IRAN

DIRECTORY OF WORLD CINEMA

EDITED BY
PARVIZ JAHED

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IRAN 2

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I'd like to express my gratitude to every author who has contributed to this volume; undeterred by their busy schedules and engagements, all have strived to produce thoughtful and insightful writing which I am proud to present in this volume.

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INTRODUCTION
BY THE EDITOR

The first volume of the *Directory of World Cinema: Iran* turned the spotlight onto Iranian cinema, with our attention permeating through its major movements, genres, historical turning points and prominent figures that have helped to define and characterize it.

Building upon the momentum of its predecessor, *Directory of World Cinema: Iran 2* is bound to be welcomed by all seeking an up-to-date and extensive guide to Iranian cinema. In the second volume, the scope has been broadened to contain the genres of political cinema, social drama, comedy, crime thriller, animation film, documentary film, underground cinema, the image of women and diasporic film, some of which have mostly remained underexplored in the English language texts hitherto.

In order to build a fuller image and be able to characterize Iranian cinema, this book tries to map out the obscure and uncharted corners of this cinema, and expound the significance of these film styles, trends, genres and creative voices.

Only a short while after the publication of the last volume, a number of pivotal events occurred within Iranian cinema. Most notably, Asghar Farhadi's (whose film *Darbare Elly/About Elly* [2009] was highlighted in the first volume) *Jodaei-ye Nader az Simin/A Separation* (2011) won the 2012 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. A first for an Iranian film, it was also nominated for Best Original Screenplay.

A Separation is a powerful dramatic piece reflecting on the conflicts of a middle-class family in Iran with a fresh approach and style. The film was met with universal acclaim by film critics around the world, whilst marking a departure from the quiet and uneventful world of Kiarostami or the more exotic films of Bahman Ghobadi, Majid Majidi and Abolfazl Jalili, who had previously garnered critical attention on an international scale.

A type of naturalistic social drama, this major genre of Iranian cinema is discussed in detail in Ali Moosavi's article in this volume, as are its well-known practitioners in Iranian cinema, such as Jafar Panahi and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Kianoush Ayari.

Despite the current financial crisis and ever-present state-imposed restrictions and obstacles, cinema remains a thriving commercial- and culturally significant industry inside the country. A film like *A Separation* is still able to reach a large audience in Iran. It was a critical and financial triumph for Iranian independent cinema but, as is often the unfortunate case, it was not acknowledged by the Iranian film authorities.

Having found its social-criticism content too subversive, the film was almost brought to a halt during production, with Farhadi having to negotiate with the state to remove the ban imposed on his film-making. He and film-makers like him are highly tactful in their handling of state control over their work, and capable of using a variety of tools and strategies available to them to circumvent censorship without diminishing the overall themes, messages or stylistic merits of the final output.

Nevertheless, this frustrating process left Farhadi exhausted by film-making in Iran and, with the support of French production company MK2, he moved to France to make his next film. *Le Passé/The Past* (2013), starring Bérénice Bejo, Tahar Rahim and

Ali Mossaffa, was a contender for the Palme d'Or at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival. Bérénice Bejo won the Best Actress Award at Cannes for her performance in the film.

In 2007, Dariush Mehrjui's film *Santouri* (2007) – awarded with the Audience Choice Prize at the Fajr Film Festival of that year – was banned from public screening by the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Saffar Harandi. This move was indicative of things to come under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's eight-year reign saw red lines abound, with a surge of censorship, bans, pressure and restrictions placed upon film-makers reaching a disillusioning level. Meanwhile, state-supported large-scale projects, with religious and patriotic motifs – known as *Cinema-ye Fakher* (literally translated as 'Sublime Cinema') – were being made at an amplified rate. These productions range from epics that depicted the history of ancient Islamic figures, such as Majid Majidi's *Mohammad* (2015) and Ahmad Reza Darvish's *Rastakhiz/ Hussein Who Said No* (2014), to films about the Iran–Iraq War which glorify the idea of martyrdom and mythologize the soldiers.

After the 2009 notorious presidential election, whilst leading film-makers such as Jafar Panahi or Mohammad Rasoulof had been prohibited from making films, Ahmadinejad's government supported the making of big-budget propaganda films, such as *Ghaladeh-haye Tala/The Golden Collars* (2012) by Abolghasem Talebi, to grant itself the licence to re-interpret the political events and the Green Movement (*Jonbesh Sabz*) that occurred after the elections.

In December 2011, Khaneh Cinema (House of Film), a national guild for film-makers and others involved in the production, distribution and screening stage, had its doors forced shut and Sazeman-e Cinemayee (Cinema Organization), a replacement body for Cinema Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, was put up by the state to take its place and enable them to place further controls upon the industry. The situation was looking ever bleaker for independent film-makers.

