and her German husband. The picture is drenched in instinctive authenticity, from the agonizing lifelessness of the hospital to the waiting for imminent death. The veteran's life was filled with pain and frustration and became a series of confusions: remembering the past, self-pity, and irritated confrontations with his sister. This is a film about beliefs, played out through the personal experiences of a man who paid dearly for what he learned. It is not a movie about battle or recovery, but a movie about Iranians like Hatamikia, who considered themselves 'sons of war' and changed their attitudes about the war.

The tendency was that Iranian war films became even grimmer and less hopeful, revealing the savage excess of casualties and martyrdom. In *Safar be Chazabeh/Journey to Chazabeh* (Rasul Molaghlipur, 1996), two friends travel back in time to the 1980s where they meet their old war companions. In this rapid-edit time-travel drama with virtually no plot, the war scenes are presented with a new sense of understanding about war. The infliction of horrible, excessive damage by troops on the civilian population was depicted for the first time in Iranian cinema. He avoids glamorization through gritty sets and authentic clothes and mannerisms, while his camera is not squeamish in its increasingly lurid depiction of dead bodies. Blood, gore, and bereavement are the images through out the film due to their pessimistic and apprehensive effects. The invisible enemy is everywhere, swiftly dispatching the young soldiers. *Journey*

to Chazabeh is a harrowing and very effective political war film which asked questions that had never been asked by Iranian cinema. Who had held the authority to command the troops? Had he put the mission before his men? Who died and who survived? Critics both praised and criticized the film for its presentation of the violence seen in the war and the moral ambiguity created by the realities of war at the fronts. Molaghlipur profiles in this film naked power and its effects with a graphic explicitness seldom seen in Iranian cinema.

Hamid Reza Sadr

The Eagles

Oghabha

Studio/Distributor:

Roshan Film

Director:

Samuel Khachikian

Producers:

Aliakbar Mazinani Mansoor Mazinani

Screenwriter:

Mohammadreza Yoosefi

Cinematographer:

Aliakbar Mazinani

Composer:

Majid Entezami

Sound Recordists:

Mohsen Roshan

Jamshid Tofighi Eshagh Khanzadi

Editor:

Samuel Khachikian

Duration:

95 minutes

Cast:

Saeed Rad

Jamshid Hashempour

Zari Boroomand

Reza Rooygari

Shahab Asgari

Aliakbar Ilkhani

Morteza Nikkhah

Behzad Rahimkhani

Reza Nazarian

Year:

1984

Synopsis

On 31 Shahrivar 1359 the Iraqi forces attack Tehran. The air force station 1 in Mehrabad is ready to combat and the first attack is going to be made on Iraq soil by the fighter aircraft F5 under the control of Lieutenant Derakhshan. The attack operation is successful. As the result, other operations are also done by the fighter aircrafts under the command of Lieutenant Derakhshan. At the same time, Lieutenant Pooya is heading to Kurdistan in Iraq, ordered by his group of ground force to conduct some recognition operations. When he arrives in the area, the aircraft used by Lieutenant Derakhshan crashes. Lieutenant Derakhshan uses his parachute in order to save himself but is attacked by Iraqi soldiers and Lieutenant Pooya fights with the Iraqi soldiers and rescues Lieutenant Derakhshan who is hurt. He takes him to a villager's house who is in opposition to Sadam Hussein's Regime. The people from Iraq Intelligence Office are searching in the Kurdish villages to find the Iranian pilot. When they arrive at the place where Lieutenant Derakhshan is hiding, they are confronted by the villager, Khan. But when they forced their way into the house, they see a body, which is said to be one of the Khan's sons who was killed by an Iraqi soldier. The next day, they put Lieutenant Derakhshan in the coffin instead of Khan's son, while the whole village is in blockade. When taking the coffin to the grave, one of the Iraqi soldiers finds out and a fight starts among the soldiers, the villagers and Khan's sons. Lieutenant Derakhshan manages to escape on a

motorcycle with Lieutenant Pooya. On their way, the motorcycle hits a land mine and is blown up. Lieutenant Pooya is killed but Lieutenant Derakhshan survives.

Critique

The Eagles was made by Samuel Khachikian and is the first war film in Iran cinematography that has a dramatic, epic structure and was made during the war between Iran and Iraq. It was definitely made for people who felt the dramatic sense of war. Samuel Khachikian is among the first generation of the directors in Iran's History Cinematography and he conformed to the values and artistic and cultural views after the Islamic Revolution. He made films not only popular among people in society but also films compatible with the situation and taste of the new regime.

Khachikian is among a few filmmakers who have made films about the Iran and Iraq war and has a patriotic tendency towards the war. In this sense it is similar to the films of Hatami Kia and Mola Gholi with its Islamic belief and martyrdom in the style of war movies. The filmmakers themselves have experienced war and therefore visualize what they have actually seen, subsequently creating a vivid atmosphere of war and adding realism to their films, and showing the realistic bitterness of war. Khachikian tried to make films in the style of Hollywood war genre movies, which is where his style of filmmaking differs from that of Hatami Kia and Mola Gholi.

The Eagles brought thirty per cent of Tehran's population to the cinema seats when it was first released. That was at the time when Iraqi forces were attacking Iran's capital city.

The Eagles has a fast pace and observes the logic of action and war adventures. It begins quickly and goes straight into the main topic without any introduction. In the first two scenes, the Iranian pilots attack the enemy in their soil twice and the aeroplane crash and survival of the injured pilot in Iraq accelerates the tempo of the film. In the last half of the movie, when the pilot and Lieutenant Pooya (played by Jamshid Arya) escape from the Iraqi soldiers, the director makes the most of the dramatic scene with the least cost, and yet it is as successful as Italian war movies.

Unfortunately the characters presented are rather weak and Khachikian feels no need to explore their minds and only their basic presence in the story is important to him. It is the heroes of the film that provide most of the drama and adventure, especially the tragic death of Lieutenant Derakhshan (played by Saeed Rad) at the end of the film. *The Eagles* is a good example of a

professional epic Iranian movie. Its propaganda has been very popular with viewers wanting to make sense of their own involvement in war.

Alireza Majmae

Bashu, the Little Stranger

Bashu, Gharibe-i Koochak

Studio/Distributor:

Utopia Distribution

Director:

Bahram Beyzaie

Producer:

The Institute for the Cognitive
Development of Children and
Young Adults (IIDCYA)

Screenwriter:

Bahram Beyzaie

Cinematographer:

Firooz Malekzadeh

Art Director:

Editor:

Bahram Beyzaie

Duration:

120 minutes

Genre:

Drama

Cast:

Soosan Taslimi Adnan Afraviyan

Year:

1986

Synopsis

At the time of the Iran-Iraq war, during an air raid, a frightened boy jumps onto the covered back of a truck, which passes through deserts, mountains and valleys. The next morning as the driver is having breakfast in a coffee house the boy emerges from under the cover to find himself in a quiet verdant road. Then scared from a roadwork explosion, he runs across the woods and paddy fields. A village woman, Na'i, finds and offers him food and water. He does not eat, but follows her to find a shelter. Na'i traps him in her barn and leaves him some food. The next morning she speaks to him, but her Gilaki Persian is as incomprehensible to him as his Khuzi Arabic is to her. Na'i learns his name by repeating her name and asking about things. His name is Bashu.

Na'i's neighbours ridicule Bashu's dark complexion, but Na'i insists that he will be white once she washes him. They gather in Na'i's house to convince her to send Bashu away. He may be a thief or have a disease. But Na'i sends them away. Na'i nurses Bashu who has fallen sick. In a letter to her husband, Na'i tells him about Bashu and her intention to keep him until his relatives are found. With the sound of a passing jet, Bashu starts shouting and hides. The children laugh at him and they fight. In the middle of the fight, Bashu hesitates between picking up a stone or a soiled Persian textbook. He picks up the book and reads: 'Iran is our country. We are all Iran's children.' People are surprised. Now that he understands 'the language of books', he is more easily accepted.

Bashu gets lost in the day market. Na'i is sad. As people gather to criticize her or express their happiness, Bashu appears in the road. Frightened by their angry questions, he backs off and falls into the river. Na'i saves him with her fishing net. While dancing together for the fertility of the land, the children fight with Bashu. Na'i defends him. The villagers are angry at Na'i for beating their children, but when the children reconcile, they calm down. In a letter, Na'i's husband asks her to send Bashu away. They cannot afford another child. Bashu finds the letter and runs away after reading it. In the middle of a storm, Na'i finds him hiding in a ramshackle barn and brings him back. Na'i falls sick. Bashu tries to heal her by drumming on a basin.

Later when Bashu is guarding the field, a man asks him for water and praises him for his scarecrow. Then Bashu finds the man talking to Na'i. She looks upset. He picks up a stick, but learning he is Na'i's husband, asks for a handshake. The man's arm is missing. Having realized what has happened, Bashu cries and embraces the man. They hear animals in the field and shout and run together to shoo them away.



Critique

Bashu, the Little Stranger is a deceptively simple film about compassion and adoption. Yet it is also a mythopoetic subversion of Iranian tragic tales of loss and belonging, akin to the myth of Siyavash; and a realistic statement against war and the efforts of the post-revolutionary government to reinstate patriarchal values. As the last film in Beyzaie's village trilogy, it brings two of his major characters – the powerful independent woman and the wandering visionary orphan – together to redefine the meaning of womanhood and nationhood in Iran. Thus unlike *Gharibeh va Meh/The Stranger and the Fog* (1974) and *Tcherike-ye Tara/The Ballad of Tara* (1978) his stranger is not a man coming from a violent unknown or a forgotten past, but an Arab Iranian boy dislocated due to a war imposed by 'an Arab nationalist'. If the first two films bring the present and the past and the known and the unknown together to negotiate an Iranian identity that has to overcome its obsession with death and heroes, *Bashu* explores the possibility of communication across geographical, linguistic, and ethnic divides to construct an Iranian identity cognizant of its ethnic variety. While reflecting on language and ethnicity as markers of otherness, it depicts the process that transforms Bashu's 'Otherness' into sameness for Na'i, and through Na'i's agency, for the village. As the first film in Iranian cinema which

challenges the idea of a monolithic nationhood, it promotes an ethnically aware sense of togetherness by depicting intense humane emotions in scenes where protagonists speak in regional languages. Na'i's Gilaki Persian and Bashu's Khuzi Arabic work with the expressive beauty of their faces to intensify Beyzaie's symbolic orchestration of the visual and auditory images that depict Iran as a microcosm, a multi-ethnic nation that has to acknowledge its variety to transcend the limitations of ethnocentrism.

The film begins with a series of images and a sequence of ritual Persian, Arabic, and Turcoman music forms that take the spectator on a journey in time and space which emphasizes variety to suggest the emptiness of the artificial markers of Iranian nationhood; the Aryan ethnic purity and Persian high culture of the Pahlavi period (1925–1925) and the Shiite religiosity of the post-revolutionary government. This opening prepares us for a symbolic reading of the encounter between Bashu and Na'i, in which Na'i, as a human goddess, or as Iran, presents open arms to the lost child of its past denials. With Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980, many Arab Iranians migrated from Khuzestan to various parts of Iran. Despite some initial conflicts, due to the lack of accommodation, these people easily settled in their host communities. Beyzaie's film is a poetic celebration of this significant development. It encounters the gibberish of Iran's radical nationalism by marking Arabness as one of the modalities of being Iranian and glorifies Iran, as a country with a woman's name, by showing how it acts as a mother to a dislocated minority within its borders.

Na'i's role as the divine spirit of Iran is revealed from the first scene the spectator encounters her. Her head abruptly comes up to fill the frame in a challenging close-up that confronts the gaze of the spectator with a powerful gaze that provokes admiration rather than voyeuristic lust. The imposition of the Islamic codes of conduct during the 1980s required that women had to be covered in all scenes and could not be shown in their intimate relations and in close-ups. Beyzaie challenges this imposition by offering a new kind of woman to Iranian cinema. Na'i is as real as a village woman, but she is also divine. The scene when Bashu find himself under the gaze of Na'i and her children does not take place in the early 1980s, but in a timeless zone, in the junction of myth, metaphor, politics and history. So are the scenes when Na'i nurses Bashu in the middle of the night, washes him to make him white, fishes him out of water as if giving birth to him, or when she immerses herself in a *sama* (mystic dance) of child labour as Bashu conducts a healing *zaar* ritual for her. Her natural beauty and her ability to commune with hunting birds and other animals remind us of

the image of Anahita, the hospitable ‘beautiful-bodied’, ‘unornamented’ ‘mother of waters’ and ‘goddess of rivers’, standing under the figure of a hunting bird in a Sassanid plate.¹

The film also evokes the sense of space and time in indigenous performing traditions. As a technique in *ta'ziyeh*, *goriz* (diversion) allows movements between different locations and periods to relate all the major events of Abrahamic religions to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. Predicting the use of psychological time and space in modern literature and that of flashback and foreshadowing in cinema, the technique suggests the power of association in the human mind. Beyzaie's film uses *goriz* as a technique to give psychological depth to his characters. The mirage of Bashu's mother appears to help him and Na'i negotiate their new relationship. At first she only appears to Bashu to act as a bridge between his past and his present. But after Bashu 'becomes' Na'i's son as she fishes him out of the river, in scenes that suggest Na'i's sympathy with an absent mother, the mirage only appears to Na'i to help her accept Bashu as her son. Beyzaie invests on these surrealistic interventions and delays the use of formal Persian as a linking medium to allow his protagonists to rediscover each other through sympathy, compassion, and the ritual enactment of common pain and shared loss rather than language. He also includes several fertility and healing rituals to enrich this ritual aspect and to show the similarity of Iranian peoples despite their differences. The film thus becomes the ritual of rediscovering a new form of nationhood, in which ethnic and linguistic differences are acknowledged, but the essential similarities of Iranian peoples and the unifying heritage of Persian language are glorified. It brings myth, history, ritual, and performance together to create a locus of negotiation from which a new form of nationhood is to emerge.

Saeed Talajooy

Note

1. See Susan Gaviri, *Anahita dar Ostoorehai-e Irani/Anahita in Iranian Mythology* (Tehran: Qoqnoos).

Marriage of the Blessed

Arousi-ye Khouban

Studios/Distributors: Farabi Cinema Foundation

Institute for the
Cinematographic Affairs of the
Mostazafan
Janbazan Foundation

Director:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Producer:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Screenwriter:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Cinematographer:

Ali Reza Zarrindast

Composer:

Babak Bayat

Editor:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Duration:

75 minutes

Genres:

Drama
Social critique

Cast:

Mahmud Bigham
Roya Nonahali
Ali Abadan

Ali Abadi

Ebrahim Abadi

Mohsen Zehtab

Hossein Hosseinkhani

Ameneh Kholdbarin

Mohammed Reza Bahmanpoor

Year:

1989

Synopsis

The film narrates the story of Haji, a profoundly traumatized veteran of the Iran-Iraq war. Returning from the front Haji seems devastated and incapable of readapting to normal civilian life. The help provided to him by doctors and his fiancée is proven insufficient. Haji endeavours to return back to his civilian job in the newspaper but in his reportage in the streets of Tehran he comes face to face with images of social injustice and intense misery. Suffering with clinical depression and with the war memories poisoning his life the protagonist openly challenges Iranian society's demand for heroes and sacrifice in the name of duty to the nation. Haji becomes the absolute anti-hero of the Iran-Iraq war, the result of pseudo-patriotic propaganda.

Marriage of the Blessed, Farabi Cinema Foundation, Institute for the Cinematographic Affairs of the Mostazafan, Janbazan Foundation.



Critique

Marriage of the Blessed is a pivotal point in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's career. Disappointed by the ideals dominating Iranian society and politics, the director utters the first words of criticism against the regime. The director unfolds his sharp criticism by inserting in his usual poetic style sequences of pure delirium, disturbing flashbacks, pseudo-documentary action and clinical atmosphere. The mental institution sequence is the perfect paradigm of how Makhmalbaf's cinematic strategies are orchestrated so as to cause the viewer's disgust over the evils of war. As we enter the clinically white room of the hospital the war veterans' acting impresses with its theatricality. Then an inmate screams 'The Holy Martyrs' and we are transformed to the snowed battlefield. The hectic, clinically white present is poisoned by the bloody past of the war. Makhmalbaf does not find refuge in Brechtian devices; his flashbacks are footnotes explaining his hero's state of mind and their intensity at times is almost unbearable for the viewer. To take things further, Makhmalbaf's strategies of shock may also trigger flashbacks to the audience about experiences locked inside the subconscious: like the images of domestic abuse, passing in front of our eyes as repressed memories.

From the opening sequence then Mohsen Makhmalbaf progressively proceeds to a deconstruction of the militaristic mythology and ends criticizing the official ideology of Iranian society. The title itself directly attacks the myth of the 'soldier-knight of the faith' fighting in war, with his beloved woman waiting for him back home as a reward. Apparently Mehri, Haji's fiancée, despite her desperate efforts, cannot comfort her traumatized husband to be. She decides to stand by him still. The two of them are presented by the director as society's victims that symbolically rebel against its irrationality. When she endeavours to bring him back to his pre-war life by showing him photographs, as if he is suffering with amnesia, he remains adherent to watching the old documentary on African famine screened on TV. Haji's experience has changed the orientation of his personality so deeply that now the only images that can distract him from his war memories are other images of profound misery. Naturally, when returning to this work to the newspaper, Haji retains his newly-discovered need for social awareness. He is only interested in taking photographs unveiling the social injustice and homelessness in his city. The pseudo-documentary quality of Haji's social injustice survey in the streets of Tehran claims reality, and the moment of self-reflexivity, when his crew is being questioned by the police, both testify for the auto-biographical character of the film. This multi-layered oeuvre, social critique, auto-biographical manifesto, rupture to the artist's past, marks Makhmalbaf's new directions both in life and filmmaking.

Nikolaos Vryzidis

The Sergeant

Gorohban

Studio/Distributor:

Hedayat Film

Director:

Masoud Kimiai

Producers:

Ahmad Najafi

Mehdi Farivar Mohseni

Masoud Kimiai

Screenwriter:

Masoud Kimiai

Cinematographer:

Mahmood Kalari

Composer:

Giti Pashai

Editor:

Masoud Kimiai

Duration:

87 minutes

Cast:

Ahmad Najafi

Golchehreh Sajjadih

Shahed Ahmadloo

Mirmohammad Tajaddod

Saeed Pirdoost

Mohammad Abdollahi

Abbas Ghajar

Hosein Maleki

Mohammadvali Ahmadloo

Aghdas Sehatbakhsh

Nasrollah Kabiri

Habib Masoomi

Ali Zandi

Year:

1990

Synopsis

Rostam, who is a retired army sergeant, returns to his hometown when the war ends. His wife has raised the children single-handedly and now she works in her brother's car garage. Rostam decides to get the piece of land for which he signed an agreement years ago, but the other side of the deal rejects his proposal.

an agreement years ago, but the other side of the deal rejects his proposal. Rostam and his 14-year-old son go to the forest and start cutting down the trees. The landowner's men beat him badly. Rostam's wife, who is a Russian immigrant, is sick and tired of the situation and wants to return to Russia with her mother when the Russian border is opened. Rostam goes to the landowner's house with his friend, who is also a retired army officer. He manages to get back the ownership document, but his friend is killed. He then goes to the border and brings his wife home.

Critique

In *The Sergeant*, Masoud Kimiai created an indirect portrayal of Iranian lives under the influence of war. Rostam is a sergeant in the Iranian Army who has been fighting in the war between Iran and Iraq for many years, away from his wife and child. And he returns to find his old life to have collapsed during his absence. He has fought on the front line for many years to protect the borders of his country from enemy attack and when back home, he finds himself having to fight with the opportunists who have arrogated his life and land.

The main characters in Masoud Kimiai's films are often a sinful, proud, bullheaded, disparate group of people and in this film the same applies, with Rostam. The heroes who have common personalities in each period and situation and are very aggressive and intractable yet they suppress their feelings and disappointment to such a degree that after facing so many situations, their final outbursts results in a tragic finale. The heroes in the film are more imaginative, the fictional creation of Kimiai rather than being found in real society and they mainly result from his idealistic and to some extent pessimistic view of life. The character of the sergeant in this film is not a true representation of a real sergeant in the army of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He is the same wounded hero in Kimiai's other films who this time has returned from service and wants to get his right from society and to bring to justice those who have cheated him in his own way. Kimiai's heroes do not believe in relying on the law or police to defend their rights, choosing to take their own revenge. However, the hero of this film, the sergeant, ultimately sacrifices himself in his attempt to achieve the justice he desires.

The sergeant does have a marked difference from those of Kimiai's previous works. Though Rostam is a soldier at war, he is very worn and impotent in his appearance and character. The name Kimiai has given to him, Rostam (a fabled hero from Ferdowsi's *The Shahnameh*) is at odds with his appearance. In other words, Rostam in *The Sergeant* can be seen to parallel the character of Don

Quixote, who fights imaginary demons, which are in reality windmills. He is a hero from a bygone time who has been too late to act. Viewing the protagonist in such a scolding manner in a Kimiai film is a new experience.

Like a film from the classic western genre, Rostam enters a dark and deserted city, where death is all around him. The film is slow in pace in the beginning but speeds up as the demonic personalities are added up. The bad characters in the film are not well developed and are typical of the macho and virile obstacles, common in Iranian film, and are exaggeratedly malignant. And in the same way, the final scene of the film is a great scene where Rostam battles Nasser who is the 'highest-ranking' of his opponents.

Besides the main theme of the film which is the conflict between good (Rostam) and evil (Nasser's gang), there are other themes like Russian migrants returning to Russia after the collapse of communism which are not exposed in the best way. Rostam's mother-in law is a lonely woman returning to Russia after several years of living in migration, and her homelessness is a sarcastic mirror to Rostam's situation who is homeless himself and feels like a stranger in his own homeland.

Mohmoud Kalari's gloomy widescreen frames and his usage of fog filters provide a cold, sad, and tedious atmosphere in the film which resonates with the situation of the leading man of the film, who is a lonesome and hopeless hero.

Parviz Jahed

From Karkheh to Rhine

Az Karkheh Ta Rine

Studio/Distributor:

Sina Film

Director:

Ebrahim Hatamikia

Screenwriter:

Ebrahim Hatamikia

Art Director:

Mahmoud Kalari

Composer:

Majid Entezami

Editors:

Hosein Zandbaf

Mohammadhosein Daroshafae

Duration:

93 minutes

Cast:

Homa Roosta

Ali Dehkordi

Hans Noiman

Andrias Kortez

Sadegh Safae

Asghar Naghizadeh

Farzaneh Asgari

Majid Safavi

Nikel Gril

Noorbert Hanzing

Year:

1992

Synopsis

Saeed, is an Iran-Iraq war victim who has headed to Germany for his eyesight treatment, comes across his sister, Leila, who has lived in Cologne with her husband and son, Jonas for many years. Saeed gets his sight back after the surgery and he is coped with the new and strange atmosphere around him. Saeed is getting ready to come back to Iran but everything goes wrong. Further examinations show that he suffers from leukemia. His disease has apparently resulted from chemical gases used in the war. When Saeed's sister finds out about his disease, she tries to prevent any situation which will cause him stress, as the doctors advised. But Saeed becomes very ill when he watches the video of Iran's leader Ayatollah Khomeini's funeral which was recorded by his brother in law. So, they take him to the hospital and he dies there while doing

chemotherapy. This happens while Saeed's wife and his newly born baby are coming to Germany to meet him. The last scene of the film shows that the family of Saeed's sister is going back to Iran with his wife.



From Karkheh to Rhine, Sina Film.

