



THE
POETICS
OF
IRANIAN
CINEMA

Aesthetics, Modernity and Film
after the Revolution

Khatereh Sheibani

I.B. TAURIS

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LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2011 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada
Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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International Library of Iranian Studies 33

ISBN 978 1 84885 741 4

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress catalog card: available

Typeset by Newgen Publishers, Chennai
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham

To my Parents, Fahimeh and Ahmad-Reza
and
To the Memory of my Grandparents,
Iran-Dokht and Mirza-Vali

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In conducting this research, I had the opportunity to benefit from the suggestions, encouragements, and insightful criticism of Drs. Nasrin Rahimieh (UC Irvine), Jerry White and William Beard (University of Alberta), M.R. Ghanoonparvar (The University of Texas at Austin), George Lang (Prof. Emeritus, University of Ottawa), Paul Salmon and Mark Fortier (University of Guelph) and Asghar Seyyed Ghorab (Leiden University). My conversations with my friend and colleague Dr. Manijeh Mannani helped me better conceptualize my ideas on Iranian culture and visual arts. My gratitude is extended to Iradj Bagherzade, Philippa Brewster, Maria Marsh, and Jenna Steventon in I.B.Tauris for helping and facilitating the publishing of this book. The editor of this book Ms. Virginia Myers made a manuscript into the book you are about to read. I would also like to thank Ostad Bahram Bayzai and his brother Mr. Bijan Bayzai, Saman Khadem – Mohtaram, and Rene V. Steiner for their invaluable help to get images for the book.

I had the intellectual and emotional support of my friends in completing this book. I wish to thank Dr. Nasser Tahbaz, who offered his collection of rare Iranian films and critical works and Dr. Lodan Fata who brought me a complete collection of Bahram Bayzai's works from Iran. Farhad Sarioseiri, generously offered his assistance on the other side of the globe in acquiring the permission for images in this book. I must gratefully acknowledge the loving support of my friends Sheena Wilson, Jurate Motiejunaite, Fariba Sattari, Maryam

Khademi, Mitra Salarvand and her daughter Shakiba Shayani. My childhood (lost and found) friend, Dr. Arash Rezazadeh, helped me overcome my fears and uncertainties, when I was sick, to face life and its struggles with a more positive attitude.

My parents' love and their confidence in me was a huge motivation in completing this project. Peimaneh and Saeed heard me out loud and helped further with mailing the material I needed for this project. I would like to express my deep appreciation to other members of my family: Payam, Sahar, Firouzeh, Ameh Nayereh, Sara, Amir, Yalda, Sharareh for their moral support; Pouneh, who watched many films with me in the languid afternoons in my hometown; my late grandmother, who was a model of a learned and strong Iranian woman; my late grandfather, a serene soul and the embodiment of pure love and kindness in my life; and the light of my eyes, my children, Mahan and Rodeen who helped me to work long hours on this book. My delighted thanks are extended to Komran, who has been a sincere supporter, a critic and a patient audience. He made my diasporic existence a meaningful and growing experience.

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

I have used a simplified version of the Library of Congress (LC) romanization system for Persian expressions and titles. However, terms such as 'Tehran' that are familiar to English speakers are not romanized according to the LC convention. In the transliteration of authors' names already known in English, such as 'Kiarostami', I have used the most common romanization in scholarly texts. Because the *hamzih* and *ayn* are pronounced in the same way in Persian, both are represented by 'l'.

INTRODUCTION

ISLAMIC REVOLUTION AND AESTHETIC EVOLUTION

In 1978–79 a revolution shook Iranian society to its foundations. During and after it, Iran not only experienced profound political and social changes, but also underwent a dramatic metamorphosis in its cultural and aesthetic discourses. Persian poetry, fiction, painting and other artistic forms have all, to a greater or lesser extent, been influenced by the upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s, but this remarkable cultural evolution is best represented in Iranian films.

In this book, I argue that the main artistic metamorphosis in post-revolutionary culture was that the exalted poetic language of Persian poetry, the leading artistic mode for centuries, was replaced by the image as the central cultural form of expression. Unlike the forces behind the Islamic revolution this transformation has been secular in nature, although not anti-religious. The poetic cinema that emerged in the pre-revolutionary period became the main artistic form of expression after the revolution. Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, as represented in Bahram Bayzai's and Abbas Kiarostami's films, has drawn on long-established themes in Persian literature and the performing arts.

