The New Iranian Cinema

Politics, Representation and Identity

Edited by **Richard Tapper**

I.B.TAURIS

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Contents

List of Illustrations

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This book arose from a conference held at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, in association with the major Festival of Iranian Films screened at the National Film Theatre, London, during June and July 1999.

Seven chapters (those by Devictor, Farahmand, Haghighi, Varzi, Saeed-Vafa, Lahiji and Sadr) are revisions of those presented at the conference. Naficy's excellent presentation, useful in the conference context, was marginal to the theme of the book; in its place he kindly agreed to revise and update an important published paper. Rahimieh's chapter has also appeared elsewhere. The remaining chapters (those by Ghazian, Dabashi and Mir-Hosseini, as well as the editor's introduction and Mulvey's afterword) were written specially for the book.

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ROXANNE VARZI is a Fellow at Columbia University where she is completing her PhD in Social/Cultural Anthropology. Varzi holds the first Fulbright Fellowship to be awarded for research in post-revolutionary Iran. Her research concentrated on the construction and consumption of public space and popular culture in Tehran with an emphasis on the Iran–Iraq war and youth culture. She has published both scholarly articles and creative short stories which include 'Iran Gardi' in *Public Culture*, 'Mercury Rising: Tajik Refugees in Kyrgystan' in *Silk Road*, 'The Caravan' in *The New York Press*, January 2000, 'The Pelican' in *A World Between: Fiction, Poetry and Essays by Iranian-Americans* (New York, George Braziller, 1999) and 'Refugee' in *The American Magazine*.

A Note on Transliteration and Style

For transliteration from Persian, the full range of vowels is used: a (but no macron for alef), e, i, o, u; and the diphthongs 'ow' (as in Nowruz), 'ey' (as in Hoseyn), 'ay' (as in Baysikel). 'Ain (except initially) and hamzeh have been retained and distinguished. Proper and personal names, wherever possible, are given in conventional forms.

Film titles are always given in English in the text, and (in cases where there are alternative English versions) have been standardized. A filmography at the end lists separately both Persian and English film titles. In the text, for the first mention of a film in each chapter, the name of the director and the date of first screening are also given. Although there are sometimes considerable ambiguities in dating (completion, first screening etc.), the editor has, perhaps rashly, again attempted standardization, usually relying on the three-volume (so far) compilation by Jamal Omid (*Farhang-e Film-ha-ye Sinema-ye Iran*, Tehran, Negah, 1377–79/1998–2000).

1

Introduction[1]

Richard Tapper

In the early 1970s, a number of films by Iranian directors attracted considerable international attention, as Roy Armes notes in his seminal work *Third World Film Making and the West*:

> 1970 [saw] the appearance of a New Iranian Cinema… created by a fairly heterogeneous group of young intellectuals, many of them foreign-educated, and receiving some support from the Ministry of Culture and the state television service.[2]

A few years later, the 1978–9 Iranian Revolution, and the inauguration of what many saw as an oppressively puritanical and totalitarian Islamic Republic, seemed to threaten the end of the 'New Iranian Cinema' (also known as the 'New Wave'). As Devictor describes this process below:

> When the Revolution broke out in 1979, observers and professionals of the film industry were worried about the future of cinema in Iran. Cinema theatres were burned down in the name of morality and cultural independence, the chain of production was completely disrupted by the exile of numerous directors, actors and producers, creativity was jeopardized by the uncertainty of what would be allowed or forbidden. Nevertheless, far from dying, Iranian cinema has become more active and lively than ever before.

1. Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh*.

By the late 1990s, indeed, cinema in Iran appeared to be flourishing, its remarkable transformation paralleling wider changes in Iranian culture and society. It is widely recognized not merely as a distinctive 'national cinema' but as one of the most innovative and exciting in the world: films from Iranian directors are screened to increasing acclaim in international festivals.

The new international stature of Iranian cinema is often presented as a paradox, given, as Naficy puts it below, the 'Western perception that Shi'i Islam as practised in Iran today is anti-modern and backward. The Islamic Republic's widely reported curtailment of Western-style performing arts and entertainment and its maltreatment of entertainers, have certainly reinforced such impressions.' This apparent paradox at least partly explains the recent international fascination with Iranian cinema.