In 2013, with the election of Hassan Rohani, a more moderate cleric, came efforts in the right direction to create a relatively more open atmosphere. Among his first decrees was the reopening of Khaneh Cinema, and the screening of films such as Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Gheseha/Tales* (2014) and Kianoush Ayari's *Khane Pedari/ Paternal House* (2012), both of which had been banned under Ahmadinejad. This helped restore some hope and more workable relations between film-makers and the country.

Some of those who had been forced to put their crafts aside were invited to recommence, although certain film-makers like Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof are still legally banned from their practice. Yet Panahi proved himself undeterred yet again, making another self-portrayal entitled *Taxi Tehran* (2015) – the film is contained within a taxi, driven by himself as he interacts with passengers – and he sent it to the Berlin Film Festival and secured the Golden Bear. Like his previous endeavour, this was a film essay critical of his own situation and the societal conditions of modern Iran and of censorship.

Naturally, such actions do not sit well with some of the hardliners who are trying their utmost to restore the previous state's restrictions and are lobbying against certain policies and films. They want to revert the gradual easing of pressure and see a return to the worst days of post-revolutionary control.

In this later period, we saw a reduction of films being made in certain genres, such as crime cinema, and a complete dissolution of other genres and trends such as Film Farsi (including genres such as 'Jaheli', the rural melodrama, and the like), whilst both fresh and familiar genres such as political, war, romance and social dramas and experimental films took hold on a grand scale.

So while the first volume of the directory dealt primarily with the pre-revolutionary genres and trends in Iranian cinema, in the second volume we draw our attention to post-revolutionary cinema, looking mainly at the most recent productions by the newly emerged and young generation of Iranian film-makers, such as Ali Mosaffa, Majid Barzegar, Abdolreza Kahani, Mohammad Rasoulof, Reza Dormishian, Shahram Mokri and Niki Karimi, who has made a transition to low-budget, independent films after her lengthy, successful career as a film star in Iranian cinema.

And, as is always the case, our contributors consist of a range of local and international film scholars, researchers and critics who are all passionately familiar with Iranian cinema, its mechanisms of film production and its codes of practice. The mainstream is covered with the same attention to detail as the arthouse, and the domestic and global reception are encompassed.

In his article on the political genre in Iranian cinema, Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad delves into the relationship between politics and cinema. Specifically, on how the two internationally known independent film-makers, Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, manage to work within the system and overcome government-imposed hurdles. Zeydabadi-Nejad refers to responses given by these two film-makers at interviews and Q&A sessions during screenings of their films abroad.

Films dealing overtly with politics were quite uncommon before the Islamic Revolution, due to the heavy political censorship of the Shah. Apart from the political messages contained within New Wave films, which were delivered implicitly, we can hardly find any political films in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema. Films such as *Asrar-e Ganj-e Darre-ye Jenni/The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley* (Ebrahim Golestan, 1974), *Saye-h Haye Boland-e Baad/The Tall Shadows of the Wind* (Bahman Farmanara, 1978), *OK Mister* (Parviz Kimiavi, 1979), *Gavaznha/The Deer* (Masoud Kimiai, 1973) and *Aramesh Dar Hozor-e Digaran/The Tranquillity in the Presence of Others* (Naser Taghvaei, 1968) that addressed political issues in Iran were banned or heavily censored by the Shah's government.

After the revolution, the political situation and overall sentiment within society allowed for such films to take hold. Every film-maker who wanted to make films about the previous regime and its suppressive system was supported by the new revolutionary government yet, save for a few exceptions – *Khat-e Ghermez/The Red Line* (Masoud Kimiai, 1982), *Ashbah/The Ghosts* (Reza Mirlouhi, 1982) and *Noghte-ye Zaaf/Weak Point* (Mohammad Reza Alami, 1982) – most of these productions were superficial and full of political rhetoric against the Shah and his secret police (SAVAK), and in favour of the new government in keeping with the political climate which had yet to take its true form.

With the establishment of the Islamic government and the imposition of new measures of censorship, it was too difficult for film-makers to address political matters and challenge the political status quo in Iran in their films. A political film such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Shab Haye Zayandeh Rood/The Nights of Zayandeh Rood* (1991) would be banned and the director forced into exile. Others like Mohammad Rasoulof who chose to remain in Iran were imprisoned or had their passports

confiscated.

In a society where freedom of expression is under extreme pressure and criticism of the prevailing power would gravely endanger the person criticizing, no producer would be willing to take on the risk of addressing such sensitive, critical issues. Even the private film companies which benefit from state resources tend not to seek involvement in this genre of film-making.

The government sponsors the production of most movies with the requirement that the script and the cast be presented to the Ministry of Culture for approval. There is a legal procedure that directors must go through before getting the necessary licence and permission and their production must meet these requirements if they are to stand a chance of completion.