Both historical and theoretical issues influenced post-revolutionary films, and I have sought to clarify how intellectual and historical circumstances gave rise to the emergence and influence of cinema. In shifting from poetry to film as the dominant national art form,

post-revolutionary Iranian poetics became the successor and at the same time a reaction to the poetics of pre-revolutionary culture.

The methodological perspective that helps to explain this process is the Russian formalist concept of 'the dominant'. This term was originally used by Juri Tynjanov,¹ but the concept is best known to us through Roman Jakobson, a linguist, literary scholar and semiotician who founded the two theoretically seminal groups of the Moscow Circle and the Prague Linguistic Circle. In a 1935 lecture entitled 'The Dominant', he proposed that:

The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure.

The dominant specifies the work... [T]he definition of an artistic work as compared to other sets of cultural values substantially changes, as soon as the concept of the dominant becomes our point of departure.²

The formalist notion of the dominant moves the emphasis from the poetic or artistic work *per se* to its relation to other poetic forms and its function within a network of interrelated artistic elements. Such a shift links each 'autonomous' poetic structure to other signifying structures, both on synchronic and diachronic levels. The idea of the Jakobsonian dominant is not static and unchanging. On the contrary, each cultural, literary, or aesthetic dominant may change through time, leading in turn to a poetic evolution. As Jakobson concludes:

In the evolution of poetic form it is not so much a question of the disappearance of certain elements and the emergence of others as it is the question of shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of the system, in other words, a question of the shifting dominants. Within a given complex of poetic norms... elements which were originally secondary become essential and primary. On the other hand, the elements

which were originally the dominant ones become subsidiary and optional.³

The Jakobsonian dominant has thus provided a new method for evaluating artistic phenomena. In any historical period, the shifting of the dominant can lead to literary evolutions through which canons change and 'subsidiary' cultural forms become 'essential' artistic works. This recalls Tynjanov's concept of 'literary evolution' or 'changeability'.⁴ He postulated that certain prominent artistic elements could 'automatize' over time to give rise to other poetic forms.⁵ In this process, the originally dominant element transforms into a secondary one. 'It does not disappear,' Tynjanov says; '[i]ts function simply changes, and it becomes auxiliary'.⁶ Against this framework, I argue that Iranian culture has changed over time, both by looking back to its past, examining other cultures and philosophies and bringing to the fore elements once considered secondary or peripheral. In this shifting of the dominants, poetry did not disappear, but lost its key role within Persian culture. Instead, post-revolutionary poetics evolved from a literary and written-based poetry into a visually oriented form of moving images.

In his article, 'After a Hundred Years', Bahram Bayzai argues that the unparalleled success of Iranian cinema in just 100 years – compared to other artistic forms such as poetry, at least 2,000 years old – demonstrates that 'the language of the image replaces the literary language. The image is the language of the people while the word is the language of the privileged'.⁷ Considering this, we can assume that the popularity of the image among the masses was a major thrust in mobilizing the shift of dominant in the cultural sphere. Iranian cinema is embedded in national culture; it thus reflects Iranian history, culture and identity, as well as its relations with other cultures, in a relatively uncomplicated language that directly reaches average film-goers.

Moreover, Iranian culture itself has very strong ties with Persian poetry, and Iranian readers and viewers are aware of its aesthetics. Poetry was not only the most popular aesthetic form, it was the language of philosophical ideas and sociopolitical commentaries throughout the ages. Iranian art films employ this deeply rooted poetic-ness.

Beyond the cultural motives that encouraged the popularity of films, there is an economic reason for the shift of the dominant: cinema is the least expensive and most accessible form of mass entertainment, especially of the performing arts, compared to other types such as theatre. It is noteworthy, however, that the other national mass medium that is easily available to Iranians is television. But this is state-funded and fully controlled by the Islamic regime. In the post-revolutionary era, the number of films and TV serials dramatically decreased. Besides, most of the TV programmes were heavily ideological and religiously oriented, with anti-royal, anti-Western and pro-revolutionary sensibilities addressing and glorifying either the revolution or the Iran–Iraq war. As a result, national television in this period did not achieve high ratings.