But hostile domestic conditions in the late 1970s had already drastically reduced the output of the New Wave. Iranian cinema has re-emerged not just in spite of government restrictions in the Islamic Republic. It has firm roots both before the Revolution, and in richer and more profound Iranian cultural traditions of drama, poetry and the visual arts that have survived many centuries of political and social change. The

contributors to this book share a perception of the need for deeper – but accessible – analysis of the recent international success of Iranian cinema. They approach the topic from a range of perspectives: media studies and film criticism, literature, anthropology, sociology, politics and economics. Many have already published books on aspects of Iranian cinema. One interesting consequence of the Revolution has been that the field of Iranian studies in the West is now dominated by Iranians, not Westerners. Most of our contributors are Iranian: some live and work in Iran, others in the US and the UK.

The chapters below collectively consider how cinema has developed in Iran in the years since the 1978–9 Revolution, the place of cinema in Iranian culture and society, and how Iranian cinema has become a true 'world cinema'. All address important relevant issues, some in a general way, others by focusing on specific films or directors. This Introduction suggests how the chapters – as the editor reads them – relate to each other and to the wider contexts of Iranian society, culture and politics.

The focus of the book is Iranian cinema since the Revolution. Pre-revolutionary cinema is the subject of several published studies, and is referred to when necessary in several chapters; a short discussion will set the scene here.

Iranian Cinema up to the 1978–9 Revolution

Opinions differ as to whether Iranian cinema began in 1900 with the introduction of the first cine-camera by Mozafferoddin Shah's photographer Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkas-bashi, or in 1930 with the first Iranian fiction film, Ovanes Oganians's *Abi and Rabi* (1930). Other films from the first half of the century, such as the first 'talkie', Ardeshir Irani's *The Lor Girl* (1933), had a major public impact – in the cities at least – and have achieved a mythical status.[3] But interesting though the history of the early years is, it must be said that nothing of distinction – nothing worthy of being called 'national cinema' – was produced until after the Second World War. For many years, the films shown publicly were mostly dubbed imports; local productions were imitations of Indian, Egyptian and other foreign films, the most popular being what became known as the *film farsi* genre.[4]

Unlike in some other countries, elements which constrain Iranian cinema today – such as its connection with politics, religion and national culture

– have always been present. Both government and religious authorities sought to control the images to be shown publicly.[5] Religious leaders condemned cinema from the start as morally offensive and ethically corrupting. As Farahmand notes below, formal censorship began in the 1920s, in the face of increasing imports of films depicting women, the family, sex and dancing, while political criticism or social realism in locally produced films was unthinkable. By the 1950s and 1960s, commercial enterprise determined film style. While political censorship if anything increased, greater freedom was allowed in the area of sex, leading Ayatollah Khomeini and other religious figures to condemn cinema in the 1970s.[6]

There were interesting developments in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in documentary-making, by writers and filmmakers such as Farrokh Gaffary, Forugh Farrokhzad and Ebrahim Golestan; but the year 1969 is generally agreed to mark the birth of the Iranian art cinema, called the New Wave, with Daryush Mehrju'i's prize-winning *The Cow* and Massoud Kimia'i's *Qeysar*. For a brief period between 1969 and 1974, Iranian cinema became known internationally for the first time.[7] Domestically, art cinema was increasingly part of new Iranian movements in literature and politics, with the involvement of intellectuals and literary figures such as Kimia'i, Mehrju'i, Golestan, Farrokhzad, Bahram Beyza'i and Gholam-Hoseyn Sa'edi. The new films introduced the notion of director as *auteur* and the idea of cinema as an art like literature, poetry and theatre. Writers now wrote for cinema.[8]

The treatment of *The Cow* at festivals prefigured the reception of some post-revolutionary films. But it was not yet a 'world cinema'. And, as Armes notes, 'The films of the young directors had given Iran an international reputation, but they failed to reach a mass audience within their own country.'[9] From the mid-1970s, local audiences for Iranian films decreased, in the face of invasions from India and Hollywood. Local production declined through lack of financial support; only *film farsi* continued to draw popular audiences and make money.

Indeed, there is much agreement that pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema was nearly dead before the Revolution, killed by the wholesale import of foreign films. But politics was still an important factor. A combination of filming styles and the choice and treatment of topics and locations – rural and tribal societies and the urban poor – brought an association of the new cinema with anti-government politics. *The Cow* in particular started a genre of allegorical 'protest' film. However, such

films were appreciated only by a small elite local audience and foreign critics, and the Pahlavi regime stifled the protest more effectively by appropriation than by censorship. As Dabashi puts it below:

> It is sad but nevertheless undeniable that much of the secular culture of 1960s and 1970s Iran, as expressed not just in the Tehran Film Festival but even more offensively in the Shiraz Art Festival, was sponsored by, and gave cultural credence to, the Pahlavi monarchy… the unfortunate state of the pre-revolutionary art was such that, in order to see the work of even Amir Naderi or Daryush Mehrju'i, two of the most progressive filmmakers at the time, one had to sit next to the Pahlavi ruling elite.