Critique

The war melodrama of *From Karkheh to Rhine* is one of the first Iranian war films made with a critical view towards the war and its destructing consequences on the life of those who survived in the war. Saeed, has a patriot and also a fundamentalist view toward the war which is opposite to his sister's point of view who lives in Germany. Although Saeed is a victim of the war, he still sticks to the belief that the war he has attended was a holy war against the enemies of Allah and he ultimately dies for this belief. Hatamikia avoids an idealistic view in his film by picturing three Basij militia (members of mobilized forces volunteered for war) who have different points of view towards the war which is unlike the official state views towards the issue. Among them, Nouzar has lost his faith to the war. He is in Germany for treatment and he is doing his best to seek asylum. Asghar still adores the war gropingly and with prejudice, and Saeed the leading character in the movie, is a moderate person who does not judge anyone and does not try to find anyone guilty. He makes a balance between the two others.

Hatamikia's liberal approach makes the characters to have unpredictable format and frame and that they respect each other's ideas. Even Saeed's

complaint to Nouzar who is trying to become a refugee is not out of this format, because Saeed's complaint is not to the nature of his action, but to the method he has selected to show his objection. Saeed does not like the idea that Nouzar is selling himself cheaply. This matter is not limited among these three people; it exists between his sister and his relationship as well. The brother is talking about the 'angels' wings' and the sister talks about wisdom and logic; the brother talks about the positive points of the war and the sister talks about the catastrophic nature of it.

The film starts with a metal tag which is a symbol of martyrdom and ends with a flying scene, which symbolically refers to freedom. There is a scene which emphasizes Hatamikia's anti-war message very well, a scene in which the German reporters are making a film on the chemically injured soldiers in Germany and Saeed starts coughing when he tries to answer the questions of these reporters. *From Karkheh to Rhine* won the 'Crystalline phoenix' for Best Film at the 'Tehran Fajr International Film Festival' in 1992.

Alireza Majmae

Leili's With Me

Leili ba Man Ast

Studios/Distributors: Sobhan Film

Farabi Cinema Foundation

Director:

Kamal Tabrizi

Producer:

Kamal Tabrizi

Screenwriter:

Reza Maghsoudi

Cinematographer:

Mojtaba Rahimi

Composer:

Behnam Ahtahi

Editor:

Kamal Tabrizi

Duration:

100 minutes

Cast:

Parviz Parastooi

Mahmood Azizi

Shohreh Lorestani

Mehdi Faghih

Ali Ghaffari

Year:

1995

Synopsis

Sadeq, who is a television cameraman, runs short of money while making a house for himself. His efforts to rent out the house and to get a loan fail. At a colleague's suggestion, he agrees to make a short trip to the area behind the front line as a cameraman to win the favour of the authorities to get a loan. Despite his fear, Sadeq heads for the south along with one of his colleagues named Mr Kamali but he is drawn to the front line against his will. As he struggles to get as far as possible from the front line, he is drawn nearer and nearer in a series of odd incidents. Meeting the combatants at the front, his attitude toward the war changes little by little. He even advances into Iraqi soil and destroys several Iraqi tanks. Then he gets wounded and is hospitalized. At the hospital, he tells Mr Kamali and his friends he is ready to go to the front again.

Critique

Leili's With Me is the first Iranian war-comedy – an uncommon genre in Iranian cinema – and deals with the story of a man who unintentionally steps into the war zone, and puts himself, or is put by other people, through some sweet and bitter adventures. Among the various types of comedy, there is none perhaps as sensitive and as interesting as war, due to its sharp contrast with the concept of comedy. In *Leili's With Me*, Kamal Tabrizi deals with a subject and theme that

is, in his own words, like ‘walking on a sharp blade’ because what we had seen prior to this point in most other Iranian war films was the same old recurring subject, characters, and the same sense of loyalty and commitment. Because of the filmmaker’s inherently inventive nature, and thanks to a script that stays away from the cycle of repeating old storylines, *Leili’s With Me* came out as a simple and fine film, distant from the obsolete clichés that have been part of the war and comedy genre in Iranian cinema for years.

The film’s two main characters, *i.e.* Sadeq Meshkini and Enayatollah Kamali, are created with subtlety and sincerity. At the beginning of the film, the filmmaker achieves his goal of attaining harmony between form and content in a very effective way by using short and concise flashbacks, as well as through dialogue. The use of the idea of returning to the past requires that two important elements be observed, which more or less has been the case: one is conciseness and the other is breaking the linear timeline. No mind in reality, especially that of a person like Sadeq Meshkini who has involuntarily stepped into a war zone, can review events in a detailed and concrete form, particularly not in a sequential manner from the start to the end along with all the ups and downs. Flashbacks are there to help throw away unnecessary and redundant details and to show events in all their dimensions and from all perspectives, inside and out. In the film’s opening scene Sadeq is talking to Kamali about his reasons for going to the war front, there is a cut to a flashback scene of a conversation between Sadeq and Mansouri, and then the rest of the talk between Sadeq and Kamali, or in Sadeq’s monologues – in which he complains about being at the front. All this helps in a peripheral way to move the story forward and prevent the film from becoming too long and boring. In this form of narration and by using concise dialogues, the characters – especially the film’s two main roles – have been quite nicely and effectively portrayed, and it raises the viewers’ empathy and curiosity about their eventual fate.

Despite all of the filmmaker’s ‘concerns’ about creating his intended ‘feel’ using the elements of satire and humour, and staying away from nonsense, the film does fall short in the second half (starting from the scene of Sadeq in the outdoor barbershop), especially in the film’s final scene, where Sadeq and another soldier are faced with an enemy tank. The film’s clichéd ending (*i.e.* Sadeq’s transformation) is inexcusable, and seems like a step by the director to tone down the possible sharpness of the film’s main message (to escape a likely ban or censorship).

Abbas Baharlou

Minoo Watchtower

Borj-e Minoo

Studio/Distributor:

Fajr Cinema Organization

Director:

Ebrahim Hatamikia

Producers:

Majid Modarresi Mohammadmehdi Dadgoo

Screenwriter:

Ebrahim Hatamikia

Cinematographer:

Aziz Sa'ati

Composer:

Alireza Kohandehri

Sound Recordists:

Mahmood Sammakbashi Hamid Parsa Hoseini

Editor:

Bahram Bayzaie

Duration:

95 minutes

Genre:

War film

Cast:

Niki Karimi

Ali Mosaffa

Mohammadreza Sharifinia

Ali Nasirian

Parisa Shahandeh

Tooran Mehrzad

Mina Jafarzadeh
Nazanin Karimi
Jahan Nemati
Nahid Sedaghati
Behnaz Farhangdoost
Sanaz Movahhed

Year:

1995

Synopsis

Minoo is just recently married to Moosa and they are busy taking their stuff to the new house. Moosa, a former militant, is informed via a letter that the Ghoghnoos watchtower in the power plant located on Minoo Island should be dismantled as he is the only survivor of the battlefield. He does not like to go for this work because he does not want to revisit his memories of the war now that the Iran-Iraq war is over. He is getting ready to go to Isfahan for his honeymoon but with Minoo's persistence and even though alMoosa is not fond of the idea, husband and wife go to Minoo Island. While there, Moosa recollects the period when he was making a tower with Minoo's brother, Mansoor, in order to make a better place for identifying the enemies. Mansoor is martyred and Minoo tries to picture her brother with Moosa and she asks Moosa to stay by the tower to find Mansoor there. She manages to picture her brother's martyred moment. But she could not bear it and when coming down the tower, she hurts herself. When she becomes conscious in the hospital, she finds a note from Moosa saying that he has left her because the present life of luxury they have is in sharp contrast with the simple life he used to lead during the war. In the end, Minoo returns to Moosa and helps him dismantle the watchtower.

Critique

Ebrahim Hatamikia is a well recognized filmmaker in Iranian war cinema and *Minoo Watchtower* is his eighth film in this genre and also a turning point in his filmmaking career. In *Minoo Watchtower* he has used uncommon rules and a non-linear narrative to depict a dramatic story about the Iran-Iraq war and Iran's Basij militia martyrs. Hatamikia portrays a different atmosphere of the war by combining symbols and realism. The name of the characters and places are

symbolic. Moosa or Moses is a prophet who doubts during his prophecy and God guides him to faith. *Minoo* is the other name for heaven and is considered as a sign from heaven on earth. Mansoor is the symbolic reference to Hossein ibn Mansoor Halaj, Iranian Gnostic in the third lunar year who preferred to follow love rather than his wisdom and insisted on his belief till the end. The last is *Ghoghnoos* (meaning phoenix) a mythic bird which is born again in its ashes after being burnt.

Hatamikia, reaches an objective reconciliation of force and option. The obligation generates from the movie's main character, who is a part of the war unwillingly, and the option generates from willing to become a martyr in the battle field. Moosa cries out on top of the tower, 'Haven't we learned to choose?' In addition to the war, a metaphysical force is also overshadowing the characters and events in the movie; a force that causes damage to their car and changes their route from Isfahan to Abadan when the couple are heading towards Minoo Island. There is a narrow border between imagination and reality and in no scene do we see Moosa, Mansoor and Minoo together. Hatamikia gets involved with Iranian women's roles on the battle field for the first time in this film. Bahram Bayzayee, the veteran Iranian filmmaker, has played an important role in the movie's success as the editor of the film and has strengthened Hatamikia's formalistic intentions.

Alireza Majmae

The Glass Travel Agency

Ajans-e Shishei

Studio/Distributor:

Varahonar Co.

Director:

Ebrahim Hatamikia

Producer:

Ali Komijani

Screenwriter:

Ebrahim Hatamikia

Cinematographer:

Aziz Sa'ati

Art Directors:

Hamidreza Charakchian

Mazyar Mirhadizadeh

Composer:

Majid Entezami

Editor:

Hayedeh Safiyari

Duration:

118 minute

Cast:

Parviz Parastooi

Reza Kianian

Habib Rezaee

Mohammad Hatami

Asghar Naghizadeh

Ghasem Zare'

Sadegh Safaee

Bitra Badran

Nasrin Nakisae

Ezatollah Mehavaran

Year:

1997

Synopsis

Abbas is a Basij militia from a small city, who has a mortar shell in his jugular vein near his neck, dating back to the war time. His wife, Narguess, has persuaded him to go to Tehran to visit a doctor. In Tehran he comes across a friend who they met first during the war between Iran and Iraq. His name is Kazem and his only income is by working as a taxi driver with his own car.

The doctor finds Abbas's situation critical and advises him to go to London

for taking the mortar shell out. Kazem accepts to sell his car in order to support Abbas financially in the trip. As the person who wants to buy the car does not arrive the agency on time, they were not able to purchase the ticket. Kazem suggests to the agency's manager to accept the car's key and documents until the money arrives, but the manager does not accept. Kazem becomes angry by the manager's refusal and starts breaking the windows of the agency. He disarms a policeman and takes the travellers in the agency as hostage. In a short time, the agency is surrounded by police and security forces. In the meantime, another friend of Kazem and Abbas, named Asgahr, enters the agency as well and joins them while another man, named Ahmad, another acquaintance from the war time, with his colleague Salahshoor are entering the agency as the representatives of the security forces and ask Kazem to disarm himself. Kazem only accepts to free some of the hostages and gives time to Ahmad and Salahshoor to send a car by 6 o'clock on the other morning to take him and Abbas to the airport. At 6 o'clock the next morning, no car is available for them, so Kazem chooses the agency's manager as his first murder but fakes the scene of killing him. At the end a car comes and the security and police force enter the agency and manage to free all the hostages and Salahshoor believes all has ended to it best. But then Ahmad comes with a helicopter, with an order in hand from the high ranking authorities to take Abbas and Kazem to the airport. Just before the aeroplane leaves the country's border, and just in time of the Iranian New Year, Abbas dies in the aeroplane due to his sickness.

Critique

After the end of the eight-year deadly war between Iran and Iraq, there was a significant change in Iranian filmmakers' approach toward the war. Instead of depicting epic stories about war, their attention was drawn more towards those who fought in the war but were alienated later on. But it took nearly ten years for Ebrahim Hatami Kia, the famous Iranian war filmmaker, to create an after-war drama based on his personal experience and his close relationship with Basij Militia and those involved in the war. It was made in the early years of Mohammad Khatami's Presidency which is considered as the political reform era in Iran.

Hatami Kia took the opportunity to criticize the new political situation and the living condition of the war heroes with a plot openly inspired by Sydney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). *The Glass Travel Agency* is one of the spectacular and highly successful films in the Iranian war film genre. Its success is due to the high technical quality, attractive *mise en scène* and powerful drama.

The two protagonists of the film, Haj Kazem (played by Parviz Parastooyi) and Abbas (played by Habib Rezaei), are forced to take hostages in a travel agency. The anarchism in their actions is a reflection of a generation who put their lives in danger to save their country but got nothing in return. The conflict between these characters and the security forces (Salahshoor and Ahmad Koochi) who are attempting to rescue the hostages is the dramatic pillar of the film.

The screening of *The Glass Travel Agency* brought up lots of discussions and criticisms among Iranian film critics. Some perceived Haj Kazem as a prejudiced reformist who will go so far as to take hostage in order to reach his goal; some respected him even more than Salahshoor (the security force) who ignored respect for the war heroes by thinking more about national security and preferring to think about the next generations rather than those who lost their lives in the war.

There is also a third group in the film who took the balance by giving the right to both the protagonists and antagonists of the film. But it is noticeable that the director shows more sympathy to Haj Kazem rather than to Salahshoor. *The Glass Travel Agency* was screened in the 19th 'Tehran Fajr Film Festival' and received the best film prize and was also welcomed by the audience in public screening. Being asked about the film, Ebrahim Hatami Kia emphasized on the fact that: 'I wanted to prove that I can make a war film without shooting a single bullet! We just used a blank in this film.' This is referred to the scene where Haj Kazem disarms the security force and he shoots into the air to disperse the forces.

Alireza Majmae

Gilaneh

Studio/Distributor:

Fadak Film

Directors:

Rakhshan Bani Etemad Mohsen Abdolvahab

Producer:

Saeid Sa'di

Screenwriters:

Rakhshan Banietemad
Reza Maghsoudi
Mohsen Abdolvahab
Morteza Poursamadi

Editor:

Davood Yoosefian

Duration:

84 minutes

Cast:

Fatemeh Motamed Arya
Bahram Radaan
Baraan Kousari
Jaleh Sameti
Shahrokh Foroutanian
Majid Bahrami
Nayyereh Farahani
Hadi Hoseini
Farideh Daryamoj
Amirhosein Ghodsi

Year:

2004

Synopsis

Naneh Gilaneh witnesses his dearest son Esmaeil going to war, while Meygol's daughter wants to go to Tehran to find her husband and the family's son in law. Gilaneh is forced to go along with her to the capital city, in a situation of air bombing attacks on Tehran. When they get to the address they had, they realize that the man has left and has emptied the house. Years have gone by. We now see Gilaneh who is living in a cottage on top of a hill in northern part of the country with her paralyzed son who came back from war years ago. Gilaneh is not feeling well, and even though she has become very old herself, but she is forced to take care of her young boy. With these conditions, the visits of her ex

daughter in law who has married another man after Gilaneh's son became paralyzed, the kind doctor who comes over occasionally to visit Gilaneh's paralyzed son, and the travellers that sometimes stop by and buy things from the old woman's little stand and leave are not at all a remedy. The news shows films of the US Military attack on Iraq.

Critique

Gilaneh is an anti-war film made by Rakhshan Bani Etemad and his long-time collaborator Mohsen Abdolvahab. The film, like other Bani Etemad films, is focused on a female character (a single mother) who is suffering in life. The main theme of the film is around the issue of suffering Iranian village women and how the Iran-Iraq war has impacted their lives destructively. The main problems with the film are that the narrative structure is too episodic and it has been divided into two separate parts.

Apparently, the second episode of the film had already been made as a short film and so, in order to turn it into a feature film, the first episode was made and added to it. This maneuver is counted as a wise decision; instead of expanding the second episode or picturing the situation as a continuation of the second episode (for instance the conflict in the scene when Gilaneh wanted to transfer her disabled son to a nursing house), the story is flashed back to fifteen years before. However, it is not specified why in the first episode Gilaneh's first daughter was centred as the main character of the film beside Gilaneh herself, whilst, in the second episode, she is not present. This issue has weakened the structure between the two episodes, and consequently, the film has no consistency. In the current form of the film, what matches the two episodes of the film is Gilaneh's personality and the other characters like Maygol and Ismaeil are just there to show Gilaneh's suffering, and as such they are not characterized strongly. At the end of the film, when Ismaeil asks his friend, who is a doctor, to prepare his mother by persuading her to be taken to the nursing house, he adds that his mother is 'struggling' which shows his awareness of his mother's situation, but it is ignored in the film, because no good recognition of Ismaeil's character is provided.

The filmmakers did not go further than pity for Gilaneh and they do not invite the audience to fathom the social situation of this woman and the causes of her suffering. Her relations with others, her doubts and disappointments, are not shown in the picture. The filmmakers could not penetrate into the characters of the film, particularly Gilaneh, and show their inner tensions and agitations. They looked at the film characters from a distance which is a destructive consequence

of documentarism in Iranian fiction films and dramas, a method of filmmaking which does not allow filmmakers to enter into the inner world of characters.

Fatemeh Motamed Arya as Gilaneh, is acceptable. Although her acting is exterior it is not superficial or exaggerated. She has tried her best to portray Gilaneh's character and situation by her way of walking, her bent back, the way she works, and her manner of talking and she has for the most part been successful. In Bani Etemad's style of *mise en scène* we usually see Gilaneh from a distance. Only for some special moments in the film is the mimic of the actress (Motamed Arya) given any importance (like the cafe scene where all the customers are talking about the death of children in bombings when the camera is close to Gilaneh's face).

The first part of the film, which tells the story of Gilaneh and her daughter's trip to Tehran, has a fragmented structure. The story of a young man in the bus who has a radiation disorder resulting from bombings, the wedding scenes and the cafe with its customers who are imagining the war, Tehran and the missiles on Gilaneh's daughter's house, are all individual stories which have been put beside each other loosely.

Despite these weak points in the narrative structure, the visual aspects of Gilaneh cannot be ignored. The city under missiles and the escape of people shown from a window frame is very realistic and striking. The road scenes in the film are shot very nicely and Morteza Poursamadi, the cinematographer, did a fabulous job in framing the wooden village structures in the foreground and the people scattered in the field in the background. Bani Etemad is successful in showing Iranian society during the war and the problems of a historical era through the story of the life of an oppressed mother who says goodbye to her son going to the frontline of the war.

Robert Safarian



Where is the Friend's House? Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA).

In the heyday of Iranian 'children cinema' between the late 1980s and 1990s, as I remember, the hot debates surrounding the international successes of Iranian cinema – which was mostly reliant on children themes and actors – used to be whether a cinema 'about' or 'with' children can be also called 'children cinema'. Today, in 2010 and just a few weeks after Iranian New Year, as I gather, the question seems rather to be: Is there any Iranian children cinema anymore to start with?

The most recent book on the subject is sceptically called *A Pathology of Children and Young Adults' Cinema* (2009) which is a collection of Amir Farazollahi's interviews with fifteen film-makers, producers, scriptwriters, and some governmental managers and policy-makers of Iranian children cinema during the last thirty years after the Islamic Revolution. The main concern and

question put forward by Farazollahi in the book is the underlying reasons why, despite an annual festival for children films since 1989 which has continued to be held regardless of all the problems within the children cinema and even superficially during the last few years, the production rate of such cinema is near to nil?

There is also a special edition of the Farabi journal dedicated to children and young adults' art and cinema back in 1999, some eleven years ago. Except for a good review of the history of Iranian children cinema by Ahmad Talebi-Nejad, the rest of the collection mostly consists of scattered writings or translations of English language articles and papers on the general subject of children, childhood, or children cinema and hardly any evaluation of the cinema of children in Iran at that successful period. These, in addition to Hamid-Reza Sadr's (2002, 2006) fascinating reviews of the subject in English, which I will come to later, seems to be all that there is, which leaves us without many serious discussions of children and their cinema in Iran, at least for the last decade or so.

On the production side, too, there is an almost total absence of films made for or about children during roughly the same period; the number of films dwindling rapidly as we approach the post-Khatami years with a drastic drop in the last four/five years. I am now convinced that talking about Iranian cinema, children cinema, or any other cultural phenomenon in Iran 2010, more than at any other time, cannot be addressed but superficially, if the sociopolitical as well as the economical contexts of a society like Iran are not put under serious scrutiny. For, how one can write about a significant absence, a massive 'lack' within a cinematic genre/subject without looking at what changes the country and its people (government, film-makers, institutions, policy-makers, audiences including children themselves) have gone through? For instance, one may need to know about the current situation of childhood in Iran: What are the needs and expectations of contemporary Iran's children? What cultural, educational, and entertainment materials are they nourished and fed with? Or even, what does it mean to be a 'child' in Iran nowadays?

Obviously, this essay will not allow me enough space to address all these in full detail and in depth. My approach, thus, will be to provide a historical overview of Iranian children cinema as a matter of course, but also to propose a 'symptomatic' reading of the more contemporary stage of it, that is the last ten to fifteen years, as a representative of the social, political, cultural, and economical status Iran has gone through and is situated in at the moment. That is why, I take the 'pathological' stance of Farazollahi and his book as an ironical allegory for Iranian children cinema; I am convinced that despite my initial dissatisfaction with the supposedly 'pathological studies' trend of Iranian cultural phenomena, a

review cannot escape the inevitable pathological stance as it seems evidence that the subject of scrutiny is either dead or in a deep coma.

Socio-poetic realism and children films

Historically, it seems that the birth of Iranian 'art' cinema before the Revolution in the early 1970s is also marked by the emergence of those film-makers whose films had something to do with children and in many cases continued to be so after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This may not be a coincidence, given the fact that most of the great names of Iranian cinema well-known to festival-goers and western viewers – such as Kiarostami – began their creative career somehow within the children genre and importantly in the cinema section of the famous Kanoon, a state-funded establishment fully named the Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) that was established in 1969 (Sadr 2002: 229). Despite all the cultural, economic, and political ups-and-downs of a country in revolution, however, and with some inevitable changes to its aims and 'missions', Kanoon continued to exist and hugely influence children cinema after the Revolution, producing many of the prestigious canons of what may be called social realist films 'about' children. Hence, what is considered prominently as children cinema in Iran has never been far or a totally separate genre from the rest of the so-called artistic social realist cinema (also called the Iranian New Wave) which was initially born just a decade before the Revolution. This social realism by no means is a homogeneous genre, ranging from the poetic escapism of Kiarostami's picturesque films of rural people and his detached documentary-like look at their slow-paced lives and banal events; to some good examples of lighthearted and entertaining films both for and about children; to really bitter and dark images of the lives of Iranian children and adults who live in dire poverty and hard conditions at work. It seems, however, that the two sides of the spectrum have been more representing Iran to the outside world, than to the middle ground.

There are thus links to be followed when tracing children cinema in Iran; first is the previously mentioned the Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) known as Kanoon, which has truly shaped and brought about a significant style of film-making in live-action, as well as playing a major role in the development of Iranian animation. Second, the Iranian state TV has been a key source of influence with some successful examples of children series and films, giving birth to a few genuinely Iranian children characters both for pre-school/school ages as well as young adults. Third, there are a few Institutions such as the Farabi Cinema Foundation that have shown an interest in funding and providing for children cinema

sporadically and for a limited period of time.

Children films in Kanoon (IIDCYA), Iranian state TV, and other institutions after the Revolution The status of children cinema in the early years after the Revolution is as confused and neglected as other periods. Between 1980 and 1981 only four films were made with children themes reflective of the revolutionary zeitgeist of the time. *Rasul Pesar-e Abolghasem/Rasul the Son of Abolghasem* (Daryush Farhang) and *Children and Exploitation* (documentary – Mohammad-Reza Aslani) both concentrate on the poverty and hard life of working children with two different approaches. Dariush Mehrjui's film *The School We Used to Go* (1980) funded by Kanoon which was not screened till ten years later, was an allegorical portrayal of Iranian society in pre-Revolution times about the social and political activities of students in a high-school which is disapproved of and prohibited by the school principal. Very few animated shorts were also made in this period, the most suitable of which for children were still full of political rhetoric of anti-Americanism evident from their titles (*Freedom; American Style* [Parviz Kalantari, 1980] and *America! America! Death to Your Treachery* [Manuchehr Abodllah-Zadeh, 1980]) (Talebi-Nejad 1999: 2–3).