The central literary form before the Islamic revolution was poetry, especially in its modern form of *shīr-i naw* or new poetry. In the 1960s, modern poetry refashioned poetic themes and formal stylistics and offered a new poetic form that was socially and aesthetically concerned. In the second half of the 1960s and the 1970s, a new art cinema started taking shape in Iran, partly through employing themes from Persian literature. This later became known as Iranian new wave cinema. The artistic form and thematics of new wave directors created an original body of art-house movies that were internationally acclaimed. This temporarily bright period of Iranian cinema did not last long, however. It was to be interrupted by the cultural and social upheavals of the revolution and, to a lesser degree, by the devastating war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988.

Nevertheless, in the pre-revolutionary period the limited number of national art films could not compete with the popular mainstream films and imported Western movies, especially Hollywood productions.⁸ According to fundamentalist revolutionaries, the Islamic revolution was a massive rejection of the economical and cultural interventions of Western countries, especially the imperialist intrusion of the United States of America in regional affairs. Cinema as a Western import and influence was regarded by the clerics as a corrupt medium whose aim was to undermine Iranian ethics and Islamic principles.

In fact, cinema had never received clerical approval since the first theatre was established in Iran in the early 1900s. As Hamid Naficy notes, 'there is a report that in 1904 a major clerical figure, Shiykh Fazlullah Nuri, attended Iran's first public cinema in Tehran and proscribed it, causing it to shut down after only one month of operation.'⁹ During the revolution, the destruction of theatres became a symbolic act of protest against the Pahlavi regime and its Western supporters. Sadly, up to 180 cinemas nationwide¹⁰ were destroyed. One of the most dramatic incidents was the explosion of Cinema Rex on 10 August 1978 in the city of Abadan, only a few months before the fall of the Shah. More than 300 people trapped behind its locked doors were burned to death. Ironically, the film being shown in Cinema Rex was Masud Kimiyai's *Gavazn-ba* (*The Deer*, 1975), which had clear anti-government sensibilities and had just received screening permission after a three-year ban. Although public consensus at the time blamed government-affiliated forces for the incident, the Shah denied the allegations and Naficy has confirmed that 'testimonies and documents compiled after the fall of the Shah ... established a clear link between the arsonists and anti-Shah clerical leaders.'¹¹

Under those circumstances, Iranian cinema, both art-house and commercial films, was inactive. The number of productions, which had steadily increased up to, for instance, 90 films in 1973,¹² was disrupted by the social turmoil caused by the revolution. In 1977, only 38 films were produced.¹³ In 1978, the year of the revolution, this fell to 18.¹⁴

When the Islamic government took over, the clerics publicly denounced cinema along with other forms of 'Western' entertainment like gambling, drinking and dancing. Because of its enormous influence, cinema was a particular target of revolutionary condemnation. As Naficy points out, in the pre-revolutionary works of Ayatollah Khomeini (*Kashf ul-Asrar* and *Vilayat-i Faghib*) that were widely read and quoted before and during the revolution, cinema was regarded as 'the direct cause of prostitution, corruption and political dependence.'¹⁵ Khomeini detested cinema as an undignified form of mass media. Paradoxically, social realist and revolutionary films such as *Safar-i Sang* (*The Journey of Stone*, 1978), *Dayirib-i Mina* (1978),

Guzarish (*Report*, 1977) and *Marsiyih* (*Lamentation*, 1978) had aroused considerable public feeling in the last year of the Shah's reign.¹⁶

Other forms of mass media had a similar impact on anti-Shah groups. For instance, both Iranian National Television and BBC Persian Radio¹⁷ sympathized with the revolutionaries and stirred up opinion against the Shah and his local and international allies. Although Khomeini widely criticized the 'ill effects' of cinema, he did not shrink from admitting that cinema and media in general could be exploited to promote Islamic values. In his historic speech immediately after his return to Iran in January 1978, a few days before the victory of the Islamic republic, he softened his views towards cinema and other forms of mass media:

We are not opposed to cinema, to radio or to television... The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth. It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our rulers.¹⁸