Like many twentieth-century nation-states, Pahlavi Iran sought legitimacy in early history. The Shahs looked to pre-Islamic times, reviving and glorifying Iran's earlier cultural and political heritage at the expense of Islam. Whatever was Islamic the state depicted as backward; 'tradition' was rejected to pave the way for 'modernization'. The Pahlavis' aggrandizement of their pre-Islamic precursors and of pre-Islamic Iranian cultural traditions was not well received by the general public, few of whom shared the values that were being promoted; in particular, they aggravated the antagonism of the religious classes towards the regime. The 1978–9 Revolution was a rejection of the Pahlavis and all they stood for. It was a populist revolution with many different elements, but the clerics had the deepest popular roots, were best organized and led, and emerged victorious as the rulers of an Islamic Republic.[10]

After the Islamic Revolution, an Islamic Cinema?

Before the Revolution, the *ulema* had either rejected cinema or ignored it; as a new art form, scholars had little to say about it, apart from applying to the depiction of images their juristic (*feqh*) rules of what was forbidden and what was allowed (*haram* and *halal*). Generally, the religious classes disapproved: for some pious families, going to the cinema was tantamount to committing a sin: it was *haram*. But the Islamists recognized the usefulness of the media, and when the state became Islamic and subject to the rulings of the jurists, they had to deal with the issue of cinema. They had two options: they could either forbid it (as the Taliban did in Afghanistan 15 years later) or Islamicize it. Realizing its power, they could no longer ignore it, but decided to bring it under proper control and use it for proper political purposes. Armes starts a chapter on 'The

Middle East and Africa' with the following quotation from Ayatollah Khomeini: 'Cinema is one of the manifestations of culture and it must be put to the service of man and his education.'[11] For Khomeini, the adoption of cinema became an ideological tool to combat Pahlavi culture.

Early revolutionary discourse defined itself in opposition to the *ancien régime*, and aimed to undo and to rectify what were portrayed as non-Islamic elements; not only to establish a new Islamic political and economic base, and popular legitimacy through a new Constitution, but to reinvent culture, society, intellectual life, education and learning, 'Islamicized' and cleansed of the pollution of Western and Pahlavi elements.

In the 1980s, the new cultural policy brought the growth of regulation: all forms of communications media and arts were forced into the ideological straitjacket of *feqh* rules of *halal* and *haram*. The most powerful media, TV and radio, were brought firmly under state control. The arts – including music, theatre, cinema – and press and publishing were made subject to the new Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG).

There was much debate on what an 'Islamic' art and cinema might mean. Naficy and Dabashi discuss this below. What would a new Islamic aesthetics be? Of course it was easier to focus on the negative (banning *haram* images and subjects, such as the portrayal of the body – especially women's – as part of the *hejab* system), but positive steps to promote Islamic subjects and images were suggested by the Revolution itself and then the war with Iraq (1980–88), which became subjects for major genres of art and cinema.

Naficy tells the story of the 'Islamization' of cinema, after the initial destruction of the film theatres themselves, a key symbolic act against the 'poison' of Pahlavi culture. He lists the elements of post-revolutionary 'Islamic culture', and the new regulations for cinema and video, and tells how an Islamic cinema was negotiated. His thesis is

> that the revolution led to the emergence of a new, vital cinema, with its own special industrial and financial structure, and unique ideological, thematic and production values. This is, of course, part of a more general transformation in the political culture of Iran.

He gives a detailed account and a chronology of events in the immediate post-revolutionary cinema, 1978–82. This was a period of uncertainty for Iranian filmmakers. Problems included:

> financial damage that the industry suffered during the revolution, lack of government interest in cinema during the transitional period, a vacuum of centralized authority, antagonistic competition between various factions over cinema, lack of an appropriate cinematic model, heavy competition from imports, a drastic deterioration in the public image of the industry as a whole, the haphazard application of censorship, and the flight of many film professionals into exile.

No quality film was produced in those early years. Amir Naderi's *The Runner* (1986) was an isolated exception, which came about because of the director's perseverance.[12] After 1982,

> Political consolidation entailed direct control of the mass media and the film industry. However, the transformation of cinema from the Pahlavi to the Islamic involved a major cultural and ideological shift, which could not take place unidirectionally, monolithically or rapidly.