Between 1981 and 1985 the politically motivated films and animations continued to be made intermittently in the Kanoon, while the private section was totally inactive in this zone. A long animated film *Ibrahim Dar Atash/Ibrahim in Flower Garden* (Iraj Emami, 1982) made in the Islamic Culture and Art Centre was a weak and complicated film about prophet Ibrahim's trial and his miracle passage through a blazing fire safe and sound. The film surely did not appeal to the young audiences it was made for (Talebi-Nejad 1999: 2–2).

With the Farabi Cinema Foundation's establishment in 1983 to manage the Iranian Cinema and bring it out of the ruins, children cinema received serious attention for a while. This was in a time when state television had only two channels to broadcast from 5–5 pm, the second of which was not available to remote areas and the country was in a bitter war with Iraq. As 'the one and only' medium to show children's programmes, Iranian state TV in the 1980s dedicated two hours of programmes to children of all ages in the afternoons. Still, some good programmes, especially puppet shows made by professionals such as Marzieh Boroumand, had a huge influence on the 1980s generation of Iranian children (the writer included!). That is why, perhaps, when Farabi decided to invest on a long feature film for children they chose Boroumand's mouse puppet characters well-known to every Iranian child in her short TV shows *The School of Mice*. Thus *Shahr-e Moosh-ha/Mice Town* (Marzieh Boroumand &

Mohammad-Ali Talebi, 1985) was a huge box-office hit and the first example of an entertaining children cinema with cheerful singing and dancing (Talebi-Nejad 1999: 2–2). Boroumand and her team continued to be popular faces of comic children programmes on TV; she made several other comic TV series with and without puppets and created successful characters loved by children and adults alike (the most famous series with a puppet character was called *Zizigulu Tales* (1994). Iraj Tahmasb is another puppeteer and director of Boroumand's team and the Kanoon generation who created the much admired comic show featuring himself as 'Iraj Khaan', a hand puppet called 'The Red Cap' (Kolah Ghermezi) and another called 'The Cousin' (Pesar-Khaleh). The characters later appeared in a feature film *Kolah Ghermezi/The Red Cap and The Cousin* (1996) that broke all the previous records of any Iranian film at the box Office.

The next successful investment of Farabi, however, came in the form of an animated series called *Ali Kocholo/Little Ali* (1985) broadcasted from the state TV. Using real black and white photos on a white background and a cut-out technique, *Little Ali* was about the everyday adventures of Ali, his mother, and his friends and neighbours while Ali's father was away at the war front, told by a female narrator over the images. The series and especially its opening song were so famous and loved that they were repeatedly shown and later became one of the nostalgic icons of the 1980s, and the children of the war years.

Farabi also invited Kioumars Pourahmad who was formerly Kiarostami's assistant and had a good record in Kanoon of making films for children. His first two films *Tatureh* and *Bibi Chelchelah*, however, did not appeal to the target audience. Pourahmad later made his most famous TV series called *Gheseh-haye Majid/The Tales of Majid* (1990) featuring a poor young orphan from Isfahan who lives with his grandmother 'Bibi' and has many funny adventures, later appearing in two feature films (*Shyness* [199X] and *The Next Morning*[199x]) which were also box-office hits. However, Farabi, too occupied with managing adult cinema withdrew interest and investment in the children genre after the few mentioned attempts. This is while the new management in Kanoon in 1985 began to take children cinema and its old film-makers seriously, starting a flourishing epoch for Kanoon-style film-making that brought home many prestigious international awards by the likes of Amir Naderi (*Davandeh/The Runner* [1986] and *Water, Wind, Dust* [1989]), Abbas Kiarostami (*Khane-ye doust kodjast?/Where is the Friend's House?* [1987] and *Mashgh-e Shab/Homework* [1989]) and Bahram Beyzaie (*Bashu, Gharibe-i Koochak/Bashu, the Little Stranger* [1986]). Thus the mid to late 1980s marked what maybe called the golden era of children cinema which not only introduced

a different kind of Iranian cinema to the world, but also boomed in terms of films for children which were particularly entertaining and exclusively made for Iranian children that also made great profits. As Talebi-Nejad states: If before this time films such as *The Key*, *Where Is the Friend's House* and *The Runner* devoted their values to introduce Iranian cinema to the world, the children films in this three year period (1989–1989) shouldered the economical load of the Iranian cinema industry by doing successfully at the box office; in other words they provided a subsidiary capital for professional Iranian cinema. (Talebi-Nejad 1999: 2–2) In 1989 Farabi began a campaign to rebuild and refurbish a number of abandoned cinema halls in Tehran and dedicate them exclusively to children films, named the Children and Young Adults Cinema Group. The first film screened in these cinemas was *The Fish* (Kamboziya Partovi) which was followed by the extraordinary reception of his second film *Golnar* (199X) based on an Azari folk tale that mixed puppet and live action in a fantasy structure. The next series of happy, singing and dancing and fantasy films for children followed: *Shangul va Mangul/Shangul and Mangul* (Parviz Saberi) based on an Iranian folk tale; *Kakoli* (Faryal Behzad) based on a story by Hushamg Moradi-Kermani; *Arezo-haye Kouchak/Patal and Little Wishes* (Masoud Keamati, 1990) a modern story in fantasy genre; *Dozd-e Arousak-ha/The Doll's Thief* (Mohammad-Reza Honarmand, 1990) a mixture of live action and stop-motion; *Safar-e Jadoyee/The Magic Journey* (Aboulhassan Davoudi, 1991) a fantasy/sci-fi film inspired by *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985); *Shar Dar Dast-e Bach-ha/Town in the Hands of Children* (Esmayeel Barari); *Dare-ye Parvaneh-ha/The Valley of Butterflies* (Faryal Behzad); *Madrese-ye Pirmard-ha/The Old Men's School* (Ali Sajadi-Hosseini); *Ali va Ghoul Jangal/Ali and the Forest's Giant* (Bijan Birang & Masoud Rassam), and some other similar films (Talebi-Nejad 1999: 2–2). Talebi-Nejad notes that these films were selling so fantastically that everyone wishing to start a film production office was tempted to start with a children's film (Talebi-Nejad 1999: 2–2). The 'International Film Festival for Children and Young Adults' also commenced in 1985 as an annual event in Esfahan where many of these children films along with international films were screened. The aforementioned Iranian children films which were mostly of the fantasy genre and used lots of special effects, although appealing to Iranian children could not compete in terms of quality and technical/technological dexterity of similar western films and thus did not receive great attention in international festivals (Talebi-Nejad 1999: 2–2). That is why, according to Talebi-Nejad, this flourishing stage did not last long and the attention and focus went back on making Kanoon-style films which indeed continued to bring success and fame to Iranian cinema abroad.

As the Iran-Iraq war drew to an end, and cinema for children began to gradually fade away, the so-called 'festival' films, with or about them, were in full swing with emerging names such as Aboulfazl Jalili (*Scabies* [1988] – an honest and sharp look at juvenile delinquency; *Dance of Dust* [1992]; *Det Mesle Dokhtar/Det Means Daughter*[199X]; *A True Story* [199X]; and *Daan* [199X]) – all of which portraying the hard lives of real Iranian children and young adults and with strong tone of social criticism; Jafar Panahi (*Badkonake sefid/The White Balloon* [1995] – winner of the 'Golden Camera' award at the 'Cannes Film Festival' in 1995; *Ayeneh/The Mirror* [1997]; and *Dayereh/The Circle* [2000]); Majid Majidi (*Baduk*[1991], *Children of Heaven* [1997] – Oscar nominated as the Best Foreign Film; and *Rang-e-Khoda/Colour of Paradise* [1999]); *Chakmeh/The Boot* (Mohammad-Ali Talebi, 1993); *Tick Tuck*; and *The Sack of Rice* – all based on Moradi-Kermani's stories; Ebrahim Foruzesh's *Kelid/The Key*, *The Jar* (1992) and *The Oil Children*; and Alireza Davoud-Nejad's *Niyaz* (1991).

Between 1994 and 1998, Channel 2 of the Iranian state TV made an episodic 52-part documentary series entitled *The Children of Iran*, made by a group of well-known children's film-makers, which documented and was a noteworthy collection of approaches to different aspects of Iranian children, not meant for children of course (Talebi-Nejad 1999: 2–2). While the 'poetic realism' film with children's themes remained at its climax till the late 1990s, at least in international festivals, there were also a few successful and failed attempts to revive entertainment cinema for children in the early-to mid-1990s, especially with the aforementioned film *The Red Cap and The Cousin* (1996) (an exceptional box-office hit and no other film could reach its record till years later), along with Marzieh Boroumand's *Hullo, Hullo, I am Juju* (1994); Pourahmad's final attempt in the children genre in his last 'Majid' film *The Bread and the Poem* (1994); and finally *The Stranger Sisters* (1996 – a free adaptation of Erich Kästner's book *Lottie and Lisa* [1949]) (Talebi-Nejad 1999: 2–2).

With all the (political/policy making) problems facing film-making for children, Kanoon remained the faithful and steady body for children cinema and importantly animation. Of the animated films of Kanoon which received international attention and were loved by Iranian children, too, Abdollah ALimorad's puppet animations must be mentioned. His beautiful long animated film *The Tales of Bazaar* (1994) consisted of two stories based on Iranian folk tales, and a 'behind-the-scenes' episode marked the first ever long animated film that was shown in the cinemas for children. At the time of the reformist

government of President Khatami beginning in 1997, Iranian cinema (children cinema included) reached its climax with an Oscar nomination (Majidi's *Children of Heaven*) and sees the emergence of many new and young faces. This is exactly the time when even Kanoon-style films with children themes started to decline and children began to be forgotten amidst other sociopolitical preoccupations of a new and busy government who had set people's expectations for change to unattainable heights.

Realism in, fantasy out

Realism in Iran, as in other similar revolutionary countries, seemed to be the most accepted and recommended style/genre of film-making. If, as Massoumi (2005) argues, in the 1960s and 1970s Iranian New Wave was born out of 'poetry and resistance', as the best vehicle to carry sociopolitical messages with an unconventional, experimental, and documentary aesthetic apt for the inexpensive art-house films that they were, such aesthetics and approaches were handed over to the post-revolutionary Iran and were even encouraged almost unproblematically. The paradox of Iranian cinema is that if in the Pahlavi era many of these films were taken as anti-establishment and critical of the status quo, thus mostly banned from public screenings, logically the same critical approach in the revolutionary system must have seemed potentially inappropriate. Yet, it is also true that the 'social realism' trend lent itself handsomely to the newly established pro-Mostazafan (the oppressed) rhetoric of post-Revolution 'aesthetics'. Hence social-realist films representing the hard-working and usually 'oppressed' children of the rural areas fitted well within what was expected of Islamic cinema – to show the 'truth' and educate rather than merely entertain; cinema should not 'distract' the viewers from the harsh and serious material of reality, of Iranian people's sufferings and predicaments, for which Pahlavi's corrupted regime could always be put to blame.

Sadr (2002: 228) suggests that children in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema serve as surrogates for what is prohibited for adults to stand for. On the one hand, making straight political films or explicit social comments/criticism about the condition of life in Iran both before and after the Islamic Revolution was never tolerated. On the other, and especially after the Revolution, the censorship rules went far beyond the political criticism red-line to the prohibition of women (and men) without Islamic dress and behaviour codes, and dancing, singing or demonstrating any sign of explicit sensual or sexual acts. Thus children became the safest theme and unprofessional children themselves the cheapest and most unproblematic actors and actresses to deal with (Sadr 2002: 228).

Conversely, perhaps, and due to the very fact of prohibition, the politics (of

representation) seems to be an ever present topic in all aspects of Iranian cinema, children cinema included. Hence, I would argue that Iranian children cinema in its most successful years was still symptomatic of the lack and/or absence of all that is supposed to be children's, all that does not exist or is not cared for in Iran regarding children. The insatiable need for realism allegorically points out the lack of fantasy in Iranian films, and look how bad Iranian film-makers are with fantasy, with entertainment and sci-fi and musical genres, and why should they not be? The establishment favours an especial brand of realism that educates on serious issues (and ignores some others). Film-makers want to make art films that win in festivals, to feed the western taste for the exotic Iran, to be poetic and beautiful and symbolic, and get away with censorship. Children are a neglected audience in 'edutainment' for having fun and being amused – the adults cannot make films about fantasies which they themselves never had.

In poetic realism films for which Kiarostami is the best representative, children are 'observed' with a distantly documentary-look, in a painterly nostalgic image, and with a slow rhythm not meant for children (for example, *Khane-ye doust kodjast?/Where is the Friend's House?* (1987) and *The Runner*). In 'hardship/problem' films, the stories and conditions of the young adults are so unbelievably dark and difficult that they either are not believed by average children or are not favoured as stories 'for' them (Jalili's *Gal*; Davoud-Nejad's *Niyaz*; Forouzesh's *The Oil Children*; Majidi's *Baduk*, *Children of Heaven* and *Colour of Paradise*). In other simpler films made with and for children with gripping stories (*The White Balloon*, *The Key*, *The Jar*, etc.), still the children are supposed to learn about the reality of life and develop their problem-solving abilities by confronting real-life situations rather than imaginary/fantastic ones. Fantasy, humour, lightheartedness, and the sweet impossibility of their dreams (and not nightmares), is absent from all of these genres.

So, while the realism (poetic, social or whatever) approach has never satisfied the insider Iranians and critics as representing true Iran or Iranian children, as Sadr argues (2002: 228) it allegorically testifies to the reality of children and childhood in contemporary Iran, a land mostly without fantasy, without fun. The importance of childhood and the general landscape is revealed when, except for the extreme cases of poverty and hardship or the most unlikely and the exotic, the story of ordinary children and their everyday fantasies and challenges remains untold: the average children are under-represented.

Sadr's surrogate theory finds interesting implications when we come closer to the present day. The first ever Oscar nominated film for Majidi's *Children of Heaven* and the most glorious days of Iranian cinema coincides with the peak of

the reformist President Khatami years. Yet, the genre starts to fade away exactly from the celebrated years because the relative freedom felt by the artists meant they did not feel the need to use substitutes to show their true subjects and preoccupations. In the reformist government with the relative freedom of speech and easing of many monitoring processes, more direct ways of dealing with social issues emerged that put an end to the symbolism and poetic realism of 1990s children cinema. Khatami's pro-women and young people campaign provided new spaces to breathe for the two neglected and denied categories. Accordingly, films about women and their struggles and problems as well as films by female directors were made in more significant numbers (among them we may mention Rakhshan Bani Etemad's social realism with strong female characters, as well as Tahmineh Milani's films with explicit 'pro-women' agendas). Such was the situation within the youth culture; the younger generation were for the first time trusted and invited to take part in building the society as journalists, writers, artists and even policy makers and managers, and their occupations became a new interest for film-makers, many of whom were of the new generation themselves (look at Samira Makhmalbaf's first film *Sib/The Apple* made in 1998 when she was 17 years old). Iranian films became more radical, more critical and political, and many film-makers initially known as children film-makers – including Kiarostami himself – changed direction. Thus, even those film-makers with 'genuine' interest and a preoccupation with children's themes such as Pourahamd and Boroumand who made some very fine and successful films, could no longer make films for children and turned to adult subjects, as investment and interest in children cinema was gradually withdrawn.

Sadr's (2002) review of children cinema in Iran, written during the time of the reformist government, closes with a hopeful statement, wishing that the new era brings with it an opportunity for Iranian's 'hidden obsessions and secret inner lives' to be revealed in children's films (Sadr 2002: 237). I am very much doubtful that this wish has come anywhere near true eight years later.

Contemporary Iran: Children and entertainment

Despite the fact that the former film-makers and producers of children cinema in Iran believe that it is long dead (Farazollahi 2009, the International Film Festival for Children and Young Adults has been held year after year. A glance at Iranian films reveals that not only have few films for or about children been made in recent years (Kanoon is still making short films for or about children but in much fewer numbers), but also they have been shown repetitively at the festival in the form of reviews and retrospectives. The cinema halls specifically for children seem to belong to a bygone era, and taking children to the cinema to

watch an Iranian film for them is history. Many of the film-makers who used to make good films for children now bitterly complain that the state TV 'empire' (Pourahmad, cited in Farazollahi 2009 58) does not provide any opportunity for them to make any films anymore. Some say that they no longer feel that they know the children of the new generation and have no idea what would appeal to them (Boroumand, cited in Farazollahi 2009 236).

Iranian children have surely changed over the last fifteen years; these are kids with access to video games, computers, satellite TV and the Internet. They can watch virtually any foreign film or animation right after its release on their DVD player or computer and get hold of any blockbuster DVD for a dollar or so. On the other hand, the eight channels of the state TV running almost 24 hours a day, either produce low quality, bad taste children shows or dubbed foreign animations of all genres, from Japanese anime to western products that can pass the censorship codes, or repetitive 'oldies' such as *The Pink Panther* and so forth. An average Iranian child, then, is more used to foreign products than Iranian ones and will surely not be interested in weak imitations of the originals, or moral stories and slow-paced, advice-type shows and programmes. Iranian state TV is as bad as ever at entertainment; weak, noisy and cheap in music and bland in humour for children. Now that happy programmes and musical shows are allowed and legitimized, it seems that the 'right' people are not there or allowed to make them anymore.

Fatemeh Hosseini-Shakib

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Uncle Moustache

Amoo Sibiloo

Studio/Distributor:

Institute for the Cognitive
Development of Children and
Young Adults (IIDCYA)

Director:

Bahram Beyzaie

Producer:

Institute for the Cognitive
Development of Children and
Young Adults (IIDCYA)

Screenwriter:

Bahram Beyzaie (Based
on a story by Fereydoon
Hedayatpour)

Cinematographer:

Nemat Haghighi

Composer:

Esfandiyar Monfaredzadeh

Editor:

Abbas Ganjavi

Duration:

29 minutes

Genres:

Short
Children

Cast:

Sadegh Bahrami

The children of the Kan district
in Tehran

Year:

1970

Synopsis

A lonely middle-aged man who has moved into a flat in the suburbs to escape the noise of the city discovers that a number of noisy children are preparing the open field in front of his house for their soccer competitions. He tries to frighten them away, but faces good humored resistance. They make fun of him and call him Uncle Moustache whenever they see his angry face near the window and escape whenever he approaches them. They continue to work in silence until the field is ready and they can start their competitions. The old man who spends most of his time gazing at old photos, reading, and napping realizes that he can no longer read or sleep in the afternoon. He confiscates their balls several times, but each time they come back with another one.

As the last straw, during an important match, the ball breaks his window. The old man is furious. He comes out with a knife, stabs the ball and runs after the children. One of the children falls from the top of a wall and seriously injures himself during his flight. The children disappear, never to return. The old man who thinks he has finally found some peace suddenly realizes that he is missing the children. He also feels guilty about the injured boy. During one of his shopping trips, he sees a few of the children and wants to talk to them. They escape and the old man follows them to the hospital in which the injured boy is hospitalized. He takes a bunch flowers from a waste basket and enters the room. They are hiding behind the curtain, but the old man tricks them by opening and closing the door. When they show themselves, they see his smile and the ball that he has brought for them.

The children return to the field. In the final scene, as the old man is returning from shopping, they sing to him, asking him to shoot the ball which is in his way: 'Uncle Moustache, kick it for us!' The old man shows his face from behind his bags, revealing a face with no moustache and a big smile. He kicks the ball and breaks his own window.

Critique

As Beyzaie's first film, *Uncle Moustache* is among the first Iranian films that approach children's cinema with serious cultural intentions. It puts human behaviour under scrutiny to show the possibility of healthy relationships when individual obsessions and social conventions that fail the test of reality are put aside. As Beyzaie's later film, *Safar/The Journey* (1972), and Kiarostami's *Nan va Koutcheh/The Bread and Alley* (1970) and *Break Time* (1972) the film functioned as a model for a new genre in Iranian cinema, which, with the new forms of censorship in post-revolutionary Iran, became the main avenue for cultural negotiation about human rights and relationships. A major achievement of the genre was the way it functioned like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Fin* (1884), to reveal the absurdity of cultural conventions and obsessions by testing them against the piercing gazes of children's untainted vision.

Beyzaie's film reflects the vicissitudes of the relationship between a lonely middle-aged man and a handful of naughty children. Women are absent from the film, yet this absence does not remove them from the equation. The man's restless gaze at his wife's photo and his final decision to reconcile with the children suggest that despite his patriarchal pretensions about male self-sufficiency, men are miserable without women and children. The old man is incapable of communicating with people. His hollow static life is defined by old photos, books and radio programmes. His experience with children, however, opens new horizons for him. He throws his knife away, buys a new ball for the children and shaves his moustache, which suggests that a particular form of manhood, defined by such age-old masculine traits as taciturn aloofness and violence, has to be transformed. The process of defying a figure of authority also suggests a political reading, making the film a cheerful allegory of resistance against a dictator, who is clever enough to reform himself rather than die in loneliness.

Despite this thematic seriousness, the film maintains its simplicity, and Beyzaie's calculated use of humour entertains the spectator. The children's avoidance to take the man seriously even when he is furious, and the man's clever theatricality, as in the scene in which he pretends to be happy and then empties a bucket of water on the children's heads, or when he feigns interest to get the ball from them, makes the film amusing. Sadeq Bahrami's exaggerated performance in the scene where he chases the children with the knife and his violent encounters with two of the children also reveals Beyzaie's intention to depict him as a humorous *shemrkhan* of *ta'ziyeh*.

Music plays an important role in the creation of this lively atmosphere. It is

both diegetic, as in the first scene where the middle-aged man is listening to the radio, and non-diegetic, in which case it carries the melodies of the diegetic music. The film keeps its lighthearted humour even in its darkest moments. When the boy is injured, the music becomes tragic, but the angle of the camera and the exaggerated music, which reminds us of Monfaredzadeh's music for Masood Kimiai's *Qaysar* (1968), play with the idea of martyrdom to such an extent that the scene becomes funny.

Saeed Talajooy

The Journey

Safar

Studio/Distributor:

Filmsaz Company

Director:

Bahram Beyzaie

Assistant Director:

Varoojh Karim Masihi

Producers:

Institute for the Intellectual
Development of Children and
Young Adults (IIDCYA)

Screenwriter:

Bahram Beyzaie

Cinematographer:

Mehرداد Fakhimi

Editor:

Abbas Ganjavi

Duration:

34 minutes

Cast:

Sirus Hasanpour

Abbas Dastranj

Parvaneh Masoomi

Year:

1972

Synopsis

A boy called Tal'e arrives at a shoemaker's shop to convince the shoemaker's apprentice, Razi to accompany him. He has a little money and a new address – he is positive that this time the address is for his real parents. Razi, who is afraid of his master, tries to send Tal'e away, but when the master comes to punish him for talking he has to escape. Once they are safe, Tal'e promises to ask his strong and rich father to find Razi a good job. They buy some bread, but a street boy robs them of the rest of their money. A wise looking stranger tells them the place is far and they cannot go on foot. They pretend to see something in the sky to distract a boy's attention and pick his pocket. Soon people gather to gaze at the sky, but Tal'e cannot convince himself to rob the boy. They see a disabled man carried by several people, and a host of spectacled construction workers. They pass through industrial wastes and a car and than a cart scrap yard, and have to flee from a sick man who tries to grab Tal'e. They see the disabled man being dumped with his things near railroads. An idiot in a yard full of ladders that are leaning on each other tells them they have come the wrong way. They walk into a yard of old doors and see finger signs showing opposing directions.