Thus the Islamic government led by Ayatollah Khomeini employed cinema as an ideological and propagandist tool. It was exploited to advocate their particular form of Islamic culture. After the revolution, in the transitional period between 1978 and 1982, the uncertain political and economic situation and the government's lack of interest in cinema discouraged local productions. But the rescreening of old movies, with their 'un-Islamic and anti-Islamic' parts censored, and the importing of foreign movies, once again drew Iranian audiences to the cinema. Many of the foreign films that filled the market in those years had socialist and revolutionary themes in tune with the revolutionary atmosphere. Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1966) became one of the most beloved films in Iran's post-revolutionary years. It was simultaneously screened in twelve theatres in Tehran and ten in the provinces.¹⁹

After a period of revolutionary turmoil that resulted in the literal destruction of movie houses, followed by a transitional time of uncertainty, Islamist film-makers such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf began to emerge. Moreover, in the early 1980s the Islamic government created

institutions that reorganized the film industry in accordance with the state's anti-Western and pro-Islamic policies. These included the Farabi Cinema Foundation (FCF), the Foundation for the Oppressed (Bunad-i Mustaz'afan) and the Arts Centre of the Islamic Propaganda Organization (Huzih Hunari Tablighat-i Islami), and they created a cinema based on morality and religion. Between 1982 and 1989, committed film directors made films like *Tubih Nasub* (*Nasub's Repentance*, 1983) and *Baykut* (*Boycott*, 1985), which observed Islamic codes of behaviour and advocated the new government's moral and religious values.

During the Iran–Iraq war, a number of government-funded films were made about the war and its social and cultural consequences. The Arts Centre of the Islamic Propaganda Organization and the War Affairs Department of the National Television (IRIB) were two of the main producers. In these films,²⁰ the 'holy cause for the war' with Saddam Hussein was promoted with the intention of instilling 'the culture of sacred defence' among Iranian youth. These films emphasized action on the front line, but the portrayal of the war and its heroes was often one-dimensional and simplistic, as in *Du Chashm-i Bi-Su* (*Two Blind Eyes*, 1983). To encourage local filmmakers, the government established a special film festival, the Holy Defence Festival or *Jashmarib-yi Difa-yi Muqadas*, for films about the Iran–Iraq war. Through sponsoring productions and organizing some TV programmes, the Islamic state sought to manipulate the image of revolution and war.

Increasingly, the government began to monopolize power and to destroy opposition groups such as the Tudeh party, Mujahidin-i Khalq and Fada'iyan which had participated in overthrowing the Shah. It exerted control over social and cultural life, imposing restrictions on behaviour and enforcing a coherent Islamic culture intended to obliterate social, cultural and ethnic differences. By this time the number of supporters of the Islamic state was decreasing markedly. By the end of 1980s the regime had lost its charismatic legitimacy. In response, the government sought to strengthen its control over cultural products in order to 'produce' a desirable image of the Islamic state and its ideal committed young hero. Almost no foreign films were screened at this time and local productions were heavily censored.²¹

The war with Iraq lasted eight years. Many Islamist young people, like Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who had contributed to the revolution and the war were disappointed by their social consequences.²² A number of directors who had been involved in creating the image of an Islamic Iran as the embodiment of an Islamic utopia started to criticize both the revolution and the war. Films such as Makhmalbaf's *Arusi-yi Khuban* (*Marriage of the Blessed*, 1988) and Ibrahim Hatami-kia's *Az Karkhib ta Rhein* (*From Karkhib to Rhein*, 1993) deal with committed young soldiers who feel betrayed and disillusioned by the outcome of the war. The ideals of martyrdom and the sacredness of the war were no longer accentuated. Furthermore, the main emphasis shifted from action on the front lines to the impact of the war on urban and rural areas. Films made during this time presented a more sophisticated image of the cultural and psychological effects of the war on Iranians.