Almost every film that is made, including those that would be considered independent, are still reliant on the financial and logistic support of government institutions and organizations, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB); the Farabi Film Foundation; Kanoon, the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IDCYA); the Documentary and Experimental Film Centre; and the film section of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. For a film-maker to completely avoid the machinations of and affiliation with this system, they must go underground.

In my article on underground cinema in Iran, I profile the development of a new trend of guerrilla film-making in Iran that has taken shape as a consequence of Iranian film-makers' civil disobedience and refusal to adhere to the rules dictated by the Iranian film authorities. It embraces a body of work that represents a margin of Iranian cinema which is being made without the required authorization or financial and technical support of the government. In my argument, Iranian underground films more closely resemble the clandestine movies made during the Spanish Civil War under the Franco dictatorship than the experimental films made by the American underground film-makers of the 1960s and 1970s.

There is no argument that independent film-makers in Iran have always been subject to censorship and intense pressure from the authorities. The Iranian government periodically reasserts its control by making arrests and punishing film-makers who have violated their rules with prison sentences and bans to set an example for others. However, underground film-making always manages to persevere to some extent and achieve recognition for independent Iranian cinema on an international scale.

I pay particular heed to how the process has been democratized and underground film-makers greatly emancipated by current digital technology and new media, enabling directors such as Jafar Panahi to more easily challenge the hegemonic forces of the Iranian state. In *In Film Nist/This Is Not A Film* (2011), Panahi uses digital cameras and a mobile phone to bypass the regulations on film-making. Even though he has been put under house arrest and is awaiting a verdict on his appeal of a six-year prison sentence and film ban, he managed to put out a film seen throughout the world.

Arguably the most neglected genre in Iranian film studies is animation, not only in the West but also inside Iran. Despite its steady growth in the last fifteen years, there has been undeservedly little academic attention paid to Iranian animation. Therefore, Fatemeh Hosseini-Shakib's article on this topic can be regarded as a rare and much needed investigation of the genre. Starting in 1958 with a mere two-seconds long animation (*Mullah Nasreddin*, by Esfandiar Ahmdieh), marked the birth of this movement at the then Ministry of Art and Culture to the present day.

Fatemeh shows how the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IDCYA) (shortened to Kanoon) was established in 1965 by Farah Pahlavi, the wife of the late Shah, and measures its great impact on the development

of Iran's animation films by providing a creative environment for artists and animators to experiment and explore.

After the Islamic Revolution, with so much emphasis on the Cultural Revolution, and despite the acceptance of cinema as an important medium to propagate important messages, Iranian animation suffered a hiatus until the late 1980s, not least due to ideological factors. The many obscure examples that were made prior to this time and the more readily available commercial endeavours have all been highlighted, as well as the variety of art styles and techniques that have been used, and the place of all these within Iranian culture. She argues that, whereas the first and second generation of Iranian animation continued to influence post-revolution animation, they did not confine Iranian animation to its traditional mould due to some drastic changes, such as the shift to digital.

Similarly, the crime film was never established as a prevalent genre of Iranian cinema. While there was a phase of rather superficial crime thrillers and gangster films that superficially emulated the American crime dramas and noir films, by film-makers such as Samuel Khachikian or Dr Esmaeel Koushan in the 1960s and 1970s, the genre was almost disappeared after the revolution, primarily due to changes in film-making policy and new codes imposed on the industry.

In my article, I focus on a number of films made before and after the revolution by New Wave film-makers such as Masoud Kimiai, whose 2005 neo-noir *Hokm/The Verdict* is an homage to western influences like Sam Fuller, Jean-Pierre Melville and Brian DePalma, and Nikki Karimi's *Soote Payan/Final Whistle* (2011), which are not entirely successful but nevertheless interesting examples of crime thrillers.

Asal Bagheri's article, 'The Image of Women in Iranian Cinema', inspects the representation of women in Iranian cinema after the revolution. Bagheri studies the cinematic images of women through the broader context of life in the Islamic Republic. According to Bagheri, from the first days of the Iranian-Islamic Revolution, Iranian cinema largely ignored women in much the same way that society did, but eventually women attempted and succeeded in establishing their place in society as well as in films and film-making.

Documentary cinema in Iran has developed significantly over recent years. Building upon the rich tradition of documentary film-making of 1960s and 1970s Iran, and the legacy of master film-makers such as Ebrahim Golestan, Fereydoun Rahnema, Forough Farrokhzad, Parviz Kimiavi, Naser Taghvaei, Kamran Shirdel and Mohammad Reza Aslani, the new generation of documentary film-makers take further steps and adopt fresh and modern approaches in their documentary films.