Razi is now hungry and worried that he has to return to his cruel master. Tal'e promises to compensate. Razi finally decides to steal some bread, but the baker catches him and cuts the front of his hair as he helplessly cries for help. They throw mud at a billboard of a child eating at a full table and continue their way through people sleeping in alleys. They see two blind people wandering, money in hand, in a barren land. Then they find themselves in a busy street full of film posters depicting semi-naked women. They escape from a roughneck lout who looks like the heroes of these films, but is apparently a paedophile. Finally they are so tired and hungry that they start fighting with each other. As they are fighting, they see the tall buildings they have been looking for, stop fighting, and take a goodbye photograph, which, since they have no money, remains with the photographer. Once they are near the buildings, Razi says he does not expect

anything from Tal'e and says adieu to his friend. The address belongs to a couple whose child has been missing for a long time. But the signs are not what they should be. Their son would be ten, he is twelve. The eyes of the woman and Tal'e remain in contact for a time, but he has to leave. Razi is outside waiting for him. Tal'e promises to find a new address for the following day...

Critique

The Journey is Beyzaie's first film in which children are the protagonists. In *Amoo Sibiloo/Uncle Mustache* (1970), children do not have that much dialogue and the dynamic character is a middle-aged man who is to realize the necessity of reconciling with the noisy children who used to play in front of his house. In *The Journey*, however, Beyzaie is concerned with the lives of two orphan boys and depicts their journey in a dust ridden world filled with expressionistic vestiges of corruption, chaos, cruelty and indifference. At the realistic level, the film depicts the story of two poor children trying to find the parents of one of them. They are obviously different from one another. Razi is self-reliant and down-to-earth. Tal'e is a visionary dreamer, whose quest for finding his parents gives happiness, colour and meaning to their lives. It is Razi who saves them from actual hazards, but it is Tal'e who keeps repeating that they should imagine and dream, to be able to put their fears away and continue.

This realism, however, like most of Beyzaie's films, is burdened with symbolic truths which recurrently impose themselves on the lives of his protagonists. As in his other films Beyzaie uses background images, symbolic encounters, and dialogue clues to enfold the realistic level with allegory. These elements make the film a tale of initiation in which two boys embark on a quest for self-discovery and happiness in the wonderland of early 1970s Tehran. The significance of the film, however, is not in its archetypal force, but in that Beyzaie subverts this archetypal significance as he is creating it. By putting in a few words at the beginning – 'This time the address is real' – and at the end of the film – 'Tomorrow I will find another address' he suggests the disastrous circularity of their painful experience. This is also reinforced when Tal'e talks of his parents' ability to cure their injuries, and so during their fight they insist on not touching the injuries they suffered yesterday. As the posters in the backgrounds of several of the scenes suggest, theirs is a society that feigns prosperity and happiness, a society whose cinema is obsessed with indomitable roughnecks helping beautiful women. Yet this society fails to protect the most vulnerable of its members. Thus, though archetypal, their journey does not follow the optimistic pattern of suffering > awareness > initiation > quest > happiness, but repeats the bleak pattern of movement towards a dark life that of

nappiness, but projects the bleak pattern of recurrent quests, which like that of Sisyphus, are doomed to fail.

The cinematography contributes to the creation of this bleak atmosphere. The long shots taken mostly from a high angle suggest the hopelessness of the two boys in an indifferent world filled with oppression and cruelty, the eye-level shots taken from the protagonists' perspective demonstrate the difficulty of finding their way through the world of adults, and the close-ups particularly in the scene where Razi's hair is cut are orchestrated to reinforce their helplessness. The metonymic close-ups of dark glasses, hands and belts at the beginning, glasses in a few scenes and bread and scissors in another, also characterize a world in which one may be watched, but is only approached when someone wants to abuse him/her, or when s/he does something that requires punishment. This is particularly noticed in the scene where Razi attempts to steal a piece of bread, or the scenes where the paedophile is following them.

Beyzaie's choice of music also suggests the ritual force of the action. Whether this music comes from a Turcoman tragic epic, *ta'ziyeh* ceremonies, or the southern healing music of *zar*, it combines with the images on the screen to create the ambiance of tragic questing and suggests a desire for healing. The repetition of the sentences 'You must reach/You must go/We must go.' by different people, accompanied by the healing music of *zar* while the boys are running, suggests an obsession with reaching a status which requires healing before it may be approached.

As we see in the case of the two boys, this healing involves acquiring a better understanding of who we are. It requires an honest creative inquiry into our roots in hazardous journeys in which imitation and repetition of age old traditions bring no results. In the context of Beyzaie's interest in the question of identity, therefore, the boy's journey finds a sociopolitical significance, which in this case concerns Iranians, but may well be extended or modified to refer to all humanity. As suggested in the film, the lives of Iranians are defined by ritual waking and sleeping, imitation and repetition. They may horde to gaze at a barren sky when others are doing so. The film suggests that society's strongest members are roughneck paedophiles who hunt children rather than help them. As in the case of spectacled workers, they may be so blinded by their obsession with repetitive practicality that they may not notice things until something goes wrong. Thus as Beyzaie suggests, unless this society transforms itself and is healed from its obsessions with imitation, repetition and doing as others do, and unless it transcends its uncreative mimicry of modernity, there will be no hope for progress and change.

Beyzaie's film, therefore, transcends its genre to create a multi level tour de

force of Iranian life and resist the dominant discourses about society, culture and cinema. The film is about children and at its realistic level understandable to children between the ages of ten and sixteen, yet at its symbolic level, as Hafez's poetry does, it addresses adults and offers strong critical comments about Iranian life.

Saeed Talajooy

Homework

Mashgh-e Shab

Studio/Distributor:

Institute for the Cognitive
Development of Children and
Young Adults (IIDCYA)

Director:

Abbas Kiarostami

Producer:

Alireza Zarin

Screenwriter:

Abbas Kiarostami

Cinematographers:

Iraj Safavi
Aliasghar Mirzaee

Composer:

Mohammadreza Aligholi

Editor:

Abbas Kiarostami

Duration:

75 minutes

Genre:

Documentary

Year:

1987

Synopsis

This is a documentary film about school children and their assignments. Kiarostami interviews students, their parents, and the authorities of Shahid Masoomi Primary School in Tehran. It also illustrates the children's impatience, their parents' anger, and the teachers' unawareness of modern pedagogical approaches to teaching.

Critique

Thanks to the Locarno Windfall and some previous screenings in Chicago and elsewhere, I have now seen over half of Kiarostami's oeuvre, including his earliest and most recent films – seven of his dozen features and five of his ten surviving shorts – and I am more convinced than ever that he is one of the giants of contemporary world cinema. (For what it is worth, Akira Kurosawa feels the same way; a year or so back he said that Kiarostami was perhaps the only living film-maker who could fill the gap left by the death of Satyajit Ray.) On the surface at least, *Homework* shows Kiarostami's documentary methods at their simplest. (It is the only one of his 16 mm features I have seen, though there are three others, one of which is also a documentary.) 'It's not a movie in the usual sense', we hear him saying off-screen to another adult as we see several boys on their way to school. 'It's a research work. It's a pictorial research on students' homework.' He goes on to explain that he got the idea to do this while helping his own son with his homework, and shortly afterwards we see the boys reciting elaborate religious chants while performing calisthenics outside in what looks like winter weather. (Because the sexes are segregated, no girls are in sight. In fact, we never see any females in the film; we only hear one woman later on, delivering expository narration about questionnaires sent by the film-makers to the boys' parents.) Then the movie settles down to its main bill of fare: interviews with a succession of grammar-school boys by Kiarostami himself about how they do their homework – whether their parents help, punish, or encourage them, whether they like doing it more or less than watching cartoons on TV, and so on. The most striking thing about these interviews is their formal

presentation: the boys are filmed frontally, as in passport photos, and though Kiarostami is heard more often than seen, there are periodic cuts to the camera and cameraman supposedly filming the boys.

I say ‘supposedly’ because there obviously has to be a second camera to film the first, and because we never see this second camera, these inserted shots are fictional: what we are seeing is not what the boys are seeing at that moment, though the editing implies that it is. (In fact, Kiarostami has noted that he shot these inserts after the interviews, though he interspersed them with the shots of the boys as if they were occurring simultaneously.) This adds a layer of irony to Kiarostami’s remark in an interview about *Homework* that several boys lied to him about preferring their homework to cartoons, since Kiarostami’s documentary film rhetoric invariably entails a lie as well. Inadvertently or not, this becomes another way of saying that he does not see himself as superior to the kids he is filming; his attitude throughout seems anything but authoritarian. (The same attitude can be found at key moments in Godard’s interviews with children in his 1977–1977 TV series (*France/tour/detour/deux enfants*), in which he asks a little girl about sound and music and a little boy about image in each episode. One key exchange I have always treasured is Godard asking, ‘Isn’t a shop window the same thing as a TV set?’ and the little boy calmly replying, ‘No.’) Late in *Homework* there is an even more ambiguous and ironic play with the documentary film rhetoric than the inserts of the camera when the film returns to the boys’ extended Islamic chants and calisthenics outdoors. Off-screen the narrator, presumably Kiarostami, says: ‘In spite of all the attention of responsible people to arrange this ceremony properly, it was not performed correctly. So in order to show the proper reverence, we preferred to delete the sound from the filmstrip.’ At this point the sound is abruptly turned off as the camera pans across the crowd of boys, thumping their chests and declaiming, eventually arriving at the figure of the male teacher leading them in the foreground. It is impossible for me to judge how sincere or hypocritical the pretext for this act of censorship is. But the effect is both analytical and aesthetic, displaying what amounts to a reverence for reality in its objectification of ritual that exists quite independent of any reverence (or subtle irreverence) for Islamic fundamentalist dogma.

In short, it is a moment of lyrical beauty as well as a moment of clarification, and the cinema of Kiarostami abounds in such moments. As simple and charming as most of *Homework* is, it winds up telling us a great deal about Iran in the 90s – everything from what some little boys think of Saddam Hussein in neighbouring Iraq to what some Iranian parents think of education in America

and Canada. (According to one father interviewed, homework is never assigned at American and Canadian schools.) There is also the boy who cries during his interview, in part because he is frightened of the film-makers. (Kiarostami also reportedly filmed his own son, though it is unclear whether he appears in the picture.) [Jonathan Rosenbaum](#)

(This a short version of Jonathan Rosenbaum's review first published in *Featured Texts* on 29 September 1995.)

Where is the Friend's House?

Khane-ye doust kodjast?

Studio/Distributor:

Institute for the Intellectual
Development of Children and
Young Adults (IIDCYA)

Director:

Abbas Kiarostami

Producer:

Ali Reza Zarrin

Screenwriter:

Abbas Kiarostami

Cinematographer:

Farhad Saba Hassan Zahidi

Composer:

Amine Allah Hessine

Editor:

Abbas Kiarostami

Duration:

83 minutes

Genres:

Poetic realism Drama

Cast:

Babek Ahmed Poor

Ahmed Ahmed Poor
Kheda Barech Defai
Iran Outari Ait Ansari

Year:

1987

Synopsis

In the beginning of the film, Ahmed, a primary school student, sees his teacher administering a sharp reproof to a fellow student, Mohammed, because he has failed too many times to use his notebook when doing homework. When Ahmed returns home he understands that he had accidentally taken Mohammed's notebook. Disobeying his mother, Ahmed embarks on an adventure to find his friend's home and return the notebook to him. Through the children's adventure we are introduced to their point of view on the surrounding world, we are offered a rare insight into children's universe in provincial, deep Iran. The two boys are presented as symbols of the innocent, uncorrupted spirit of deep Iran.

Critique

Undoubtedly *Where is the Friend's House?* is far more complex a film than just a cinematic text produced for the educational purposes of a state-financed Iranian institute. Abbas Kiarostami received funding from the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults and created this poetic essay on the heroes of everyday life, the microcosm of children and their position within the world of the adults. Kiarostami's oeuvre captivates us with its simplicity, dramatic minimalism, energy and affectionate focus on youth. The director, by showing the low position of children in the social hierarchy, illuminates the eternal clash between the adults' narrow-mindedness, duty-orientated logic and the youth's idealistic solidarity. The difficulties that Ahmad faces while trying to find his fellow student's house constitute a subtle criticism against the adults' behaviour towards their children. This beautiful portrayal of childhood in a village leans on notions of loyalty to a friend, the traditional values of rural Iran and civil duty. It is no surprise therefore that the film's title is a loan from a poem by Sohrab Sepehri, whose poetry is marked by a deeply humanist mood.



Where is the Friend's House? Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA).

The artist's cinematic style is the usual neo-realist aesthetics, so dear in post-Revolution Iran: amateur, child actors, realistic photography, shooting on location, slow pace, or better a humanist economy of the cinematic time, and unpretending dialogues. Kiarostami however, in order to achieve this impressive insight in the 'innocent' world of childhood and rural Iran, does not faithfully follow the neo-realist recipe, or an obvious at least political agenda. The representation of the Iranian landscape and the lyrical images of the children wandering in the slum-like houses, are only some aspects of the film that offer sublime aesthetic pleasure to the viewer. Furthermore, in the eyes of the average westerner *Where is the Friend's House?* seems like a substantial testimony on pure, 'deep' Iran: we are introduced to the environment, the conditions, and values of the backwaters of the country.

The British Film Institute has listed *Where is the Friend's House?* among the best children's films in the history of cinema. This was Kiarostami's first film to be distributed in the international art-house market, having won the Bronze Leopard at the 'Locarno International Film Festival'. From our point of view it is a rather humble piece of work produced for children which at the same time talks straight to the heart of the cinephile audience for its 'alternative' and neo-realist aesthetic values. And this is not a negligible achievement for Kiarostami's career that would soon take off.

Nikolaos Vryzidis

Water, Wind, Dust

Ab, Baad, Khaak

Studio/Distributor:

IRIB

Director:

Amir Naderi

Screenwriter:

Amir Naderi

Cinematographer:

Reza Pakzad

Editor:

Amir Naderi

Duration:

74 min

Cast:

Majid Niroomand

Year:

1989

Synopsis

A young boy is seen to return to his hometown in the south part of Iran where the entire area has been hit by a terrible dry-spell and the inhabitants abandoned the village just to save their lives. The boy finds that his family has also fled the region just like the others.

So he starts a long journey into the harsh desert with howling winds, rushing sands and searing sunlight.

As he begins his search for his family the situation around him steadily

AS HE BEGINS HIS SEARCH FOR HIS FAMILY THE SITUATION AROUND HIM STEADILY worsens, with famine and drought leading to inhabitants abandoning their homesteads.

When the boy gives up his search, he begins to dig into the earth vigorously until water spurts from the ground.

Critique

Like *Davandeh/The Runner* (1985), Amir Naderi's second post-revolutionary fiction film *Water, Wind, Dust* is stylistically powerful and textually rich. In approximately seventy, almost dialogue-less minutes, Naderi seeks to bridge the gap between realism and fantasy as young Amiro (Naderi's repetitive character influenced by his own character) tries to survive the horror of almost certain death in an unrelenting, unending desert devoid of food and water. From the harsh elements and the inevitability of his own death, Amiro escapes into a dream world where he miraculously digs into the sand and discovers life-saving water. To create a harsh world of blowing sand and drought ending with a flood of water and life, Naderi brings to bear all of his skills as a still photographer and visual artist.

One of his finest moments of mastery is found in the breathtaking shot of the desert that Naderi so skillfully framed and lit that one is immediately reminded of photographs of the surface of the moon. And at once, the audience sees and understands the total hopelessness of Amiro's situation. In the final sequence Naderi frames a shot containing only a hammer, a pair of worn shoes and a small mound of sand. The camera hangs on the scene for a moment which has the beauty of a painting by a Dutch Master, before, from off-camera, sand flies into the scene as Amiro escapes into a dream world where he digs into the sand and miraculously discovers an ocean flowing underneath. In an attempt to make the illusionary world believably real, Naderi succeeds, at the very least, to make it a believable dream.

When it was finally released by the government in 1988, *Water, Wind, Dust* was selected to be shown at the 'Fajr Film Festival' in Tehran. In 1989 the first international screening of *Water, Wind, Dust* was at the 'Locarno Film Festival' with almost 8,000 spectators attending. Unfortunately it was shown out of competition, a condition set by Iran before they would send the film. Later however they changed their minds and allowed the film to be shown in competition whereupon it received the 'Grand Prix' at the 'Tri-Continental Festival' at Nantes (1989) and was shown at prestigious festivals in Montreal, New York (New Directors/New Films), San Francisco and many more. *Water,*

Wind, Dust was the last Naderi's film made in Iran before he left the country and moved to the United States.

Awards

Grand prix at Three Continent Film Festival, Nantes 1989 – France Grand prix at Brussels Film Festival 1990 – Belgium Special jury prize at Three Continent Film Festival, Brugge 1990 – Belgium Grand prix at Fakuoka Asian Film Festival 1991 – Japan

Bronze plaque at Damascus International Film Festival 1991 – Syria

Bahman Maghsoudlou

The White Balloon

Badkonake Sefid

Studio/Distributor:

Ferdous Film

Director:

Jafar Panahi

Producer:

Koroush Mazkooi

Screenwriter:

Abbas Kiarostami

Cinematographer:

Farzad Judat

Composer:

Amirfarshid Rahimian

Editor:

Jafar Panahi

Duration:

85 minutes

Cast:

Aida Mohammadkhani
Mohsen Kalifi
Fereshteh Sadr Orfani
Anna Bourkowska

Year:

1994

Synopsis

Razieh, a little girl, takes a 500 toman banknote from her mother to buy a goldfish for their New Year decorations (*Haft Seen*). She runs into two snake charmers on her way. When she reaches the store, she finds that she has lost the banknote. An old woman helps her, and they find out that the banknote has fallen into the basement of a shop beneath the pavement. Her elder brother, Ali, comes to help her. He goes to find the shop owner's house. Meanwhile, Razieh meets a soldier, but he cannot help her either. Ali returns without the shop owner. A balloon seller nearby comes to help them. With his help, they retrieve the bank note. Finally, they go home, and the young balloon seller is left alone with a white balloon.

Critique

The White Balloon belongs to the genre that was founded by its scriptwriter, Abbas Kiarostami. We are therefore compelled to compare this film with Kiarostami's cinema. In the scene I will describe below, as well as in the rest of the film, Panahi's visual style is fundamentally different from that of Kiarostami's. *The White Balloon* starts with a long shot from the neighbourhood's alley. In this shot, the camera is placed right in the middle of the crowd, showing – with an almost 360° sweep – the atmosphere of the marketplace on the last day of the year. This scene is entirely set and serves as a testimony to Panahi's technical directorial abilities. Yet, in this very scene there is one thing that has not come out quite right. If you watch the film for a second or third time, you will realize that two of the important characters of the film, namely the soldier and the balloon seller, can be seen among the crowd. This introduction, however, happens so quickly and without emphasis that it escapes the viewer's notice the first time the film is watched, and from a directorial

perspective, this counts as a shortcoming. We then see a petite mother, who is worriedly looking for her child.

After the little girl is found and upon their return to home, we are introduced to the atmosphere of their family life in what is the film's best chapter. It is not a happy household. The father is taking a shower, and we never get to see him, but we do hear his voice, nagging because the water heater is not working and there is no soap. Poverty has dominated the household and finally there is the little girl, not willing to give up on buying the little goldfish she has fallen in love with. This girl is one of those well-known heroes of Kiarostami, who with persistence and elaborate scheming manages to persuade her mom to give her the money to buy the goldfish. On one side is the mother's daily routine; doing the laundry, sweeping the rooms clean, and the father's anger. On the other there is this cute 'plump' goldfish that looks like a bride. The grownups' disregard for the beautiful world inside the child's mind is the bitter side of such films, and the perseverance and 'heroism' of the girl, who eventually manages to have her way, is its beautiful and hope-inspiring side.

The White Balloon, Ferdous Film.



One can never find a scene like the opening scene of *The White Balloon* in any of Kiarostami's works. A scene that is entirely set in order to introduce the

audience to a certain atmosphere and to certain people, so that they can be used later as the story unfolds. There are even fewer (than usual) improvisations in the plays. In most cases, the film's cuts follow the dramatic logic of the story. Although the film employs amateur actors (Ayda, the fish seller, the tailor, etc.), the characters and story are not formed based on these people, but before they even appear (in any of the scenes), and these people are actors – albeit amateur ones – who are supposed to bring these pre-determined characters to life. I am not mentioning these as the film's shortcomings, but as characteristics of Panahi's style, which compared to Kiarostami is more conventional. Paying closer – but not absolute – attention to dramatic elements, conventional storytelling, and making use of the cuteness of the girl playing the leading role, help the film to connect better with an ordinary audience.

Apparently, Panahi's goals (narrating an ordinary story and rebuilding the atmosphere of a New Year's Eve which might stem from childhood memories) do not quite coincide with Kiarostami's intentions as the scriptwriter (focusing on various people who go about their business without paying any attention to the little girl). That is why the film suffers from some sort of thematic confusion, as if Panahi has not quite grasped the meaning of the Kiarostamilike situations (in the script), where there is great emphasis on the lack of any connection between the grownups and the kids (for instance the scene where the tailor is having a long conversation with customers while the kids are waiting), even though he does emphasize communication in many of the film's chapters. For example, in the scene where the old foreign lady helps the little girl, or the outstanding dialogue between the soldier and the girl which is specifically the most appealing scene in the movie. In this chapter too, there is more focus on communication than on the lack of it.

The final chapter of the film is also nice. The balloon seller has sold all but one of his balloons. The red, green and blue balloons are all sold out, each gone to a home where there is the feel of the EID (the New Year holidays), but a white balloon still remains, tied up to a stick. The young balloon-selling Afghan boy is that white balloon: while all the other kids are now in their homes, sitting by the New Year spread, he is all alone in the streets. This is a very moving chapter with a cinematic language, but it is at the same time an abrupt break from what the film has cooked up to this point. How does a film, which has Ayda as the hero and is about her getting to her favourite goldfish, suddenly become about an Afghan child's homelessness and loneliness at the end, even taking its title from this theme? *The White Balloon* has a good beginning and a good ending, and maybe it is these two that take the viewer's attention away

from the film's shortcomings in the middle.

Robert Safarian

The Mirror

Ayeneh

Studio/Distributor:

The Sound and Image of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Director:

Jafar Panahi

Producers:

Jafar Panahi

Vahid Nikkhah Azad

Screenwriter:

Jafar Panahi

Cinematographer:

Farzad Joodat

Editor:

Jafar Panahi

Duration:

90 minutes

Genre:

Children

Cast:

Mina Mohammad-Khani

Year:

1997

Synopsis

Little girls pour out of a school and line up to cross the street, but one of them, Bahareh, whose hand is in a cast, is still waiting. Bahareh makes a phone call, but no one picks up the phone. Back at the school gates, a Gilaki man is trying to persuade the caretaker to accept a jacket so that her son may look smarter in the wedding of the man's daughter. He then gives Bahareh a ride to a nearby bus stop. After Bahareh gets off, the man has an accident. On the bus she overhears a chubby woman reading the palm of another woman and her daughter, an old Azari woman speaking to a Kurdish woman about her son's unkindness, and two women talking to a bride-to-be about the disrespectful behaviour of the groom's relatives during their shopping. Bahareh is absorbed by the exchange of looks between the future bride and groom from across the men and women's zones on the bus. Two street music players play a Khorasani love song. As the other passengers get off, the Azari woman tells the Kurdish woman that she is going to leave her son's home.

In the final stop Bahareh realizes she has taken the right line in the wrong direction. She is now in Parliament Square, but should go to Republic Square. The driver asks a colleague to take her there. Bahareh notices the Azari woman sitting on a bench. On the bus, the driver keeps asking her questions and the conductor, a Lor soldier, tries to examine her hand. For a moment she stares at the camera. A voice from behind the camera says, 'Mina, why are you looking at the camera?' The girl gets angry, takes the cast off and says she is not going to act any more. Panahi comes forwards to talk to her, but she gets off. As the camera crew try to figure out what to do, they realize her mike is still on. Panahi decides to follow her on her way home. Now Mina is heading towards Parliament Square. Listening to her descriptions an old man tells her she should go to Victory Avenue. Once in Parliament Square, she speaks with the Azari woman. Mina thinks the woman was also forced to say and do things she did not like, but finds that she was only asked to talk about her real life problems.