A number of new institutions assisted in the process: the Farabi Foundation was created in 1983, while the Mostazafan Foundation and the Jehad (later Ministry) of Reconstruction had important roles in film production and exhibition and in the use of media generally. By 1984, film production was being encouraged once more. Naficy examines in detail the dominant themes of the films being made, such as promotion of anti-Pahlavi, Islamic values, war subjects and a restricted women's cinema.

How much did the Revolution mark a break from pre-revolutionary cinema? Naficy focuses on differences, although some other writers stress the continuity, pointing to the many accomplished directors who made films both before and after the Revolution, to the abiding connection of cinema with politics, and to the continuation of censorship in various forms.[13] The main break was the public's reduced exposure to Hollywood films, which by the late 1970s had ruined Iranian local cinema and – Islamists would say – public morals.

Back to the Festivals

By the mid-1980s, the failure to establish an Islamic ideological cinema was evident. What happened in the world of Iranian cinema parallels other developments in Iranian society: a gradual stretching of the limits imposed by the jurists, and of the way social realities – facts on the ground – respond to ideology and law, and a further redefining and reinventing of culture. As far as the arts were concerned, some Muslim

militants and radicals who had won the earlier battle with the secularists became moderates and liberals themselves. They were the so-called 'left', who formulated cultural policies in the 1980s. Among the key players was Mohammad Khatami, who began as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 1982 in the government of Mir Hoseyn Musavi, and with a team of Muslim intellectuals laid the foundation for an independent press and a new, national cinema.

In the first decade following the Revolution, art, including cinema, freed itself from the domination of ideology. The Farabi Cinema Foundation (FCF) realized that art cannot be dictated and that it was best to allow filmmakers to choose their own themes. Pre-revolutionary directors such as Mehrju'i, Beyza'i, Kimia'i and Abbas Kiarostami resumed their interrupted careers. Prominent newcomers included women directors. Gradually, the period of recovery and qualitative growth started, and with films like Mehrju'i's *The Tenants* (1986) and Beyza'i's *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1988), Iranian films started to attract international attention again. Official attitudes and conditions changed. Morality codes were relaxed in 1988. From 1989 to 1993, scripts no longer needed approval. As Naficy says, 'Cinema, rejected in the past as part of the frivolous *superstructure*, [was] adopted as part of the necessary *infrastructure* of Islamic culture.' Strict censorship continued, but a process of cultural negotiation and accommodation resulted in a lively cinema and cinema culture.

With the end of the war in 1988, and Khomeini's death a year later, cinema became a focus for ideological and political dispute. The political skirmishes reached a peak at the Fajr Festival of 1991. Naficy describes the debates in summer 1991, leading to the resignations of Khatami and others, and the start of a new period of uncertainty. Rafsanjani's 'rightist' government banned many high-quality films, and adopted the habit of accusing internal opponents of supporting 'Western cultural invasion'.

But the change of policy was too late, and it backfired. It politicized the filmmakers and forced them to take positions, as became evident in the 1997 presidential elections: Khatami was a surprise candidate, and the artistic community – including prominent filmmakers – came out and took sides, the first time they had taken an active role in politics. Those producing art and progressive cinema openly supported Khatami. His campaign 'commercial' was made by Seyfollah Dad, who later became Deputy for Cinema Affairs under Ataollah Mohajerani, the new Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Mohsen Makhmalbaf's

interviews played an important role in Khatami's campaign.[14] With Khatami's election, a new phase in Iranian cinema began. Many long-suppressed films were now screened, and issues that had been taboo in the 1980s were now addressed in films such as Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* (1998) and Tahmineh Milani's *Two Women* (1999).

With the phenomenal success – and festival exposure – in the late 1990s of new films by established masters like Kiarostami, Mehrju'i, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, as well as newcomers such as Majid Majidi, Abolfazl Jalili, Samira Makhmalbaf, Ja'far Panahi and Bahman Qobadi, the international progress of Iranian cinema seemed unstoppable. Iranian cinema became the rage. No respectable film festival was without at least one example. Festivals devoted to Iranian films multiplied. In summer 1999, the National Film Theatre staged the largest season so far (and the third in London that year) with some 60 Iranian films, both pre- and post-revolutionary, screened over two months. In the same year Chicago held its tenth annual festival, and there were seasons devoted to Iranian films – or particular directors – elsewhere in the US, France, Canada and other countries.