By the late 1980s, Iranian cinema had regained its position as a form of cultural expression. Many new wave directors, like Darush Mehrjui and Abbas Kiarostami, started making films again. Film-makers such as Bayzai and Kiarostami drew on the formal and thematic elements of Persian literature and the conventions of performing arts to create an Iranian art cinema. The increasing number of production companies and institutions supporting artistic productions had a positive effect on this. For instance, a special production company, Sima Film, in IRIB, started producing both popular and art films. Several film-makers like Abulfazl Jalili began making films under Sima's auspices.²³ Another institution, Cinema-yi Tajrubi (Experimental Cinema) was founded in 1983, the same year that FCF was established, to encourage and support young film-makers in their first films. In the private sector, the number of production companies grew to 60 in the 1990s.²⁴

In this period, the more experienced institutions such as the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kanun-i Parvarish-i Fikri-yi Kudakan va Nujavanan), as well as new foundations like FCF and the Arts Centre for Islamic Propaganda, sponsored and produced art films. Many of the directors who started their careers before the revolution in Kanun, such as Bayzai and Kiarostami, became leading *auteurs* in the post-revolutionary era.

The films of these two new wave directors contributed most to the change of the cultural dominant.

Abbas Kiarostami is probably the best-known Iranian director on the international scene, and has been praised by directors as distinguished as Jean-Luc Godard and Akira Kurosawa. He was born in 1940 in Tehran and studied painting at the University of Tehran. During the 1960s he worked as a graphic designer and illustrator. He made the innovative credit title of Masud Kimiyai's *Qaysar* (1969), which caught the attention of critics at the time. In the same year he helped to set up the film-making division of Kanun, where he made his first film, *Nan va Kuchih* (*Bread and Alley*) in 1970. This neo-realist narrative brought Kiarostami to national and international attention. Since then he has made more than 20 films, including feature films, documentaries and educational shorts.

Kiarostami's work is deceptively simple in plot and philosophically thought-provoking on the level of thematics. He has also written screenplays for other directors, such as Jafar Panahi and Bahman Gubadi. In the late 1980s, Western festivals started showing his films. The first one that was widely acclaimed was *Khanib-yi Dust Kujast?* (*Where Is the Friend's House?*, 1987). In 1997 he was the first Iranian director to win the Palme d'Or, for his *Ta'im-i Gilas* (*Taste of Cherry*, 1997).

Bahram Bayzai's films are among the most popular art films in Iran, despite a highly metaphorical language that makes them difficult to understand. Bayzai was born in 1938 in Tehran. He was a professor at the University of Tehran until the Islamic revolution interrupted his career, and is a scholar of the performing arts and a playwright as well as a film-maker. He has undoubtedly refashioned Iranian visual arts and re-mythologized the culture. Bayzai's interpretation of myth is a 'modern' response to the question of self and identity. He has founded a cinematic tradition that clearly expresses his cultural and historical concerns by using the conventions of visual arts. He also rediscovered *ta'zyih* (Iranian passion plays) as the most important form of traditional Iranian visual arts and used them to convey contemporary issues in Iranian society. His films are dramatic and theatrical, and he uses a highly polished language.

This book is an attempt to represent the poetics of the dominant cultural form of expression in post-revolutionary Iranian culture. This visual culture put an end to 'a time-honoured aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty', in Darush Ashuri's words; the main artistic form of expression has shifted to embrace 'an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty'.²⁵

CHAPTER 1

CINEMA AS ART: A POETIC INTERPRETATION

The Iranian film industry went through a transformation after the 1978–79 Islamic revolution. In the late 1980s, emerging from a period of dormancy, Iranian cinema re-established itself as an art form and revisited Persian literature, especially poetry, for inspiration. As a form of artistic cultural expression representing a nation's voice, Iranian cinema chose a separate path from that of the government. The role of investors in the film industry – production companies and various institutions – was significant, paving the way for a liberal and rather independent art-house cinema in Iran.

In addition, we should not underestimate the impact of the international (mainly European) market, which was ready to invest in the production and distribution of certain genres of Iranian film. Even though the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) did not relax its censorship rules in the 1990s,¹ art cinema became a substitute for the ideological cinema that the state failed to maintain, and its emergence in the late 1980s refashioned Iran's film industry. The originality of art-film aesthetics was widely perceived both in Iran and internationally,² partly through the production and distributing strategies of companies such as the Farabi Cinema Foundation (FCF). The new art films took an essentially humanistic approach and sidestepped the (political) religiosity promoted by the government.

In addition, art cinema portrayed a cultural and ethnic diversity that was at odds with the fixed, homogeneous and ideologically