Mina gets into a taxi in which a Yazdi driver is having a debate with a passenger about women's role in society. In a traffic jam, Mina gets off and disappears behind the cars. The mike suggests that a man who used to dub John Wayne is helping her. The camera finally catches up with Mina after John Wayne's voice has left her in her neighbourhood. Mina leaves the mike with a shopkeeper, tells him she no longer wants to act in the film and enters her home. The film ends with the backup lady refusing the offer of the shopkeeper for finding them another girl.

Critique

The Mirror is a locus of reflection and recognition, where the auditory and visual richness of a day in Tehran fills the eyes and ears to create a new form of realism. Panahi focuses on the adventures of Mina in the wonderland of Tehran, a city whose image is reflected in the mirror of Mina's journey. As a true child of Iranian cinema, Panahi uses its inter-filmic world of images and forms to create his well-orchestrated, yet naughty realism of images and sounds. In his film, therefore, one can see, for instance, Beyzai's emphasis on background in depicting Tal'e and Razi's circular quest for a home (*Safar/The Journey* [1972]); Naderi's depiction of the drudgeries of Amiro's existence and his desire to overcome his limits through work and literacy (*Davandeh/The Runner* [1985]); and Kiarostami's reflections on lonely travelling children and on how the actualities of life impose themselves on the fictional narratives that human beings create about it. His protagonist, however, is a girl, which in the context of the Iranian cinema of the 1990s highlights the issue of women's rights in society. Thus, though adhering to the representation of a chunk of life, the real-time journey of a 7-year-old girl to her home; it contains a sea of signifiers that make the spectator leave the film not with images associated with a narrative, but with inexplicable details about the lives of those 'others' who were not the subject of the film.

The film begins with a pan that ends in the medium long shot of Mina sitting near the school entrance, and starts the action with the beginning of a soccer match between Iran and South Korea whose report is heard from the bus or shop radios or in people's conversations. It ends with a still long shot, showing Mina closing the door of her house as the mike in the shop captures the news of Iran winning the game 6–6. The 90 minutes runtime of the film, therefore, corresponds to the length of the match, during which Mina reaches home. This may be a device to highlight the real-time length of the performance or an inter-filmic homage to Kiarostami's *Mossafer/The Traveller* (1974). Yet it also suggests a possible orchestration of events to give national significance to Mina's journey. A little girl rebels, transforms herself, confronts the threats of a big city, and finally shuts herself in her home to challenge being presented as something she is not. In the context of the people's ethnic variety reflected in the film's soundtrack, the predominance of images suggesting a society in transition, and the references to Parliament and Republic squares and Victory Avenue, one is tempted to see the film as a symbolic reconfiguration of Iranian identity; a nation rebelling to transcend the distorting gaze of an overwhelming 'other'.

This may well be the over-readings of a mind obsessed with the very circle of

signs Panahi is attempting to dislodge, but is it really possible to deny such interpretations? Panahi's has inherited his emphasis on background from Beyzaie, but rather than putting it in the service of his narrative, he uses it to break the limits of his narrative and offer a multiplicity of unfinished narratives that claim separate lives.

- The Gilaki salesman, whose epithet is 'General', insists that for his daughter's wedding, the same afternoon, the caretaker's son should put on the jacket that he wants to lend him. We never learn what happens to him after the accident, but at the very end of the film, another travelling salesman with a bike similar to his appears to deliver a jacket to Mina's house. Does the sequence suggest a critique and rejection of borrowed modernity, or is it just a coincidence?
- The southern-looking palm reader on the bus tells a modern woman to spend as much as she can to stop her husband from having another wife. Then as she is reading her daughter's palm she says she will be living abroad and will have a bright future. Their conversation coincides with the disjointed story of the unhappy marriage between the Iranian girl and the Iranian-American man, the Khorasani love song and the women speaking to the bride about the rudeness of the groom's relatives. Are these to comment on the extremes of medieval and modern mentalities in the public and private lives of contemporary Iranians, or are they examples of the common non-symbolic condensation, heightening and rearrangement of events in stylized realism?
- The old Azari woman, who was born into a rich feudal family, explains how her son and daughter-in-law do not want her to talk to their children because they may pick up her accent. She intends to rebel and leave them because they are ashamed of her presence when they have guests and want to send her to a care centre. Her rebellion, however, unlike Mina's, seems to be hopeless because her emotional ties to her son's family are too strong. Like the old man, who recurrently fails to cross the street at the beginning of the film, yet finally does so and disappears behind Mina, she is doomed to continue her circular journeys to the bench in Parliament Square until she learns from Mina's example to cross the lines. In the context of the multiplicity of ethnicities present on the bus, is this sequence a defiance of the ethnocentric limits of the Persianized Iranian nationalism and the hastily produced masks of modernity or is it just a chunk of life that happens to reflect the rich ethnic texture of Iran?

The little narratives that move us along the streets of the city become more

complex when Panahi creates the meta-filmic device of Mina's rebellion and separates the soundtrack from the camera. In two occasions, the camera loses sight of Mina, but rediscovers her by chasing the sounds. Yet in both cases, after the soundtrack presents disjointed voices and sounds, it suddenly becomes clear to create two self-reflexive comments on cinema. In the first, as the salesman talks about his product, he asks if it is possible to create great images or art works on a low budget. In the second, the disembodied voice of John Wayne appears to take the heroine, Mina, from a dangerous place to a safe one and comment on the condition of Iranian music and cinema. In short, *The Mirror* reflects a chunk of Iranian life in the mirror of Mina's journey in Tehran, but it also draws its spectators into a locus of negotiation where they are to relocate their place in their journey towards modernity.

Saeed Talajooy

Colour of Paradise

Rang-e-Khoda

Studio/Distributor:

Varahonar Company

Director:

Majid Majidi

Producers:

Varohonar Company

Mehdi Karimi

Ali Kalij

Screenwriter:

Majid Majidi

Cinematographer:

Mohammad Davudi

Art Directors:

Masood Madadi

Asghar Nozhadimani

آسگیاں ہرزادوں کا

Editor:

Hassan Hassandoost

Duration:

90 minutes

Genres:

Drama

Cast:

Mohsen Ramezani

Hossein Mahjoub

Salameh Feyzi

Year:

1999

Synopsis

School is out for the summer and Mohammad is waiting at his school for the blind in Tehran for his father to take him home, excited that he will soon be playing in the fields with his little sisters and grandmother. For Mohammad, blindness is no hindrance either to his education or his appreciation of nature's wonders. His father, however, is a widower struggling to look after his two daughters and his elderly mother and is having trouble dealing with Mohammad's blindness. Deciding that he can no longer care for Mohammad, he takes him to live and work with a blind carpenter, but this causes much grief and despair for both Mohammad and his grandmother, leading ultimately to tragedy.

Critique

Following closely in the footsteps of his Academy Award nominated *Children of Heaven* (1997), with *Colour of Paradise*, Majidi has produced a deeply affecting drama of childhood strength and determination in the face of adversity. The narrative revolves around young Mohammad, played with remarkable skill by nonprofessional actor Mohsen Ramezani, who is really blind. Through Mohammad, Majidi evokes a world of beauty, colour, love and wonder. Although this is a world Mohammad cannot see with his eyes, he interacts with

and experiences this world through his senses of touch and audition. Furthermore, for him, the world is not something merely to be lived in or experienced, but to be communicated with. Mohammad's fingers 'read' the stones in the river, or a stalk of wheat, mouthing the sounds of the alphabet just as he has learnt in his Braille lessons. Similarly, the sounds of the woodpecker constitute a secret language – not dissimilar to the tap-tap-tap of the Braille machine – a language which not only binds Mohammad to the natural world, but as his name might suggest, also to the spiritual world.

For the viewer, Majidi uses a range of cinematic devices to convey the richness of Mohammad's world, which is suggestively not dark at all but richly coloured and textured. For his visually oriented spectators, Majidi provides many wide shots of sweeping fields of colour to convey not only the visual beauty of the landscape surrounding Mohammad's home village, but to enable us to feel Mohammad's oneness with nature as he runs unassisted through the landscape. In fact, it is not just Mohammad, but his sisters and grandmother who comfortably inhabit this space, in which work and play are combined in a highly idealized representation of village life. Mohammad and his sisters help collect the flowers that will be boiled to make the colourful dyes for the rugs that are made in the village. Majidi's camera lingers over the boiling vats of bright colour, reminding us of the integral connection between nature and culture. As in Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1996), a strong connection between traditional arts such as rug-making and cinema is inferred, suggesting the deep link between the wealth of nature and the rich possibilities of the cinematic medium, which in Majidi's hands is one more of poetry than of narrative, recalling the vast tradition of Sufi poetry, which frequently cast human endeavour through the metaphorical evocation of the natural world.



Colour of Paradise, Varahonar Company.

This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Majidi's use of the soundtrack to contrast Mohammad and his father's (played by Hossein Mahjoub) views of the natural world. Throughout the film, Majidi appropriately uses point of audition techniques to allow us to hear/see the world through Mohammad's perspective. In fact, the emphasis placed on the act of hearing in the early stages of the film assists to re-orient the spectator towards 'hearing' rather than merely looking for details. This technique is exemplified in an early scene when Mohammad is waiting for his father alone in the school grounds. Mohammad reacts to a faint tweeting sound. As he turns his ear toward the sound, it becomes slightly louder, suggesting that Mohammad has now focused upon the sound. As he slowly tracks the sound into the bushes, the ambient noises of the city heard earlier fall away, the sound of the distressed bird tweeting now mixes with other sounds located in Mohammad's immediate surrounds: the sound of his breath and his feet crunching the dried leaves on the ground. As Mohammad finds the bird, climbs a tree and places the chick safely in its nest, we are not only given a glimpse into Mohammad's compassionate and determined personality, but we gain some insight into how he expertly navigates the world through senses other than sight. For Mohammad the sounds of the natural world are pleasant and filled with hope and God's love, but for his father, sound comes to represent fear and the darkened world of despair. This may be witnessed in a scene in which he

shaves at the riverbank. As he runs the blade over his face, he is startled by a rather foreboding whooping sound created by some distant, unknown creature. This causes him not only to cut his face, drawing blood, but to drop the mirror, which cracks on the rocks. The next view of his face that we see is reflected in this broken mirror, an image that sadly foreshadows the tragic events that are to come. Such sounds do not form part of Mohammad's soundscape, but throughout the film, we observe his father being increasingly troubled by them. They function ultimately as a sign that he has lost touch with both the natural world and with his son, his frightened reactions signifying his inability to communicate effectively with Mohammad, nor to understand his great capacity for independence.

Michelle Langford

The First Letter

Abjad

Studio/Distributor:

Novem Productions

Director:

Abolfazl Jalili

Producers:

Abolfazl Jalili

Emmanuel Benbihy

Screenwriter:

Abolfazl Jalili

Cinematographer:

Mehdi Majd-Vaziri

Editor:

Abolfazl Jalili

Duration:

113 minutes

Cast:

Mehdi Morady

Mina Molania

Abdolreza Akbari

Fariba Khademy

Gholamreza Tabatabaei

Year:

2003

Synopsis

Outside Tehran, in the town of Saveh, 16-year-old Emkan is in frequent trouble with his surroundings. He is torn between his deep, instinctual passion for artistic expression and his parents' conviction that his creativity is an offence against their Muslim faith. Though very bright, Emkan is constantly berated by his father for his interest in music, photography, calligraphy and poetry. When a new girl named Maassoum moves into the neighbourhood, they strike up a tender friendship which develops into love. This relationship feeds Emkan's burgeoning desires to explore his talents and experiment with arts he has not encountered before – photography and motion pictures. However, his father's ongoing disapproval, and the changing political climate of the time, present Emkan with the increasingly difficult task of negotiating the family's traditions, his own faith, his irrepressible nature and his feelings for Maassoum.

Critique

Abolfazl Jalali's films perfectly represent the new characteristics of post-revolution art-house Iranian cinema, which are the common elements in the films of film-makers such as Kiarostami, Panahi, Samira Makhmalbaf and Majid Majidi. This type of cinema, although successful in finding an important place in the international scene, has more or less failed to attract a domestic audience, and has been criticized by some Iranian film critics as merely being a 'festival favourite' kind of cinema. Amongst them Jalili's films, due to his unique cinematic approach and emphasis on documentary elements, and by avoiding classical narrative structure, has had the smallest audience among Iranian cinema goers. In his films, Jalili is mostly concerned with criticizing tradition, the fundamentalist conception of religion, and the moral taboos within a

conservative religious society.

Abjad is to a great extent an autobiographical work, and is inspired by Jalili's own personal life. The story of a teenager named Emkan who rebels against the restrictions and religious constraints in the fanatic and traditional atmosphere of a provincial town, and despite his family's wishes, spends his time on interests such as painting, calligraphy, music, photography and cinema. At the same time, he falls in love with a Jewish girl, whose father owns a movie theatre, and Emkan designs signboards and gate posters for his cinema hall. This film, which is in fact telling the story of Jalili's own youth and his infatuation with cinema in a closed society, deals more than any other film in Iranian cinema with the issue of tradition vs modernity, and depicts an atmosphere filled with fear, distress, and repression, which is something that has always been facing Iranian artists. Emkan feels a frightful contrast between his natural and reasonable wishes and the expectations of the traditional society surrounding him. He is the muezzin at a mosque, goes to a religious school and fasts even on non-Ramadan days. But the society that is moving quickly towards modernization, examples of which can be seen everywhere, takes Emkan with it as well.

The First Letter, Novem Productions.



Abjad might be the first Iranian film that portrayed the reaction of the conservative and fundamentalist Muslim clergies against music, painting and cinema. The mullah teaching at the school, punishes Emkan for drawing the

portrait of a woman on the blackboard, the neighbourhood's clergy reprimands him for bringing a violin into the mosque and bans him from being the *Mukabbir*¹ during prayers. However, since the film is based on historical events, Jalili's carelessness in recreating historical details and an accurate and realistic portrayal of the atmosphere of the time period in which the film is taking place, can possibly be seen to have damaged the believability of the film in the eyes of the audience, and to have weakened their connection with the film. These details not only include songs and musical compositions that are supposed to reminisce a specific time period, but they also encompass people's clothing, the equipment and material used on the set, as well as the display of certain scenes from the old films shown in the town's movie theatre. In terms of substance and atmosphere, many of the scenes that take place in the relatively distant past prior to the revolution look no different than the ones that happen in the present time.

The biggest historical error in the film is in the scene where Emkan, who makes signboards, is doing calligraphy on a work commissioned by the Iranian Tudeh Party (an oppositionist, communist party) during the days prior to the Revolution. It is quite obvious that the Tudeh party near the end of the Shah's regime, when the Iranian political system was a single party, did not have any open and publicized activities to need a signboard for its office. As well as this, the film's logic and its inner reality necessitate that Emkan's age and appearance would change in the passage of time, yet during the long period between his childhood and his adolescence we see he is played by the same actor with no noticeable change in his appearance.

The use of the music and voice of Mohammadreza Shajarian – the prominent and famous vocalist of traditional Iranian music – for the soundtrack plays no role in creating the film's atmosphere, and is probably due to the film-maker's sheer personal interest. His fondness for the maestro had been so much that he even dedicated the film to Shajarian. Though containing all of the elements to make it a work that stands out as pioneering and an important breakthrough in Jalili's career, it is to a certain extent a flawed final product which lacks certain merits to make it an outstanding success in the field of artistic Iranian cinema.

Parviz Jahed

Note

1. In group Muslim prayers, especially in large groups where the leading Imam might not be directly visible to the rest of the group, one person called

Mukabbir who usually stands opposite the praying group and whose job is similar to that of a music conductor, says different things including ‘Allah-o Akbar’ (God is great) to announce the prayer movements of Imam to the entire group.

Turtles Can Fly

Lakposhtha Parvaz Mikonand

Studio/Distributor:

Mij Film Co., Bac Films

Director:

Bahman Ghobadi

Assistant Director:

Shahram Shah Hosseini

Producer:

Bahman Ghobadi

Screenwriter:

Bahman Ghobadi

Cinematographer:

Shahryar Assadi

Composer:

Hossein Ali Zadeh

Editors:

Mostafa khergheh Poosh

Hayedeh Safi Yari

Duration:

98 minutes

Cast:

Avaz Latif

Soran Ebrahim

Saddam Hossein Fevsal

Hiresh Feysal Rahman
Abdol Rahman Karim
Ajil Zibari

Year:

2004

Synopsis

The story takes place in a border village of Iraqi Kurdistan shortly before the US invasion. A teenage boy named Kaak Mahwareh (meaning 'brother satellite' in Kurdish) is spearheading a group of kids in charge of collecting mines from farmlands previously used as mine fields during the war. With his rather limited technological knowledge he is also capable of installing satellite dishes for the people in the village, which earns him the name 'satellite'. Kaak Mahwareh is an arrogant liar and throughout the film is seen boasting and giving orders. In one scene, he falsely translates George Bush's speech, which is being broadcast from satellite channels for the villagers.

In contrast to him, there is another teenage boy who has lost both his arms in the war. Unlike 'the satellite', he is quiet and introverted but is capable of making predictions, with many future events taking shape in his mind before actually happening. Similarly silent and secretive is his little sister, although there is a huge unrest and struggle going on inside her over her own mortality. After being raped by a Ba'athist soldier she is left the unwanted mother of a rape child. Throughout the film she struggles with the idea of killing herself and her unwanted child.

Critique

After *Zamani Bara-ye Masti Asb-ha/A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000) and *Songs from My Motherland, Turtles Can Fly* is Bahman Ghobadi's third feature-length film about Kurdistan and the Kurdish people. A noticeable point in Ghobadi's films is that family does not have the usual meaning or form that it has in melodramas. That is to say family, as a focal point of love comprising a man and a woman or a father and a mother along with children, does not have any place in Ghobadi's films because he makes films about a society that has lost its balance and composure and is dealing with social calamities caused by war, violence and poverty. Here I will highlight some of the more important

characteristics of Ghobadi's films, with an emphasis on his latest film:



Turtles Can Fly, Mij Film Co., Bac Films.

The ethnographical elements

Ghobadi is the only Iranian film-maker who has specifically made all his short, long and documentary films about the Kurdistan region and its people (except *No One Knows About Persian Cats* [2005] which takes place in Tehran). This is true even in his roles as assistant director and actor as he has taken part in Abbas Kiarostami's film *Baad Ma ra Khahad Bord/The Wind Will Carry Us* (2000) and Samira Makhmalbaf's *Takht-e-Siah/Blackboards* (2000), both of which are set in Kurdistan. His films, irrespective of their technical strengths and weaknesses, have now become an important source of information and visual documents on Kurdistan and its related issues as there are strong ethnographical aspects to them that could be of use to researchers and (especially) anthropologists. The fact that Ghobadi himself is from Kurdistan, and his close ties and familiarity with the geography, culture, language, customs and traditions, as well as the Kurdish people's temperament, brings a certain uniqueness to his films. It is the main reason they are made more credible and believable to the audience.

Documentary outlook

The presence of some familiar and chief elements of 'modern Iranian cinema' such as 'documentarism', employing amateur or nonprofessional actors, and exoticness in Ghobadi's films has ensured their success at international film

EXCELLENCE IN GHOBADI'S FILMS HAS ENSURED THEIR SUCCESS AT INTERNATIONAL FILM festivals. Although in terms of employing the above elements, Ghobadi's film reflects the ongoing trend in today's Iranian art cinema, it still has certain characteristics that make it different from the rest. The most important of those are the classical style of storytelling, attention to the dramatic structure and its strong emotional quality, which make the film easier for the ordinary audience to understand and has increased its ability to influence the audience.

Children in Ghobadi's films

The children in Ghobadi's films are usually those who have lost their parents at a very early age and are forced to struggle for survival under harsh and inhumane conditions. In the film *A Time for Drunken Horses*, a young boy is responsible for taking care of his sisters as well as his mentally retarded brother. In *Turtles Can Fly*, the family consists of a brother and a sister along with an illegitimate child, but even that gradually falls apart and at the end of the film there is only an armless boy left. The children in Ghobadi's films are deprived of the right to be kids and live in a child's world. Like the children in *A Time for Drunken Horses*, they must cooperate with smugglers to make ends meet, and like the children in *Turtles Can Fly*, they put their lives on the line to remove landmines from farming lands. They do not even have time to for a basic education because, as 'brother satellite' points out, now is the time for war, and kids must take up arms and fight to defend their homeland.

Non-actors

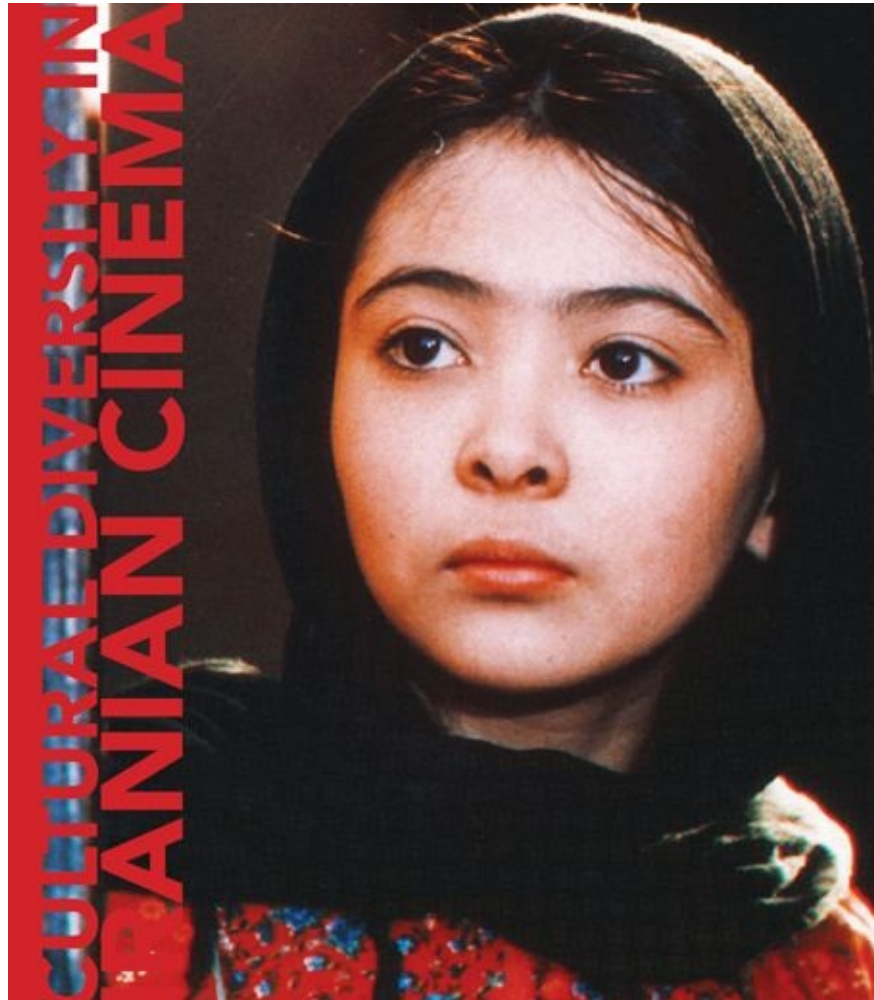
Ghobadi has an incredible ability to make children and ordinary (amateur) people act. Like in all his feature-length films, he has again decided to employ amateur children and adults instead of using professional actors, and the kids in *Turtles Can Fly* exhibit outstanding and memorable performances. The image of limbless children carrying baskets full of landmines is a shocking one that can only be found in documentary films with actual people in them. The technique of using the armless boy's predictions in this film is quite ingenious and dramatic and is among the positive points of Ghobadi's style.