International Success: Politics or Economics?

How much has Iranian cinema's international success been achieved despite, or because of, Iranian government intervention? Why does government intervene, whether to promote or to censor? How has censorship affected filmmaking styles and strategies? What has attracted international critics and festival organizers to Iranian films? What are the expectations and attitudes of audiences at home and abroad? How much have Iranian films succeeded despite, or because of, their limited range of themes and focus? Because of Iranian culture or in spite of it? The following chapters address these and other central questions.

Many have suggested that Iranian cinema could not survive without its international market. Not surprisingly, French cinéastes, traditionally hostile to Hollywood, have been foremost in welcoming Iranian cinema, as Mojdeh Famili notes; she adds that this was also a smart attitude economically,[15] a point developed by Farahmand below.

In their chapters Devictor and Ghazian both note the high rate of film production reached during the 1990s, and ask how far Iranian cinema's international success and high output are due to government policy

towards cinema. Devictor suggests that Iranian government policy has been mainly ideological, rather than economic or artistic, but that it has used classical tools of intervention, and it is not unlike the policies of some Western democratic regimes. Like Naficy, she recounts the problems of cinema early in the Islamic Republic, being resolved only in 1982 in a coherent intervention policy with Khatami as Minister. She surveys the state institutions founded to deal with cinema production, such as Farabi; and the regulations – which the professionals demanded. She shows how the regime actually operated an ideological cinema, which was not peculiar to Iran: in the USSR, the US (under the Hays Code) and France too, cinema has been part of political debate. She draws parallels with state cinema policies in France – especially the tools used – then shows the limits of such a comparison, largely at the levels of political structure, ideology and motivation.

Ghazian takes an economic perspective, noting that the artistic success of Iranian cinema has not been matched by financial success. Many reputed films have failed in the domestic market. As before the Revolution, the public does not go to see Iranian films, but continues to prefer foreign films, despite the restrictions. The film industry is in severe financial crisis, and produces ever fewer films per head of population. Ghazian considers the role of government in alleviating this crisis, and suggests that state aid disrupts the supply–demand relationship. 'Ironically, this aid itself has aggravated the crisis, since it has come accompanied by ideological and political interference and a failure to appreciate the changes in the social structure of Iran over the past two decades.' The government supports films that the public does not want to see. He concludes that, if the government fails to recognize public demand by relaxing its controls, 'the eventual collapse of the Iranian film industry is a serious possibility'.

Political or Social Critique?

Farahmand and Haghighi examine, from different perspectives, the absence of political criticism in Iranian films. Farahmand looks sceptically at the international success of Iranian cinema, stressing its economic and political – rather than its artistic – basis. 'The recent recognition gained by Iranian cinema has overshadowed the remarkable Iranian film tradition of the past, and ignores the current crisis facing the industry.' Like

Ghazian, she highlights this financial crisis and suggests that government promotion of Iranian films abroad was strongly motivated by the promise of new external investment, especially by French production companies. It was also 'a promising means through which to renegotiate the imagery of the nation, and gradually to reclaim a place for the country within the global economy in the name of art', to foster a new (peaceful, artistic, childlike) image of Iran after the end of the war with Iraq.

Farahmand argues that Iranian films' 'entrance in and accolades at international festivals both reflect and produce a set of concerns that gradually and retroactively affect the film production and distribution process'. She is concerned about the internal consequences of censorship: how it interacts with film festivals to encourage and promote particular film styles, subjects and directors, and to exclude others:

> many filmmakers choose to avoid controversial themes entirely. In other words, filmmakers have been led to refrain from making confrontational and socially critical films for fear of being held accountable for making anti-system or anti-establishment statements through their work.

However,

> I am not suggesting that creative activity and critical expression are only possible in the absence of (self-)censorship, nor do I hold it the duty of filmmakers to be politically conscious and openly critical of society in their work… This, however, does not mean that censorship is good because it makes artists more creative.

Farahmand looks at the work of Kiarostami in particular, aiming 'to historicize and problematize aesthetic values and to subject them to a critical consideration… to situate Kiarostami's highly regarded works within a broader context'. He chooses 'village themes and location shooting in rural landscapes [which] reinforce the exotic look of Iranian films – and increase their marketability abroad'. She suggests that Kiarostami's 'political escapism… caters to the film festival taste for "high art" and restrained politics', and questions the politics of the festivals, drawing parallels with US–China 'ping-pong diplomacy' in the 1970s. Like Devictor, Farahmand refers to the politics apparently involved in Kiarostami's Palme d'Or and the last-minute screening of his *The Taste of Cherry* at Cannes 1997, just before Khatami's election as president.