Tragicomedy

Despite the bitter and tragic atmosphere in Ghobadi's films, they still have a subtle comedy to them. In *Turtles Can Fly*, the way the satellite TV programs are presented and the religious reactions of the Kurdish villagers to their content and form create a comic situation. In one scene, one of the owners of a satellite system begs 'brother satellite' to block the forbidden channels so they can not be received by anyone, which is an explicit reference to the restriction of modern

and independent media and the news censorship in today's Iran. In addition, the sudden appearance of George Bush on the TV screen and hearing his simplistic and empty promises about saving Iraq and its future has added to the intensity of this comedy. However, in the second half, the film takes a very bitter and tragic tone. The incessant and hopeless attempts of the young girl to commit suicide and kill her innocent baby, 'the satellite' stepping over a landmine and getting wounded, and eventually the painful death of the little girl and her baby are the culminating points of this tragicomedy.

Parviz Jahed



Baran, Fouad Nahas.

A particularly poignant sequence occurs several minutes into Bahman Ghobadi's film *Zamani Bara-ye Masti Asb-ha/A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000). A group of Kurdish children are packed into the back of a truck. They are being taken from Iraqi Kurdistan, where they have been working doing odd jobs in a bazaar, back to their village in Iranian Kurdistan. Along the way the driver picks up a load of children's school books, which he is attempting to smuggle across the border. Each child hides a number of books under their jumpers, but as they approach the checkpoint they are ordered out of the truck and searched. The books and the truck are impounded and the children are forced to complete the journey on foot through the cold, harsh winter landscape. The viewer is given no concrete indication as to why the Iranian border guards might want to confiscate the schoolbooks, but the contextual implication is that they are Kurdish language textbooks, and the effect of this scene is to generate what I shall refer to

throughout this essay as a multi-layered politics of language and location. Throughout the film, Ghobadi draws our attention to both language and landscape as sites of extreme struggle and hardship for the Kurdish people attempting to maintain a sense of cultural integrity and unity in the face of fragmentation, dispersal and abject poverty. Ghobadi is one of a number of Iranian film directors who have attempted to take up a range of questions concerning cultural identity and diversity in their country, which reflect quite clearly some of the contradictions that often arise between official policy and unofficial practice regarding ethnic and linguistic minorities. In this essay, I shall attempt to provide an overview of cultural diversity in Iranian cinema. In doing so, I will also analyze some of the recurring thematic concerns treated by a range of filmmakers to produce a critical view of the conditions and contradictions lived by Iran's 'Others', some of its most marginalized minorities: Kurds, Arabs and Afghan refugees.

An overview of cultural diversity in Iran

Despite the rather homogeneous view of Iran provided by western news media, Iran is a country of great cultural diversity, consisting of a range of ethno-linguistic groups including: Persians, Azaris, Arabs, Kurds, Baluchis, Gilaki, Turkmen, Armenians, Jews, Assyrians, and a variety of tribal groups. In addition to the diverse cultural backgrounds of indigenous and long-settled groups, Iran 'is one of the most concentrated areas of Afghan migrants and refugees' (Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.* 2005: 2) having admitted over two million Afghans during the many decades of conflict and drought in Afghanistan, from the Russian invasion in 1979, to the protracted civil war, the years of Taliban rule, and the post-September 11 US-led war on terror. While initially Iran maintained an open door policy to Afghan refugees, allowing them work permits, access to education, health care, and reasonably stable residency permits, these have been eroded over the decades in alignment with Iran's shifting policies toward Afghanistan, which have aimed at establishing complex, multi-layered 'spheres of influence' (Milani 2006: 236). According to a 2005 report on Afghan refugees in Tehran, in 1995 Iran 'announced that all Afghan refugees must leave Iran, but later in the year sealed its border [...] effectively ending repatriation efforts' (Abbasi-Shavazi *et. al.* 2005: 21). The remaining refugees were subsequently confined 'to designated residential areas and enclosed camps' (21). 'Government subsidies for health and education' were withdrawn from those not living in camps (21–21). Furthermore, these refugees have never been absorbed or integrated into Iranian society, particularly through restrictions on land ownership, property rental, employment, education, documentation, and freedom

of movement within the country (22).

The eight year war with Iraq also caused significant displacement of people, particularly Kurds, who were systematically massacred by Saddam Hussein, the worst being the chemical attacks on the Kurdish city of Halabcheh in 1988 where thousands died and thousands more were injured and permanently maimed. While the Kurds of the border regions of Iran, Iraq and Turkey, maintain a desire for the establishment of an independent state, the political views of these three nations make this appear highly unlikely.

Since the rise of nationalism in the 1930s when the Shah also changed the name of the country from Persia to Iran, Persian (Farsi) was institutionalized as the official language and script, a situation that continues in post-revolutionary Iran. According to article 15 of Iran's constitution, all official documents, correspondence, texts, and textbooks must be in the Persian language and script. Constitutionally at least, the maintenance of linguistic diversity in the press, the mass media, and for the teaching of non-Persian literature in schools is permitted (constitution cited by Amnesty International 2006a). However, as is suggested by the sequence of *A Time for Drunken Horses* described above, a gap between constitutional rights to linguistic freedom and actual practices seems to exist. Amnesty International have recently reported that 'discriminatory laws and practices' against ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities are widespread throughout the country, resulting in 'land and property confiscations, denial of state and para-statal employment [...] restrictions on social, cultural, linguistic and religious freedoms which often result in other human rights violations [...] restrictions on movement and denial of other civil rights' (Amnesty International 2006a). Although it is difficult to ascertain what direct impact these practices have on the Iranian film industry, some anecdotal evidence of censorship is apparent. Indeed, in personal correspondence with Iranian film critic Mehdi Abdollahzadeh who spoke to Ghobadi in early 2006, I was told that Ghobadi has been warned not to use the Kurdish language in his films. It is important to note that while this is not an official ban, this warning is typical of some of the pressure placed on filmmakers to self-censor their films in order to avoid having them banned (Abdollahzadeh 2006, personal communication, 3 November). In another interview, Ghobadi has spoken of self-censorship while making his film *Niwemang/Half Moon* (2006) (Guillen 2006). In fact, post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers work under the constant shadow of censorship. Rather than treat potentially controversial issues directly, filmmakers frequently adopt coded, metaphorical, and allegorical modes of expression. The task of locating cultural diversity in Iranian cinema, particularly for the non-Iranian viewer, becomes a

matter of negotiating the censorship minefield and deciphering the coded cinematic language: looking to the very margins of film narratives and images to get a glimpse of some of Iran's most marginalized cultures.

Cultural diversity in Iranian cinema

Over the last 28 years since the Iranian Revolution, Iranian filmmakers have intermittently attempted to take up a range of questions concerning cultural identity and diversity in their country, which reflect quite clearly some of the contradictions that often arise between official policy and unofficial practice regarding ethnic and linguistic minorities. Referring to the choice of locations used by Iranian directors, Iranian film scholar Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, drawing on the work of cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, has identified in Iranian cinema what may be called a 'politics of location'. She writes: For the filmmaker, the choice of location is a cultural and at times a political statement, which consciously or unconsciously reveals aspects of the filmmaker's personal identity as well as his or her attitude to dominant culture. (Saeed-Vafa, M 2002: 202) Furthermore, according to Saeed-Vafa, location can reveal the filmmaker's state of mind, as well as standing as a metaphor for a cultural and emotional situation.

This theoretical framework of a politics of location provides a useful way of locating and theorizing cultural diversity in Iranian films, but I would also like to add to this a politics of language, as language is one of the most enduring, but also one of the most fragile signifiers of identity and diversity. Given the recent report that Iranian-Kurdish filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi may be prevented from using the Kurdish language in his future films, this has indeed become an issue around freedom of expression, and would not only seriously contravene the Iranian constitution, but also the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, of which Iran is a signatory.

I wish now to give a brief overview of some of the ways a range of films made between 1985 and 2005 have mobilized these dual politics of language and location.

Displaced and marginalized Arab minorities

Bahram Beyzaie's *Bashu, Gharibe-i Koochak/Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1986) is one of the earliest examples of a post-revolutionary film attempting to depict Iran's cultural diversity and to represent some of the social tensions that emerge from this. The relatively progressive and confrontational nature of this film may perhaps be attributed to the fact that it was made after the appointment of Mohammad Khatami (who later became president) to the Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance in 1982. Khatami has been credited for opening up the

Iranian film industry to a diversity of voices, views and opinions. The film revolves around the title character, Bashu, a young Arab-Iranian who flees from southern Iran to the region of Gilan in the north due to the Iran-Iraq war. His village has been destroyed and his family killed. He is 'adopted' by a woman called Na'i, who speaks only the local Persian dialect of Gilaki. As a member of the Arab ethnic minority, Bashu's first language is Arabic, and neither of these two characters speaks Persian fluently. Furthermore, having never seen an Arab, the 'white' northern villagers are highly suspicious of Bashu's blackness. Na'i even attempts to 'clean' his skin, believing him to have emerged from a coal cellar, before finally coming to accept that his dark complexion is natural. According to Nasrin Rahimieh's excellent reading of this film, the foregrounding of linguistic and physical difference functions as a 'critique of Persian ethnocentrism' (Rahimieh 2002: 238). She writes: 'The film's inclusion of ethnic minorities in its frame of vision helps to problematize the myth of a linguistically, racially and culturally unified Iran' (238) particularly in the wake of the coincidence between the rise of nationalism and the legislation of Persian as the national language in the 1930s, which sought to vilify Arabic language and culture, and evokes the wound of the Arab conquest in the seventh century and the nationalist agenda of cleansing Persia of Arabic 'contamination' (238). The film's present-day setting during the Iran-Iraq war serves to highlight the continuity of this myth, which is intensified during times of conflict. Through the depiction of Bashu's traumatic forced relocation due to the war, the film also clearly evokes the themes of displacement, homelessness, and the need for the acknowledgment and acceptance of diversity.

Twenty years later, *Iron Island* (Mohammad Rasoulf, 2005) serves as a potent reminder of the continuing marginalization of Iran's Arab ethnic minority. Once again, a politics of language and location come into play in highly metaphorical and allegorical ways. The film is set on a derelict oil tanker abandoned several hundred meters off the coast of Iran. The tanker has become a thriving village, occupied by marginalized members of Iran's Sunni-Arab minority. The occupants of this ship are quite literally marooned, with limited freedom and little in the way of a livelihood. They all work on board the ship for the seemingly benevolent Captain Nemat (whose name means blessing). Like any 'great' leader Nemat claims to have the people's best interests at heart but, as the film progresses, we become more aware of his self-serving nature, and we realize he is certainly not such a blessing to these people. Although the ship's inhabitants all appear to be industrious, with constant activity taking place on board the ship, this apparent industriousness is ironically turned towards dismantling the ship for scrap metal. They are literally being forced to tear down

what little semblance of a home/land they have. Additionally, the ship is slowly sinking, certainly a double signifier of the unstable 'ground' beneath their feet.

The film's narrative and setting closely mirrors the situation of Iran's Sunni Arab minorities in a number of details. Amnesty International describes these people as 'one of the most economically and socially deprived social groups' despite the fact that they primarily inhabit the province of Khuzestan one of the most oil-rich regions in the country. They have little access to social amenities and 'have been subject to forced evictions from their homes or lands' (Amnesty International 2006b).

The metaphorical politics of location is introduced into the film in a scene that occurs several minutes into the film. During a lesson in the ship's onboard schoolroom, a little girl interrupts a discussion about the war to ask: 'Uncle, where is the world?' The teacher replies: 'Where we are now is part of the world.' Confused, a little boy retorts: 'Uncle, but this is an oil tanker.' The teacher needs to explain further. He says: 'Pay attention students. We're inside the ship, and the ship is in the sea, and the sea is in the world, so we're all in the world.' The need for such an explanation suggests that the children's concept of 'the world' is something they feel excluded from.

Communication is also explored as an important theme, which highlights the isolation and marginalization of this community. Captain Nemat keeps a tight check on contact with the outside world, serving as a kind of media and communications censor. For example, the ship's teacher complains that the newspapers Nemat brings are very old, dating back to the Iran-Iraq war. In addition, television is entirely forbidden. Restrictions are also placed on outgoing communication. The ship has only one mobile phone with poor reception and the calls are closely rationed and monitored. Furthermore, as in *Bashu*, language becomes a signifier of cultural homogenization, as, despite their Arab ancestry, everyone speaks Persian, and several times in the film we see the children in the onboard schoolroom learning Persian. Once again, this situation closely reflects observations made by Amnesty International, who have reported that even schools in predominantly Arab areas are not allowed to teach lessons in Arabic (Amnesty International 2006b). There is clearly a sense of erasure of this community's fragile linguistic identity.

Perhaps the most potent reminder of the impoverishment of this marginalized community comes when we discover towards the end of the film that they are in fact sitting on a vast oil field. Captain Nemat siphons the oil out of the ship's hull to sell. With this discovery, one feels that perhaps there is hope for these people to gain some prosperity from this 'island of oil' (quite obviously a metaphor for Iran). however this is not to be the case. as they will not be able to

share in the prosperity of this (is)land they inhabit. When the captain finally sells the ship for scrap metal, these people are once again displaced, this time into the barren and uninhabitable desert. The captain, who has had them sign over their power of attorney, promises that one day they will all own a piece of it, but of course by this time, the viewer has learnt the disingenuousness of such a statement. Visually, we see a group of people in a veritable no man's land, once again isolated and without proper accommodation, having been displaced from an 'iron island' to something that resembles a vast 'desert island'. The film offers little hope that these people will be integrated into the wider Iranian community.

The film can be read as an allegory for Iran itself and in particular the marginalization of the Arab minorities who have lived in Iran for centuries, yet have been restricted in their ability to share in the country's prosperity. As in *Bashu*, the long-standing national wound of the Arab invasion of Persia in the seventh century, however, is shown to be still festering on the surface of contemporary Iranian society through the perpetual marginalization and subjugation of these minority subjects.

Afghans seeking refuge and going home

The plight of Afghan refugees and the troubles of Afghanistan itself have also been prevalent themes in the work of a number of Iranian directors. Abbas Kiarostami's *Ta'm e guilass/Taste of Cherry* (1997), and Jafar Panahi's *Badkonake sefid/The White Balloon* (1995) both contain minor but important Afghan characters. The beautiful, melodramatic love story *Baran* (Majid Majidi, 2001) is one of the most sustained filmic appeals to Iranian's to respect and care for their Afghan neighbours.¹ But the most prolific treatment of this theme has been conducted by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, his daughter Samira Makhmalbaf, and wife Marziyeh Meshkini.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf embarked upon this project as early as 1989 with his internationally acclaimed film *Bicycleran/The Cyclist*. It is a film about a refugee family from Afghanistan presented in Makhmalbaf's typically surreal style. The wife is seriously ill and needs hospitalization, yet the family do not have enough money to pay for either the hospital or medication. As the father manages to scrape together enough money for each day, he sends his young son to the hospital. The cruel hand-to-mouth economics of poverty is highlighted through cross-cutting between the mother gasping for air, being denied the life-giving oxygen that lies just out of her reach, and the son paying the hospital attendant, who makes a call to the ward. Cutting back to the ward, we see the mother

finally being provided with oxygen. She will breathe more easily for another day. Throughout the first third of the film, we follow the father as he struggles to earn enough to keep his wife alive. He tries digging wells and other menial low-paying jobs. He even considers smuggling, although realizes that he is not physically or morally suited to such a profession. Eventually, once an unscrupulous promoter discovers that he had once been a champion cyclist in Afghanistan, he takes up the challenge to ride a bicycle non-stop for a whole week. He literally has to live on the bicycle for a week, going round in circles as onlookers pay for the pleasure. The metaphor of a cycle of poverty, while rather obvious, becomes highly potent, as we realize that others are getting rich from his misery, while his wife's life still hangs in the balance. By the end of the film, and once he has achieved his goal, he finds that he is unable to stop cycling, signifying perhaps that his problem is not a singular or individual one, but one that is endemic amongst refugees more generally.

More than ten years later, Makhmalbaf takes us beyond the borders and into Afghanistan with his internationally acclaimed *Ghandahar/Kandahar* (2000). This film helped to bring attention to the problems in Afghanistan well-before the September 11 attacks and the US led invasion. Although ostensibly not about Iran he does hint at Iran's 1995 policy of attempting to repatriate Afghan refugees, providing them with US\$20 as an incentive, despite the fact that most no longer have homes to return to. The film's central female protagonist Najaf, an Afghani-Canadian journalist arranges to be accompanied across the border by one such family returning to their war-torn homeland. The politics of location is strongly evoked throughout the film which shows the harsh conditions, which have not only caused Afghans to flee the country for decades, but serve as an impediment to their return. The landscape is clearly wracked by drought and war, with bandits, the Taliban, thirst, and disease ever-present dangers in Najaf's journey to Kandahar to try to prevent her sister from committing suicide. In the refugee camp on the Iranian side of the border, we see a group of children being taught to avoid land mines disguised as dolls, which serves as a potent reminder of the dangers they will face, and raises questions regarding the repatriation program. In my reading of the film, I believe Makhmalbaf is making a plea to halt the premature repatriation of these people to a scared and broken homeland and quite possibly serves as a coded critique of his own country's policies regarding Afghanistan.

Makhmalbaf continued his passionate attachment to Afghanistan in his documentary *Alephba-ye Afghani/Afghan Alphabet* (2002), which is about the education of Afghan refugee children in eastern Iran. He was also responsible

for producing the first feature film to be made by an Afghan following the fall of the Taliban. The film *Osama* (Siddiq Barmak, 2003) is the result of Makhmalbaf's broader initiative to train filmmakers and technicians at his film school in order to provide countries such as Afghanistan, which he has described as a 'country with no images' (Makhmalbaf 2001: 33–33) with possibilities of building an image culture and creating possibilities for self-representation. What I find interesting about this is the regionalism exhibited by Makhmalbaf, who is interested not only in representing Afghanistan, but in empowering local artists to tell their own stories and to evoke their own politics of location.

Makhmalbaf's daughter Samira also shares her father's interest in refugees and minority cultures in Iran, having made films in Afghanistan and the Iranian region of Kurdistan, which is home to Iran's Kurdish minorities. Samira contributed an episode to the international collection entitled *9'11'01* (2002) made to commemorate the attacks on the World Trade Centre. Her contribution, entitled 'God, Construction and Destruction' is set in a small Afghan refugee camp where an Iranian teacher tries to explain to the children what has just taken place in New York in terms that they can comprehend. This short but potent film reminds us that there is not one single perspective of the world and the events that occur within it, and that one's locatedness has a significant impact on one's perceptions. These children, who one could assume to have been born in the refugee camp, do not even possess the concept of an office tower of the size of the World Trade Centre. Their idea of work and shelter is based on the main activity that takes place in the camp, which is the making and firing of bricks. This becomes the reference point for the teacher's explanation, as she takes the children outside to contemplate the kiln's tall chimneystack. 'This is a tower', she tells them, and asks them to observe a minute of silence for the victims of the terrorist attack. While this act seems to have little meaning for them, looking at the film from another perspective it becomes clear that the major point of the film is less about the children understanding the attacks, and more about the viewer being made conscious that these children's lives are likely to be deeply affected by the US led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, which has not yet taken place in the narrative time of the film. As with the numerous films set in refugee camps and marginal spaces, the landscape functions to emphasize the isolation of the figuratively forgotten people.

Samira followed this short with a feature set and filmed in post-Taliban Afghanistan. *Panj-e Asr/At Five in the Afternoon* (2002) is set amongst the ruins of Kabul and the film tells the story of an Afghan woman who dreams of becoming president. In 2004, Mohsen Makhmalbaf's wife Marziyeh Meshkini

made *Sagha-ye Velgard/Stray Dogs* in Afghanistan, a film about two children whose parents are both in jail. They are forced to wander the streets like the fluffy white stray dog they rescue from being burned by a group of children.

The border regions of Kurdistan

The place of Kurds inside and outside the geographic borders of Iran has also been treated frequently by Iranian directors, and most notably by the Kurdish director Bahman Ghobadi, who is certainly the most prominent, if not the only Iranian director belonging to an ethnic minority. Politics of language and location feature strongly in this cycle of films.

Once again, Samira Makhmalbaf distinguishes herself by turning to Iran's borderlands with *Takht-e-Siah/Blackboards* (2000). This film is set in the harsh, barren landscape of the Kurdistan region on the Iran/Iraq border. The harsh natural conditions are exacerbated by the fact that this is one of the most heavily mined regions in Iran, and references to this are a constant reminder of the lingering scars of the long Iran/Iraq war. The film begins by introducing the viewer to a nomadic group of teachers wandering the countryside looking for students while carrying blackboards on their backs. This functions as a surreal image, particularly as these objects come to serve a variety of different purposes. During the course of the film the blackboards are used as protection against air attacks, as shade from the sun, a wall to divide unmarried men and women, a 'house', and are even used to dry laundry. Along the way, these teachers meet a range of similarly nomadic, lost, and disoriented people whose need of food, shelter, and clothing make education seem like an unnecessary luxury. Many, particularly children, resort to the dangerous job of smuggling goods (quite possibly drugs) over the border in an attempt to feed themselves. The setting of the borderland functions to metaphorically introduce a politics of location to this film. This is particularly evident in the coded references to the chemical attacks on Halabcheh and the subsequent displacement of Iraqi Kurds into Iran. One confused old man, haunted by the sounds and images of war, is desperate to return to Halabcheh, but he is too disoriented to find his way.

Language too is an important element of the film, as Samira chose to have the film's dialogue spoken in Kurdish and the majority of the cast was made up of non-professional actors from the region. As an internationally prominent filmmaker, Samira provides the opportunity to create a space for this language to exist on the international stage, for the Kurds themselves to represent their own suffering and the state of their fractured homeland.

The Kurdish-Iranian filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi has set and filmed the majority his feature films in the region of Kurdistan and on both sides of the

Iran/Iraq border. These include *Zamani barayé masti asbha/A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), *Avaz-haye Sarzamin-e Maadari-am/Marooned in Iraq* (2002), *Lakposhtha Parvaz Mikonand/Turtles Can Fly* (2004) and *Niwemang/Half Moon* (2006). All of these films have focused on the fragmented and displaced lives of the Kurds of Iran and Iraq. In interviews he has spoken of his deep desire to make a film in Turkey, but this would seem impossible due to the very harsh treatment of the Kurds by the Turkish government, who have banned the use of the Kurdish language in schools and the media.

In all of his films, Ghobadi mobilizes a potent politics of language and location. This is particularly evident in *A Time for Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly*. Ghobadi stresses the barren and harshness of the borderland as a metaphor for the inability for the Kurds to unify either as a regional culture or as a nation, even as an ‘imagined’ one. The setting of *Turtles Can Fly* in a refugee camp on the Iraq/Turkish border a few weeks before the US invasion is a politically potent one, as it highlights the divisiveness of national geography and politics on the desire for unification and settlement of these historically displaced people. At one point, as the children are playing at the barbed-wire fence, a Turkish border guard fires at them, showing the animosity of the Turks toward the Kurds.

One of the central characters in *Turtles Can Fly* is an armless adolescent boy from Halabcheh who had survived the chemical attacks. In a touch of magical realism, this boy is prone to visions – premonitions. During the film it is suggested that he had a premonition of the attack on Halabcheh and his sister’s rape by an Iraqi soldier. Later he similarly envisions the impending US attack on Iraq and warns the inhabitants of the refugee camp. In his ability to foresee the future, all he sees is conflict, destruction and death; no sign of hope or harmony for the Kurdish people is in sight. Furthermore, in a very subtle gesture, Ghobadi does not place much faith in the Americans, as at the end of the film, another of the main protagonists (an adolescent called Satellite) turns his back on the soldiers as they make their way through the camp.

Conclusion

The majority of these films share a range of themes that cut very deeply at the heart of human rights issues in the region. These themes include: education, and homelessness. The rootlessness of Arabs, Afghan’s and Kurds is exemplified particularly by wandering characters, refugee camps, and people taking arduous journeys trying either to escape from or return to their homelands. Similarly, borders, the restriction of movement, and smuggling serve as potent metaphors of dislocation and separation. Refugee camps and ships function both as liminal

spaces – no-mans-lands – but also may be seen as marginal but burgeoning communities with a social structure. Furthermore, these films testify to and transmit to international audiences the debilitating effects of war – horrific injuries, orphaned children, the danger of landmines and unexploded artillery.

This array of films also demonstrate that Iranian filmmakers have been very interested in registering the cultural diversity of their nation, frequently employing the stories of marginalized and displaced peoples to challenge and usurp the long-held myth of a homogenous Iranian identity.

Michelle Langford

Note

1. I am currently preparing an essay on this film, so I will therefore not discuss *Baran* at length in this essay.

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The Cyclist

Bicycleran

Studio/Distributor:

Institute for the
Cinematographic Affairs of the Janbazan Foundation **Director:**
Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Screenwriter:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Cinematographer:

Ali-Reza Zarrindast

Composer:

Majid Entezami

Editor:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Duration:

79 minutes

Genres:

Drama Art house

Cast:

Moharram Zeinalzadeh
Esmaeel Soltaniyan
Samira Makhmalbaf
Mahshid Afsharzadeh
Hossein Haj-jar
Firouz Kiyani
Mohammad-Reza Maleki
Shahnaz Babaieyan
Mansour Farnia

Mohammad Dowlatabadi

Year:

1989

Synopsis

Opening a small wooden shutter, a stunt motorcyclist climbs into the previously pitch-black interior of a tarp-covered, spherical track, which now emits a luminous, smoky shaft of light. After closing the aperture, a succeeding hard cut reveals spectators overhead, looking on at the biker at the bottom of the sphere. Among these is Afghani refugee Nasim, whose wife, as we learn through a series of cutaways, is suffering from a fatal illness. In order to pay for her medical care, Nasim, himself a former endurance bicycle champion in his native Afghanistan, consents to ride a bike, day and night, for seven days straight.

Day one commences on what is billed ‘the best circus in the Middle East’. Nasim initially peddles around a dusty village square for a spattering of half-curious locals. With the crowd soon swelling, a public address announcer commends Nasim for choosing to earn an honest living rather than submitting to a life of crime. The lead’s son Jomeh is handed a fistful of cash that he rushes to the hospital, paying for his mother’s treatment at what is made to seem the last possible instance. Back at the makeshift track again, an ambulance and a public official arrive to monitor Nasim’s progress day and night, even as factions within both the government and among rival gamblers plot for the bicyclist’s failure.

After nightfall a few days later, Nasim collapses onto a triangular glass atrium built into the ground. Apart from his supporters and a ‘blind’ accordion player who confesses to having bet on Nasim, no one seems to notice that he has fallen. This permits the protagonist to rest while a friend rides in his place, a scarf covering his face. The next morning Nasim begins anew, refreshed as he pushes toward day seven. On his final night of riding, Nasim inserts thin wooden sticks between his eyelids to keep his heavy eyes from closing. He succeeds in making it through the night – with the aid of buckets of water tossed by the crowd and his son’s slaps to the face – and in reaching day seven, where camera crews and interviewers now besiege the track. Though the ‘race’ has concluded and his wife’s treatment has been paid in full, Nasim continues to ceaselessly circle the ground. The film suspends in mid-gesture with Nasim still riding.

Critique

Critique

Despite receiving 'best film' prizes at the 1989 Rimini and 1991 Hawaii international film festivals, along with being director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's most travelled work on the global festival circuit, *The Cyclist's* greatest present notoriety among western connoisseurs of world cinema may be as a reference point for Abbas Kiarostami's semi-documentary of real-life Makhmalbaf impersonator, *Nema-ye Nazdik/Close-Up* (1990). In Kiarostami's film, *The Cyclist* appears in the form of its screenplay (with cover art visible), which the fake Makhmalbaf, Hossain Sabzian, reads on the bus; as the film that Sabzian insists the Ahankhah family see, in less censored form, before they prepare their new film; and most significantly, in the message that the impersonator asks Kiarostami to relay to Mr Makhmalbaf: 'his *The Cyclist* is part of me.' Certainly Sabzian's admiration for Makhmalbaf's work is easy to intuit provided his own hard-luck story: *The Cyclist* demonstrates great compassion for its oppressed, underclass protagonist.

Stylistically, *The Cyclist* shares little with Kiarostami's technique, apart from its similar utilization of *Close-Up's* eponymous framing strategy. Nonetheless, Makhmalbaf often employs this device in tandem with long takes of the mobile Nasim (Moharram Zeinalzadeh) as he circles the square, completing one 360° revolution after another (by contrast, Kiarostami's close-up framings rely largely on figural stasis). In this film of circular trajectories and figures – additional examples include the opening stunt track and the motorcycle wheel spinning behind the head of the crashed rider – Nasim fails to move forward, even though he succeeds in paying for his wife's treatment, and to escape from the 'race' which the closing freeze-frame suspends in time. Nasim's condition is existential.

The Cyclist proves to be even more dissimilar from much of Kiarostami's corpus on the level of its narrative structure. (*Close-Up* is again less of an exception thanks to that film's reconstructions, which are frequently initiated by unmarked flashbacks.) From the opening sequence, Makhmalbaf cuts between temporalities and/or locations: on the hand is Nasim in an ostensible present – often with his son Jomeh (Mohammad-Reza Maleki) – and on the other is his wife, ecstatically writhing on a hospital gurney, or later reaching aggressively toward the camera from under the bubble in which she is quarantined. Makhmalbaf joins his more dramatic passages with Majid Entezami's heavily melodramatic score, from which the filmmaker cuts away as commonly as he does his image track. As with the director's subsequent *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989) and *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* (1992), *The Cyclist* emerges as an

exceedingly fragmentary experience.

Or, to define Makhmalbaf's stylistic contribution in art historical terms, *The Cyclist* is a profoundly baroque work. Whether it is the aforesaid admixing of temporalities, the director's construction of recessive planes via his staging of figures and objects close to the camera, or his predilection for extreme high and low camera angles, Makhmalbaf's film exemplifies a tradition of the baroque in the international cinema that additionally encompasses Orson Welles, Federico Fellini and Emir Kusturica. As with many of the notable works in this tradition, *The Cyclist* features a style that both calls attention to itself as such, through images and camera figures that emphasize their constructedness and distinctive graphic qualities, while mimetically reinforcing character psychology and haptic experience (among the best examples of all three is the stunt motorcyclist's plunge to the bottom of the sphere, where Makhmalbaf alternates between point-of-view editing and identificatory follow shots).

Similarly noteworthy for their mimetic effect are Makhmalbaf and director of photography Ali-Reza Zarrindast's revolving crane shots of the circling lead. Here, not only does the film impress the spectator with Nasim's single-mindedness and his all-consuming physical and mental exhaustion, as well as with the picture's distinctive visual style, but it furthermore makes the viewer aware, in the final of these passages, of the 'race's' filming, not only by the film crews that have descended upon Nasim on his final day, but by the filmmakers of *The Cyclist* themselves. This *mise-en-abyme* becomes particularly evident when Makhmalbaf and Zarrindast's camera circles with a crane operator who is himself revolving around the lead. In other words, Makhmalbaf makes his viewer aware, however briefly, of *The Cyclist's* making; it is a film that provides a glimpse of its scaffolding (as would the director's subsequent *Marriage of the Blessed* and, much more comprehensively, his 1996 career highlight, *A Moment of Innocence*). It is likewise this very tendency of modernist film practice that Kiarostami would pursue so rigorously from *Close-Up* on, even as Makhmalbaf's self-reflexivity occasionally sought other valences, such as his exploration of the multitudinous variations of Iranian film history in *Once Upon a Time, Cinema*.

Michael J Anderson

Blackboards

Talk to a Sick

فيلم-ع-سیدان

Studio/Distributor:

Makhmalbaf Productions

Director:

Samira Makhmalbaf

Producer:

Mohamad Ahmadi

Screenwriters:

Samira Makhmalbaf Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Cinematographer:

Ebrahim Ghafori

Editor:

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Duration:

85 minutes

Genres:

Drama

War film

Refugees

Cast:

Said Mohamadi

Behnaz Jafari

Bahman Ghobadi

Mohamad Karim Rahmati

Year:

2000

Synopsis

Set in the region of Kurdistan in the aftermath of the Iran/Iraq war, Kurdish children smuggle goods across the Iran/Iraq border, skillfully dodging

landmines. Teachers carry blackboards through the rugged terrain in search of students, but none have the time for such 'luxuries'. It is food and shelter that they need. Kurdish refugees make their way towards the border in search of home, across the border in Iraq. But they carry the physical and psychological scars of war, many suffering from the devastating effects of the chemical weapons used against the Kurds by Saddam Hussain's troops in Halabcheh in 1988. Situated somewhere between fiction and reality, the film contemplates the complex issues faced by displaced Kurds and their dreams of the return to and restoration of their homeland.

Critique

Following in her father Mohsen's footsteps, Samira Makhmalbaf achieves a mix of realism and surrealism with this film. *Blackboards* is set amidst the very real, barren, war-ravaged landscape of Kurdistan in the north-west of Iran. Many of the film's characters are played by local non-professional actors. The dialogue is predominantly spoken in Kurdish, and the film cogently addresses many of the very real concerns of Iraq's displaced Kurds following the chemical weapon assault on the town of Halabcheh: homelessness, hunger, poverty, illness, injury and illiteracy. This texture of realism however is infused with a slightly surreal aesthetic and absurdist logic, which enables a level of indirect social critique to be achieved. This is evident from the opening shots in which the film's major emblematic trope is introduced: the blackboard. The film opens with a long shot of a barren road, large hills on either side and mountains in the distance. In the very depths of the image, several small figures appear and as they move towards the camera it becomes evident they are men, carrying boards across their backs. As they move even closer, we realize they are in fact blackboards. Through their casual conversation, we come to realize these men are teachers who are searching the countryside for students.



Blackboards, Makhmalbaf Productions.

Throughout the film, these blackboards come to be used for a variety of unconventional purposes: protective camouflage, a stretcher, a splint for a broken leg, a modesty veil, a house, a place to dry washing, and even an object of value in divorce proceedings, after which we may presume it will be used for fire wood, enabling cooking and warmth. The blackboards therefore become signifiers – literally and metaphorically – of the film’s major themes: literacy, displacement, danger, shelter, poverty, illness and cultural tradition.

Through this semantic slippage they become emblematic of the struggles faced not only by the teachers themselves, but by the various people they encounter. The first of these moments of slippage occurs within the first few minutes of the film. The teachers notice a plane flying overhead, they run for cover at the base of a nearby hill, and using their blackboards as cover, they hide until the plane has passed. As the teachers begin to emerge from their huddle, the camera cuts to a shot showing a flock of black birds hovering high in the sky above. The viewer might imagine they are looking for carrion – signifying death. As the film cuts back to the teachers, they inexplicably begin to imitate the birds, squawking and gently moving their boards as though they are wings. This subtle and inexplicable departure from a predominantly realist aesthetic prefigures the loosening of sign and signifier that will occur time and again throughout the film. Once it is safe again, the teachers proceed to coat the boards in mud, so that

they may provide more effective camouflage. If the blackboards conventionally signify education, they now come to mean something very different: protection. Reading these two images together – as a kind of rebus – this opening scene may suggest that literacy is an enabling resource that may play a part in protecting a displaced and oppressed population. In fact, the rather surreal image of the travelling teachers bearing the tools of their trade on their shoulders could suggest that education is in fact a highly portable resource. However, as the film progresses this positive and hopeful attitude towards education becomes somewhat inverted, as few people in the region have the time or luxury for education. But the teachers are on a mission, unwilling to give up. We follow one of the teachers in search of pupils. No one he meets is interested in his services, but he pushes on through the rugged terrain until he meets a group of young Kurdish smugglers. He tries earnestly to convince them of the value of education, but they must keep moving, so he runs with them, negotiating the difficult landscape, conducting mobile lessons along the way. With this, Makhmalbaf appears to be suggesting that even in the most extreme of situations, education is possible and necessary.

Michelle Langford

A Time For Drunken Horses

Zamani Bara-ye Masti Asb-ha

Studio/Distributor:

Bahman Ghobadi Films, Farabi
Cinema Foundation

Director:

Bahman Ghobadi

Producer:

Bahman Ghobadi

Screenwriter:

Bahman Ghobadi

Cinematographer:

Gianni Di Biasi

Saed Nikzat

Art Director:

Bahman Ghobadi

Editor:

Samad Tavazoe

Duration:

80 minutes

Genres:

Drama War film

Cast:

Ayoub Ahmadi

Rojin Younessi

Amaneh Ekhtiar-dini

Madi Ekhtiar-dini

Year:

2000

Synopsis

Set in the barren landscape of the border between Iran and Iraq, the film focuses on the plight of a family of Kurds trying desperately to eke out a living. While the father works smuggling goods to Iraq via the treacherous snow-laden mountains, the family's five children are left alone to fend for themselves – their mother having died during childbirth. Adding to their woes, the eldest boy, Mahdi suffers from a congenital disease, leaving his growth severely stunted and his health poor. The family can barely afford the medicines needed to keep him alive. The other children all pitch in, Ayoub and his little sister Ameneh work tirelessly doing menial tasks at the local bazaar while their elder sister Roozhin takes care of the home and the baby. When their father is killed by one of the landmines that litter the smugglers' route, the children are left to fend entirely for themselves. The hero of the story, Ayoub, struggles endlessly to make sure Mahdi is taken care of, and to earn the money needed for him to have a potentially life-saving operation. But no matter how hard they work, life continues to be highly precarious in this harsh and impoverished environment.



A Time For Drunken Horses, Bahman Ghobadi Films, Farabi Cinema Foundation.

Critique

Bahman Ghobadi's debut feature expands upon the tradition of child-centred films that emerged in Iran in the mid-1990s. Following in the steps of Kiarostami, Pahani and Majidi, Ghobadi uses the talents of non-professional child actors – in this case Kurdish children – who may well have been intimately familiar with the conditions in which their characters live. The opening scene introduces us to the chaotic *mise en scène* of the bazaar where the camera – adopting a child's eye view – introduces us to three of the film's child protagonists who work busily wrapping glassware in newspaper or carrying heavy goods to awaiting trucks. Filmed with a mobile camera and cutting every few seconds, sound and image create a frenetic and urgent atmosphere around these children and the many others who work tirelessly alongside them. Like many of the Iranian films featuring children, *A Time For Drunken Horses* presents these children not at play, but by necessity having to confront the issues of the adult world almost in the absence of adults. In fact, for the first few minutes, Ghobadi keeps his camera trained on the children alone, capturing only glimpses of adults as a surging and undifferentiated mass of heads or legs. In contrast, the children are predominantly shot in one-shots, giving them a

privileged position in the film's cinematic language. This cinematic privileging of children is further emphasized as the tiny figure of Mahdi steps into frame from behind a row of bicycles, his back to us and clad in a yellow jacket. Although he is barely taller than a bicycle wheel, his canary-yellow jacket makes a striking contrast with the black tires and pants of the men who tower over him, granting him significant visual status and foreshadowing the important role he will play throughout the film as the centre of the family and an emblem of their struggle to survive. The many one-shots of Mahdi present him as a simultaneously helpless and noble figure, around whom his loving brother and sisters rally. The perspective of children is further emphasized by the intermittent voice over of Ayoub's little sister Ahmaneh, who narrates the family's story.

Unlike many of the child-centred films from Iran, in this film, Ghobadi does not attempt to present the children as metaphorical substitutes for adults, or as foils against the censorship of male/female interaction. Instead, here the children function more as figurations of the future: resilient against poverty and illness, yet seemingly trapped in a hopeless situation as much determined by socio-economic status as by the unforgiving environment, which itself becomes a character in the film. In fact, despite this cinematic privileging of the child's perspective, the adult socio-cultural world eventually intervenes to lay claim upon these orphans. While the children's uncle has effectively relinquished any responsibility for their financial and physical well-being, leaving young Ayoub in charge, he does step in to negotiate a marriage between Roozhin and a man from a distant village. Although an agreement is reached that she will take Mahdi, whose medical treatment will be paid for by the groom's family, upon seeing him, they refuse to take him and Ayoub has no choice but to carry him to Iraq himself. The open ending – Ayoub and Mahdi cross a coil of barbed wire stretched across the deep now-covered landscape – is characteristic of many post-revolutionary Iranian films. It effectively allows the viewer to decide Mahdi's fate. Indeed, the film itself, which won the prestigious 'Camera d'Or' at the 2002 'Cannes International Film Festival', asks us to do just that: to pay attention to an oft-neglected part of the world and the troubles faced by its inhabitants.

Michelle Langford

Baran

Studio/Distributor:

Fouad Nahas

Director:

Majid Majidi

Producers:

Majid Majidi Fouad Nahas

Screenwriter:

Majid Majidi

Cinematographer:

Mohammed Davudi

Art Director:

Bahzad Kazzazi

Editor:

Hassan Hassandoost

Duration:

94 minutes

Genres:

Drama

Melodrama

Love story

Refugees

Cast:

Hossein Abedini

Zahra Bahrami

Reza Naji

Mohammad Amir Naji

Hossein Rahimi

Hossein Mahjoob

Year:

Synopsis

A young Afghan woman named Baran (Zahra Bahrami) is forced to disguise herself as a boy named Rahmat in order to gain employment on a building site on the outskirts of Tehran. On the building site, she encounters Lateef (Hossein Abedini), an adolescent worker whose fiery temper is ignited when the boss gives Rahmat his job of shopping, cooking, and making tea for the workers. But when Lateef discovers Baran's true identity, his anger turns to love. There is nothing in the world he would not do for her.

Critique

Inspired by the lack of awareness – both in Iran and internationally – of the plight of Afghan refugees, *Baran* serves as a moving and poetic commentary on the legal and social status of Afghans living and working (many of them illegally) in Iran. One of the film's most striking achievements is the skilful way Majidi embeds this social commentary within a moving story of passionate but ultimately unrequited young love, allowing it to function allegorically on numerous levels simultaneously. This is achieved on one level as an allegory (rather than a direct representation) of physical love through the use of very clever and subtle cinematic devices. The soundtrack and *mise en scène* of wind and rain, a wild river, steam, fire, colour, birds and bread, all function to displace emotion metaphorically onto the objective world around the characters, to create an emotionally charged environment that envelops them, standing in for the love they dare not acknowledge outwardly. This is emphasized further by Majidi's occasional use of an indirect subjective camera, which enables the viewer to experience Lateef's passion *with* rather than *through* him, as conventional devices of point-of-view might encourage. This is perhaps most evident in the scene where Lateef first discovers Baran's true identity as a woman. Majidi is careful to 'veil' Baran with a frosted window as she brushes her long tresses, and although the use of shot-reverse-shot suggests that we are witnessing the scene through Lateef's eyes, this impression is modified when Lateef steps into an apparently subjective shot. Throughout the film, Majidi generates a deep sense of emotion and intimacy without ever showing any physical contact between Lateef and Baran, and without ever violating neither the character's nor the viewer's modesty.

On another level, by couching this love story in the broader context of the socio-economic condition of Afghan refugees in Iran, Majidi produces yet another level of discursive meaning where an ideal model of Islamic love and charity toward others may be perceived, effectively embodying a highly idealized conception of the nation. This is perhaps most evident in the film's narrative trajectory and characterization. Through the character of Lateef, a simple adolescent gofer working on a building site, Majidi constructs an exemplary model of selfless devotion and modesty, despite his rather unpredictable adolescent state. Besotted by Baran, but aware of the social and cultural restraints preventing them from coming together, Lateef sacrifices all to help Baran and her family return to Afghanistan, knowing he may never see nor hear from her again. It is possible to read his actions merely on a personal level, however his behaviour also functions as a powerful illustration of the practice of welcoming Muslim refugees. Through his actions, Lateef embodies the principle of treating Baran as a member of the *Mohajerin* ('involuntary religious migrants') a principle enshrined in the Quran calling upon Muslims to extend generous hospitality to such migrants, even if this may lead to one's own poverty.¹ Ironically, while Lateef performs two significant self-sacrificing acts (giving his entire savings and selling his identity card) that deeply reflect this principle, the position of the state – represented by the government inspector who comes to check the building site for illegal workers – is to seek out and expel the Afghans who, by their lack of legal status, may not work without a permit. This detail of the film closely reflects Iran's changing policy towards Afghan refugees who, after 1993, were classified under the rather pejorative label of ' *panahandegan* (refugees) and were subject to tougher restrictions on access to work and other civil services.² Lateef's strong sense of both personal and Islamic devotion to Baran and her family is clearly being contrasted here, with a view of the state's rather pragmatic approach to the refugee question. While spectators may become deeply immersed in the love story, Majidi also intends to provoke a consideration of the refugee question in contemporary Iran.



Baran, Fouad Nahas.

Michelle Langford

Notes

1. Sami A Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, 'The Islamic Conception of Migration', *The International Migration Review*, 30: 1 (1996), p. 53.
2. Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi, Diana Glazebrook et al., 'Return to Afghanistan? A Study of Afghans Living in Tehran' (Afghanistan Research Evaluation Unit, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, 2005), p. 13.

Iron Island

Jazire-h Ahani

Studio/Distributor:

Farabi Cinema Foundation,
Sheherazad Media International

Director:

Mohammad Rasoulof

Producers:

Abolhassan Davudi
Mohammad Rasoulof

Screenwriter:

Mohammad Rasoulof

Cinematographer:

Reza Jalali

Art Director:

Mohammad Rasoulof

Editor:

Bahram Dehghani

Duration:

90 minutes

Genre:

Comedy

Cast:

Ali Nassirian
Hossein Farzi-Zadeh
Neda Pakdaman
Didar Razeghi
Mehdi Bedeleh
Rahbon Nadali

Year:

2005

Synopsis

Iron Island is set on a derelict oil tanker abandoned several hundred meters off the coast of Iran. Although the exact place is not given, both the setting and subject matter suggest it takes place somewhere in the oil-rich region of the

Persian Gulf. The ship has become a thriving village; home to several hundred members of Iran's marginalized Sunni-Arab community. These 'villagers' work under the tutelage of the seemingly benevolent Captain Nemat (whose name means 'blessing') who claims to have the people's best interests at heart. However as the narrative proceeds, we are provided with greater insight into Nemat's essentially self-serving nature, and realize the extent to which the people are hopelessly dependent upon him for all of life's basic necessities: food, shelter, employment, education, and communication. When it is discovered the ship is gradually sinking, the ship's inhabitants – who quite literally have no home/land – are at Nemat's mercy once again, finding themselves displaced from a sinking ship to an equally uninhabitable desert wasteland.

Critique

Iron Island is a good, if somewhat thinly veiled example of the tendency towards allegory in many post-revolutionary Iranian films. It is also one of the many recent Iranian films that have attempted to address the plight of Iran's marginalized ethnic minorities (others include *Baran*[Majid Majidi, 2001], *Takht-e-Siah/Blackboards*[Samira Makhmalbaf, 2000] and the films of Kurdish-Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi). Writer/director Rasoulof takes a mildly humorous approach to the marginalization of Iran's Arab ethnic minority through the depiction of a series of absurd scenarios, comically stereotyped characters, and clever metaphorical imagery to convey his serious message. First of all is the image of the ship itself. The clear blue water and the bright sunshine form a stark contrast both with the dark, cavernous spaces within the ship, as well as with the rusting decrepitude of the discarded ship, its sheer bulk making a severe and somewhat surreal blight on the landscape. Like the ship, its inhabitants are a motley and disheveled crew who include a group of unruly adolescent boys, women, young and old, little children, a teacher, and numerous men who labour endlessly to provide for their families. While the ship serves as a makeshift home for its people, it is clear that they are at once dislocated from the broader Iranian society, and have limited freedoms. Although the villagers work constantly and industriously in less than ideal conditions, ironically this industriousness is turned towards dismantling the ship for scrap metal and siphoning the oil from the dark depths of the container's hull. They are literally being forced to tear down what little semblance of a home/land they have.