While political cinema for Farahmand would involve open criticism of the Islamic Republic, for Haghighi, 'the basic essence of a political

film is an engagement with the most important political issues of the time,' which in Iran today would concern the competing factions in government, representing opposed 'ideological, charismatic, populist and authoritarian' views of the nature of political power. He maintains that there never has been such a political cinema in Iran. The 'intellectual cinema' of the 1970s attracted attention for its resistance to Pahlavi culture, but its critique was social, not political. Before the Revolution, there was no political cinema for three reasons: strict political censorship, the consequent obscurity and complexity of the critical films that were made, and the absence among filmmakers of political activists – of any colour. Islamic intellectuals used other media and art forms – such as literature – but not cinema. Cinema was religiously disapproved, and remained strongly associated with Pahlavi dominance, consequently in the post-revolutionary years, in an atmosphere where politics were expressed through religion, cinema was neglected. Only with the war did we see the birth of a new engaged cinema, but in the form of war films, without 'political' significance. Cinema, Haghighi feels, has continued to offer a social, not a political critique. With censorship, filmmakers commonly express political opinions indirectly through symbolism; but this has not been common in Iran, and viewers often see symbolism where none is intended. Iranian cinema, he maintains, has avoided not only politics, but also the thriving ideological and intellectual debates that have engaged the press and literature in the 1990s, such as new formulations of arguments concerning religion, development and modernity.[16]

Modernity and Realism: The War and After

'Modernity' is a guiding theme of Dabashi's chapter, which offers a complex and lyrical interpretation of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's passage through revolutionary experience into Islamic cinema, and then into art. Inspired by Heidegger's philosophical critique of technological modernity as essentially colonial and as 'the categorical reduction of things, including the human, to their use-value', Dabashi finds Islamic art, and the Islamic cinema to which Makhmalbaf aspired, to be 'nothing but a further Islamization of ideological resistance to colonialism as the extended arm of Technological Modernity'. However, 'a fundamental feature of such resistance has been [the] categorical failure to recognize

the formation of the so-called "native" or "traditional" mode as something in and of itself deeply colonial'.

In 1982, after an eventful early career as guerrilla, prisoner and revolutionary ideologue, Makhmalbaf started 'on a wild goose chase after an "Islamic Cinema", a figment of his own perturbed ideological imagination which even he himself cannot quite identify'. In his early films, 'his target is correct, but his political awareness is extraordinarily childish and idealistic, with no historical consciousness … "Cinema" for Makhmalbaf is … a classic case of a forbidden pleasure, both feared and yearned for.' Dabashi shows, in the contexts both of events in Iran at the time and of Makhmalbaf's personal trajectory, the formative effect of these early films in exorcizing 'the political demons inhabiting his still agitated imagination'. Then, after a near-fatal affliction by 'cine-mysticism', the artist emerges. 'Makhmalbaf's case is a spectacular example of a relentless honesty with the real literally pulling the artist out of the mystifying misery of casting a metaphysical gaze on an already brutalized world.'

Dabashi identifies the crucial change, the rebirth of Makhmalbaf into supreme cinema artist, in his short novel *The Crystal Garden*. Makhmalbaf starts to take his art seriously.

> [We] read an artist in the making, with no sign of Makhmalbaf the religious and revolutionary ideologue … Politics is almost absent from *The Crystal Garden*. But the consequences of politics are not … a far more serious intelligence is at work here, probing and discovering realities beyond the bland, tedious and insipid emptiness of all ideologies, Islamic or otherwise … Neither here nor later in his best films does Makhmalbaf attempt a logical narration of interrelated events. He has always pursued the virtual veracity of the real more than its actual or factual. Many of the characteristic features of his later films are anticipated in *The Crystal Garden*, where narrative movement is always virtual … the earliest moments of Makhmalbaf's later cinematic penchant for virtual realism, one of the characteristics which has led to the global celebration of Makhmalbaf as a filmmaker.

Makhmalbaf was trained as a war-film director, and *The Crystal Garden* is, among other things, a war story: the main characters are families of martyrs, and issues of death and identity are central to the plot.

Sacred Defence war films are the theme of Varzi's chapter. Like *The Crystal Garden*, the story of Rasul Mollaqolipour's *The Horizon* (1989), an action film of the war period, raises the main problem of post-war films – and society: the need for a body, the visible proof of death, before