Beyond these narrative details, however, the film engages with and problematizes some of the key discourses that lie at the heart of Iranian nationhood and identity formation. According to Farideh Farhi, throughout

history, Iranian (and previously Persian) national identity has been fought out variously in terms of territory, the myth of ethnic purity and linguistic cohesiveness.¹ On one level, the ship functions broadly as an allegory of Iran, a territorially 'secure' but not impervious Island, rich in natural resources. In fact this is reinforced by the easy linguistic slippage from 'Iron' to 'Iran' suggested by the film's English title. This 'land', however is depicted as somewhat chaotic, dysfunctional, and ruled by a seemingly benevolent, but ultimately autocratic ruler, Captain Nemat. Not only does he limit the 'villager's' mobility by heavily restricting access to the land, he also censors all communication on board the ship: television is banned, access to the ship's only mobile phone is heavily restricted, and even supplies only newspapers that date back to the Iran/Iraq war. Furthermore, Persian is enforced as the ship's official language, even though Arabic would be the language of their ethnic heritage. The people are effectively kept in a state of temporal and informational suspense, an allegory perhaps of media censorship in Iran. On another level, however, the ship is certainly *not* Iran, but rather serves as a clear marker of a territorial partition on the margins of Iran effectively isolating and excluding the Arab-Iranian inhabitants from the broader citizenry. Like the tanker, they are quite literally 'marooned' on a sinking ship, certainly a signifier of the unstable 'ground' beneath their feet.

Iron Island, Farabi Cinema Foundation, Sheherazad Media International.



Michelle Langford

Note

1. Farideh Farhi, 'Crafting a National Identity amidst Contentious Politics in Contemporary Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 38: 1 (2005), p. 10.

Half Moon

Niwemang

Studios/Distributors:

MiJ Film Co.

Silkroad Production

New Crowned Hope

Director:

Bahman Ghobadi

Producers:

Simon Field
Keith Griffith
Behrooz Hashemian
Bahman Ghobadi

Screenwriters:

Bahman Ghobadi
Behnam Behzadi

Cinematographer:

Nigel Bluck

Composer:

Hossein Alizadeh

Sound Editor:

Haydeh Safi-Yari

Editor:

Haydeh Safi-Yari
278 Iran

Duration:

113 minutes

Genres:

Drama Art house

Cast:

Ismail Ghaffari
Allah Morad Rashtiani
Farzin Sabooni
Hedieh Tehrani
Golshifteh Farahani
Hassan Poorshirazi
Kambiz Arshi
Sadiq Behzadpoor
Ali Ashraf Rezai
Reza Haj Khosravi
Mohamad Nahid

Bahram Zarei

Year:

2006

Synopsis

Over a blow horn, a paunchy, middle-aged Kurdish man Kako auctions off a fighting rooster, before introducing the subsequent cockfight with a quote from Kierkegaard: 'I am not afraid of death because when I am here he is not.' As soon as the match commences, Kako is called away on an important phone call; he is asked by famed Kurdish musician Mamo to arrange a bus to transport him and his musician 'sons' to Iraq for the nation's first post-Saddam concert of Kurdish music.

Having attached a DV video camera to the front of his bus, Kako begins his journey, picking up members of Mamo's band, including an aged gentleman whom he retrieves from his musical instrument workshop. With these men on board, Kako reaches Mamo, whom we first see lying in an open grave. With Mamo now on the bus and barking orders, they next stop for the old man's daughter, who teaches students on a barren Kurdish hillside; seeing this, Mamo asks his daughter to continue on as their teacher. Following an additional stop where the renowned musician is warned by another son of the potential danger ahead, Mamo has premonitions of his body lying in a second empty grave and of a woman pulling a casket.

Back on the bus, they then travel to a village, sculpted out of the side of a mountain, where 1,334 female singers have been exiled. Inside the ancient village, the women stand in rows along the tops of the house, each holding a large daf. They raise their instruments in unison and begin to play; women's voices continue to be audible though we see no one singing. Mamo walks off with the divinely-voiced Hesho, whom he has recruited to journey with them to Kurdish Iraq.

Mamo and Hesho consequently rehearse on the bus as they continue on under the cover of night. The next day the bus is stopped and inspected by border guards with Hesho hidden from view. They are permitted to continue on, but are pulled over shortly thereafter by the same border patrol. In this instance, Hesho is discovered and is hauled away by the inspectors. Though a sympathetic Kurdish border guard smuggles Hesho back to Mamo and company in the middle of the night, she leaves clandestinely before they wake the next day.

Lacking both a singer and instruments now (the latter were destroyed during their most recent border inspection), they continue on to the village of a second, legendary musician, Kak Khalil. Unfortunately, their arrival comes one day after his death, leading a distraught – and very pale – Mamo to lie once more in a vacant grave (thus replicating the image seen previously as a premonition). However, the ethereally voiced female singer from the funeral, Niwemang, volunteers to accompany the troupe to Iraq, before also supplying the men with new instruments.

With the concert fast approaching and the men now split into two groups as they cross the border on foot, Niwemang leads the dying Mamo on horseback through the thick mountain snow. With Niwemang returning to Mamo's sons to seek assistance with their gravely ill father, the old man crawls on hands and knees across the snow, ultimately finding his final resting place in an open coffin. Returning, Niwemang and one of Mamo's sons discover the old man deceased in the coffin; they proceed to drag him across the Iraqi border with the film fading to black.

Critique

Half Moon, the fourth feature directed by Bahman Ghobadi, leading chronicler of the tragic Kurdish experience, and commissioned on behalf of Vienna's New Crowned Hope festival commemorating the 250th anniversary of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's birth, distinguishes itself from its predecessors (*Zamani Bara-ye Masti Asb-ha/A Time for Drunken Horses*[2000]; *Marooned in Iraq*[2002]; and *Lakposhtha Parvaz Mikonand/Turtles Can Fly*[2004]) through its comparative disinclination to depict gross human suffering on screen. Rather than representing the travails of child smugglers, musicians caught in the post-Gulf War Kurdish genocide, or youthful black marketers in the landmine-saturated Turkish-Iraqi border region, *Half Moon* features the comparatively lighter subject of a well-known Kurdish musician travelling to perform in post-Saddam Iraq. Tonally, *Half Moon* is also often less severe with Allah Morad Rashtiani's performance as the slightly slippery, though ultimately comically inept bus driver Kako (Allah Morad Rashtiani) contributing to the film's relative levity: the most humorous of his blunders is his failure to load tape into his DV camera – he had planned to sell the recording to Kurdish television. Likewise, humour is gleaned from Kako's punishment (he is hung upside down during Kak Khalil's funeral) and even from his handgun, which Mamo (Ismail Ghaffari) uses to shoot off the ear of a fellow traveller. This latter incident leads Mamo's sons to joke that the turbaned gentleman now looks like Vincent Van Gogh.

Half Moon, MIJ Film Co., Silkroad Production, New Crowned Hope.



Nevertheless, Ghobadi's humour is tempered by the tragic, which the film depicts not only in Mamo's ultimate death, but also, and more acutely, in the political realities facing women in Ghobadi's country of birth. Indeed, though *Half Moon* does not make the point directly, Iran's legal prohibition against women singing in public pervades the work: this reality is depicted most immediately through Hesho's (Hedieh Tehrani) arrest, but is also perceptible in Niwemang's (aka Half Moon, Golshifteh Farahani) voiced over performance at Kak Khalil's funeral, as well as in the overdubbed vocals of the 1,334 exiled female residents of the mythic village. In both of the latter examples, we hear women singing without seeing them do so. In this way, *Half Moon* shows us a nation of female singers who are legally prohibited from doing so, persecuted, and driven underground; in this regard, the subject of Ghobadi's fourth feature prefigures that of his fifth, *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009).

Half Moon accordingly represents an opening up of the director's subject from the experiences of the Kurdish people to the contemporary political realities of the Iranian nation. This change in orientation similarly impacts the film's representational strategy, which moves away from the depiction of the material and bodily suffering that played such a large role in the first three Kurdish-specific works – Ghobadi's role as chronicler of the Kurdish experience was of course to depict said experience, to show rather than to hide – to a strategy of occlusion that marks many of Iran's latter-day art cinema achievements, and in particular those films produced by Ghobadi's characteristically less political mentor, Abbas Kiarostami, along with his many pupils. Following in this tradition, *Half Moon* not only prohibits us from seeing women singing (save for Hesho secretly rehearsing), in intimate moments with men (under the bus, we

see two sets of legs pressed very close together), or without their heads and bodies covered, but also from witnessing the final concert that has determined the narrative throughout. As in the post-1990 festival-oriented cinema of Kiarostami, it is for the spectator to decide whether the final performance occurs, and ultimately, whether or not Niwemang sings. The viewer becomes the agent of the film's societal critique.

Michael J Anderson

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IRANIAN CINEMA ONLINE

Online Resources

<http://www.khanehcinema.ir/en/indexen.aspx>
<http://www.film-magazine.com/>
<http://www.fcf.ir/pe/> <http://fa.shortfilmnews.com/>
http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/tv/2011/04/000001_ptv_aparat.shtml
<http://www.peykemostanad.com/> <http://www.irancinema.ir/films>
<http://www.greencine.com/static/primers/iran-1.jsp>
<http://onlinefilmhome.dk/info.asp?filmid=66>
http://fajrfestival.ir/29th/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=53
<http://www.iranianfilmfestival.org/>
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TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Questions

1. Under the reign of which monarch did Iranian aristocrats first become familiarized with the cinematograph?
2. The characters of *Abi and Rabi*, from the first Iranian fiction film were inspired by which preceding Danish comedy duo?
3. Which director was the recipient of the 'Golden Lion' at the 'Venice Film Festival' for his feature length film in 2000?
4. Which Iranian actress whose appearance in Asghar Farhadi's 2008 film *About Elly* led to successful roles in Hollywood films?
5. What is the name of the first Iranian talkie film?
6. Which film studio was responsible for the first serious documentaries to be produced in Iran?
7. Abdolhossein Sepanta, the director of the first Iranian talkie, made the film in collaboration with which Indian film studio?
8. After the Second World War, Iranian cinema faced a decline and no films were made for eleven years – what film was the first to mark the end of this hiatus?
9. What is the name of the term used for the typical mainstream Iranian film made in Iran before the Islamic Revolution?
10. What was the first film released by the renowned director Abbas Kiarostami?
11. What genre came to special prominence after the Islamic Revolution with no examples being made beforehand?
12. Which institute in Iran was responsible for the production of films concerning the subject of children?
13. Which famous Iranian poet received the award of Best Documentary Film for her directorial debut, becoming the first Iranian female to do so?
14. What was the most financially successful film in Iranian cinema before the Revolution?
15. Which 1968 Iranian New Wave film, at first banned in Iran under the regime of the Shah, famously received praise from Ayatollah Khomeini the Islamic Republic's supreme leader described as the 'ideal' example for future films to be made after the Revolution?
16. What's the title of Bahram Beyzaie's film about the plights of a young southern Iranian boy coping with the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war?

17. Which director aims to use his films to shed light on the lives and society of the Kurdish minority in Iran?
18. Who opened the first movie theatre in Iran in 1904?
19. Which acclaimed Iranian film directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, takes place in Afghanistan during the rule of the Taliban?
20. Which actor came to personify the 'Jahel' character, evidently establishing a genre of its own?
21. Who is the founder of the Iranian National film Archive?
22. Who was the director of the 1972 political satire, *The Secret of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley*?
23. Who played the starring role as the anti-hero of Massoud Kimiai's 1968 film *Qaysar*?
24. Who is the writer of the book *Tranquillity in the Presence Of Others* and co-scriptwriter of its cinematic adaptation, who was also involved with other important films of Iran's New Wave movement?
25. Which genre became the staple of Film Farsi cinema in pre-revolutionary Iran.
26. The film *Vagabond*, made by Mehdi Raees Firooz in 1950, is a typical example of which sub-genre?
27. Which Iranian film was a modern adaptation of a tale from *One Thousand and One Nights*?
28. What is the name of the 1924 celebrated documentary film about the migration of the Bakhtiary nomads in the South of Iran?
29. Who is considered to be the first actress in Iranian cinema?
30. Esmail Koushan directed *The Shame* (1951), starring which Iranian pop singer?
31. Which musical comedy was the first Iranian film to be shot in colour?
32. Which director active in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was regarded as the Alfred Hitchcock of Iran, because of his output of thrillers and noirs inspired by American cinema?
33. Which Kiarostami film dramatized the real-life story of a man who impersonated the famous Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf?
34. Who is the director of *Hello Cinema*, a film paying tribute to cinema's centenary?
35. Which Henrik Ibsen play was adapted by Dariush Mehrjui for his film *Sara*?
36. Which Jean Luc Godard film served as inspiration for Kamran Shirdell's

- Iranian New Wave film *The Morning of the Fourth Day*?
37. Which female Iranian film-maker won the 'Jury Prize' of the Official Competition section of the 2000 'Cannes Film Festival'?
 38. Who played the main role in Dariush Mehrjui's New Wave film *The Postman*?
 39. What is the name of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's romantic episodic film which was screened in the 'Un Certain Regard' section at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival?
 40. Which Rakhshan Bani-Etemad film addresses drug addiction in contemporary Iran?
 41. Writer's block is the main theme of which Iranian films made after the Revolution?
 42. Which of Jafar Panahi's films was inspired by Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*?
 43. Whose debut feature film won the 'Golden Alexander' for Best Film at 'Thessaloniki Film Festival' 2004?
 44. Kiarostami dedicated which of his films to the Japanese film-maker Yasujiro Ozu?
 45. In which film does Rakhshan Bani-Etemad deal with forbidden romance across age and class barriers?
 46. Which of Asghar Farhadi's films focused on the issue of capital punishment in Iran?
 47. Which Dariush Mehrjui film was highly inspired by Karl Georg Buchner's 1873 play *Woyzeck*?
 48. Who shot the footage of the coronation of Mozaffareddin Shah?
 49. Frank Perry's *The Swimmer* was the inspiration for which Iranian film?
 50. Who plays the main female role in Dariush Mehrjui's film *Leila*?

Answers

1. Mozaffareddin Shah
2. Double Patte and Patachon
3. Jafar Panahi
4. Golshifteh Farahani
5. *The Lor Girl*
6. Golestan Film Studio
7. Imperial Film Studio
8. *The Tempest of Life*

9. Film Farsi
10. *The Bread and the Alley*
11. War films
12. Institute for the Cognitive Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) 13. Forough Farrokhzad – ‘Adults 13’
14. *Qaroon’s Treasure*
15. *The Cow*
16. *Bashu, the Little Stranger*
17. Bahman Ghobadi
18. Ibrahim Sahaf Bashi
19. Kandahar
20. Mohammad Ali Fardin
21. Farrokh Ghaffari
22. Ebrahim Golestan
23. Behrouz Vosoughi
24. Gholamhossein Sa’edi
25. Jaheli genre
26. Iranian urban melodrama
27. *The Night of the Hunchback*
28. *Grass*
29. Ruouhangiz Saminejad
30. Delkash
31. *The Runaway Bride*
32. Samuel Khachikian
33. *Close-Up*
34. Mohsen Makhmalbaf
35. *A Doll’s House*
36. *Breathless*
37. Samira Makhmalbaf
38. Ezatollah Entezami
39. *Time of Love*
40. *Mainline*
41. *The Pear Tree*
42. *Crimson Gold*
43. Mohsen Amiryousefi
44. *Five Dedicated to Ozu*

45. *Blue-veiled*
46. *Beautiful City*
47. The Postman
48. Russi Khan
49. *Beehive*
50. Leila Hatami

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

The Editor

Parviz Jahed is a postgraduate film scholar and critic, film-maker and lecturer in film studies, scriptwriting and film directing. He is the author of a number of books and essays on Iranian cinema and his critical works on Iranian and world cinema have been published in various publications and journals in Iran and the United Kingdom. His book, *Nevashtan ba Dourbin/Writing with a Camera*, an in-depth interview with Ebrahim Golestan (the veteran Iranian film-maker and writer who lives in the United Kingdom in exile) was published in 2005 in Iran. Jahed is also a regular contributor to the BBC Persian website and television as a film critic and reviewer. Jahed's areas of research interest include Iranian Cinema (especially the New Wave and art film), American film noir, world film, and the history of film style and theory. Jahed also made a number of documentaries and short films including: *Maria: 24 hour peace picket*, *Ta'zieh*, *Another Naration*, *The Grass*, *The Lark*, *Day-break*, *Coffee-Cup Reading*, *Solayman Minassian: A Man With a Movie Camera* and *Bonjour Monsieur Ghaffari*.

The Contributors

Adam Bingham worked through nine years of a formal education in Film Studies. He writes for the Canadian-based film journal *CineAction* and other film journals include *Cineaste*, *Sight and Sound*, *Electric Sheep*, *Senses of Cinema*, *Asian Cinema* and *Screen*. His particular areas of interest and research are postwar Japanese documentaries, the Japanese New Wave director Yoshida Kiju, transnational genre, Hong Kong cinema and Eastern European cinema.

Jonathan Rosenbaum is an American film critic. Rosenbaum was the head film critic for the *Chicago Reader* from 1987 until 2008, when he retired at the age of 65. He has published and edited numerous books and has contributed to most of the world's notable film publications, including *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Film Comment*. Jean-Luc Godard once said of him: 'I think there is a very good film critic in the United States today, a successor of James Agee, and that is Jonathan Rosenbaum. He's one of the best; we don't have writers like him in France today. He's like André Bazin.' Rosenbaum's books include: *Moving Places: A Life in the Movies* (1980), *Midnight Movies* (1983), *Film: The Front Line* (1983), *Greed* (1993), *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (1995), *Movies as Politics* (1997), *Dead Man* (2000), *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Films You See* (2000), *Abbas Kiarostami (Contemporary Film Directors)* (2003); with Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* (2004), *Discovering Orson Welles* (2007) and *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia: Film Culture in Transition* (2010).

Michelle Langford is a lecturer in Film Studies at the University of New South Wales. She has published on Iranian and German cinema and is the author of *Allegorical Images: Tableau, Time and Gesture in the Cinema of Werner Schroeter* (2006) and editor of *The Directory of World Cinema: Germany* (2011).

Bahman Maghsoudlou is an Iranian film critic, film-maker and producer who lives in New York. He is a graduate in Cinema Studies from the City University of New York (Staten Island) with a PhD from Columbia University. Maghsoudlou is the producer and director of short documentaries on Iranian artists and writers including: Ardeshir Mohasses, Ahmad Shamlou, Ahmad Mahmoud and Iran Darroudi. Maghsoudlou is author of the book *Grass: Untold Stories* which detailed the background stories related to the making of the 1925

silent movie, *Grass in Iran*.

Michael J Anderson is a PhD candidate in Film Studies and History of Art at Yale University where his dissertation research focused on the early films of Howard Hawks. Michael has published online and print essays on a wide variety of films and topics, including pieces on *Hatari!* and Hollywood's Safari "A"-picture cycle, Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeezah*, Abbas Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Jacques Rivette's *Histoire de Marie et Julien*, James Benning's *13 Lakes*, Michael Mann's *Collateral* and Tony Scott's *Deja Vu*. Michael is also the proprietor of film weblog *Tataville* (tataville.blogspot.com).

Behrouz Turani is a media historian who has been writing for the Iranian and British media since the early 1960s. He is the author of several books in Persian and English on Iranian media, including *A History of Broadcasting in Iran* (2004), *A Glossary of Journalism* (1997) and *Iranian Films of the 1970s* (1979). He has translated into Persian a selection of British and American screenplays as well as several textbooks for film students.

Najmeh Khalili-Mahani studied Computer Engineering in Tehran Polytechnic. She migrated to Canada in 1993, and studied in Concordia and McGill Universities, completing postgraduate studies in Biomedical Engineering, Neuroscience and Film Studies. Her cinema research interests include phenomenology of new media, audience reception and social function of popular cinema.

Saeed Aghighi is a film critic, scriptwriter and translator. He is the writer of the books *The Glass Travel Agency* (a monograph of Ebrahim Hatamikia's film), and *Taste of Cherry* (a monograph Abbas Kiarostami's film). Aghighi teaches cinema and scriptwriting in Iran. He is also scriptwriter of the films: *White Nights* and *Seven Acts* both directed by Farzad Mo'tamen.

Gilda Boffa holds a Master's degree in Film Studies from Concordia University. She wrote her thesis about the influence of mystical thought and poetry on the cinema of Mohsen Makhmalbaf. She has published several articles and a book chapter about Iranian cinema. She is currently researching Middle Eastern dances and working on a documentary about a male belly dancer.

Hamid Reza Sadr is a film critic working in Tehran. He is well known for his articles on cinema in *Film Magazine* and *Haft Magazine*. His books include:

Sinema-ye Komedi/Comedic Cinema (1987) and *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (2006).

Robert Safarian is an Iranian film critic, translator and documentary filmmaker. He has studied cinema and Persian literature. His film reviews and articles on short films and documentary cinema were published in Iranian magazines and journals including *Gozaresh-e Film* and *San'at-e Cinema*. Robert is the author of *Analysis of Michelangelo Antonioni's 'L'Aventura'* and *Analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's 'Shadow of a Doubt'*, both in Persian.

Fatemeh Hosseini-Shakib is an animation and media researcher in Iran. Having completed her PhD in animation studies in the United Kingdom (University for the Creative Arts [UCA], Farnham) in 2009, Fatemeh is currently lecturing animation theory/aesthetics at the Faculty of Cinema and Theatre at Tehran Art University, Iran. Prior to her move back to Tehran, she had been lecturing animation theory to undergraduates at UCA since 2006.

Nikolaos Vryzidis studied Film (BA) at Queen Mary, University of London, and Film and History of Art (MA) at the School of Oriental & African Studies. His academic interests include transculturalism in cinema and the visual arts, cultural hybridity and museology, with particular emphasis on the regions of the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Saeed Talajooy has recently completed a UCL Mellon Fellowship in comparative literature and translation studies. His research and teaching are focused on the changing pattern of Iranian identity as reflected in Iranian theatre, cinema and literature. At the moment, he has two book projects that are close to publication. The first which he is editing with Dr Karima Laachir is an edited book entitled *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures: Literature, Cinema and Music* (forthcoming, 2012). The other is a critical collection containing five Iranian plays, and essays on Iranian theatre, entitled *Modernity and Iranian Drama: Plays and Playwrights* (forthcoming, summer 2012).

Abdee Kalantari, Iranian-American cultural critic, writes in Persian and lives in New York. He is editor of the *Nilgoon* website and former columnist at Radio Zamaneh.

Taraneh Dadar is currently a PhD candidate at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. She has a BA in English Literature from Ferdowsi University,

Mashad, Iran, and an MA in Cultural Studies from The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. Her PhD is on the construction of gender identity in the popular cinema of post-revolutionary Iran.

Abbas Baharlou is a film researcher and historian based in Iran. He is the author of several books and articles on Iranian cinema in Persian, including: *The History of Film Criticism in Iran*, *Iran's Filmography* and *Point of View in Iranian Cinema*.

Alireza Majmae is a journalist and film critic in Iran. He was the editor of *Farhang va Cinema* and *Mehr Weekly Journal*. He writes for *Donyay-e Tasvir* and *Naghd-e Cinema*. 24, *Jame Jam* and *Donya-ye Eghtesad* newspaper. Majmae was also a producer of programmes for Iran's 'Jam-e Jam TV', and has written articles on Iranian war films.

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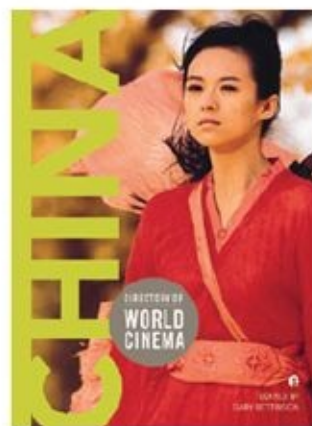


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