The veteran film historian and researcher, Mohammad Tahaminejad, wades through the remarkable timeline of documentary films and trends in Iranian cinema, from the forerunners to recent years, recognizing and elaborating on the different trends and waves of Iran's documentary film-making tradition and how it portrays the various aspects of Iranian life and culture before and after the Islamic Revolution.

In his article, Ehsan Khoshbakht investigates a particular sort of documentary film that is made by Iranian film-makers inside and outside Iran, described as 'cinemadoosti' – the Persian word for cinephile. He focuses on the intense passion that exists in Iran for film and its potential, which persists amongst Iranians, and serves as a study of a series of documentaries that convey the nature of this world and subculture.

Comedy has always been a highly domestically oriented genre that has borne many stars and popular cinematic hits. Since the comedy genre before the revolution has been already discussed in the first volume, in this volume, Nacim Pak-Shiraz brings the focus onto Iranian comedies made after the revolution. After a brief introduction to pre-revolutionary comedy films in Iran, she explains how the genre completely disappeared for a while after the revolution but has re-emerged and survived after the

Iran–Iraq War. By focusing on new trends of comedy films in Iran, she provides a broad overview of the genre and its development.

A very wide net must be cast to cover all aspects of the 'social drama', arguably the most important genre in Iranian cinema, serving as a powerful challenge to the government's suppression of social issues reflected in cinema. The Iranian authorities and censorship are very sensitive towards films with social and critical content. There are still films of this genre which are acclaimed globally but were never screened domestically. Films such as Kiarostami's *Ten* and *Baad Ma Ra Khahad Bord/The Wind Will Carry Us* (2000); Jafar Panahi's *Dayereh/The Circle* (2000), *Offside* (2006) and *Talay-e Sorkh/Crimson Gold* (2003); Mohammad Rasoulof's *Keshtzarhaye Sefid/The White Meadows* (2009) and *Be Omide Didar/Goodbye* (2011); Mohsen Amiryousefi's *Atashkar/Fire Keeper* (2006); and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Nun va Goldoon/A Moment of Innocence* (1996), *Nobat-e Asheghi/The Time of Love* (1991) and *Shab Haye Zayandeh Rood/The Nights of Zayandeh Rood* (1991) are still banned in Iran for their social criticism and taboo-breaking approach.

Ali Moosavi, in his profound analysis of this foremost genre, examines films from the main figures and representatives of this cinema from the different generations of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad to Abdolreza Kahani and Jafar Panahi.

And finally, we cannot speak about Iranian cinema without considering Iranian diasporic films. Films about this topic have increased nowadays, particularly after the migration of prominent film-makers such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Mania Akbari and Bahram Beyzaie to the West, and the appearance of young, talented film-makers with Iranian backgrounds who have grown up outside Iran, such as Ramin Bahrani, Dezireh Akhavan and Ann-Marie Lilipour. Such a significant and timely issue has much to be said about it – and because of this we chose to have two articles on the subject from different authors, Adam Bingham and Christopher Guv.

Christopher Guv's piece provides very important information about a number of films made outside Iran by Iranian film-makers of different backgrounds and generations, especially the first generation of Iranian migrant film-makers to the West, such as Sohrab Shahid-Sales, Amir Naderi, Parviz Sayyad and Sousan Taslimi. By focusing on some key examples of the cinema of Iranian diaspora, he tries to answer the question whether a film made in Los Angeles or Berlin can be regarded as an 'Iranian' film. And if so, then what sense does it make to talk of 'Iranian cinema' as if it were a 'national cinema', as if it were a geographically discrete and perfectly knowable entity?

While Christopher Guv in his article addresses Iranian diasporic films on a historical basis, Adam Bingham looks at the recent films that were made in the Iranian diaspora by the second generation of Iranian film-makers, such as Kaveh Zahedi, Ramin Bahrani, Marjane Satrapi and Maryam Keshavarz, who have managed to forge successful and interesting bodies of work that effectively stand apart from their peers working within their native country.

All of this allows me to say with pride and conviction that we have been able to create a comprehensive guide on the many genres and aspects of Iranian cinema. And I certainly hope that our call for contributions inspired many fruitful and heated debates amongst fellow Iranian film scholars.

Parviz Jahed

The Last Step, Road Movies Productions.

FILM OF THE YEAR

THE LAST STEP
Pele-ye Akhar

The Last Step

Pele-ye Akhar

Studio/Distributor:

Road Movies Productions
Iranian Independents

Director:

Ali Mosaffa

Producer:

Ali Mosaffa

Screenwriter:

Ali Mosaffa, loosely based on James Joyce's 'The Dead' (1914)

Cinematographer:

Alireza Barazandeh

Editor:

Fardin Sahebzamani

Duration:

88 minutes

Genre:

Melodrama

Cast:

Leila Hatami
Ali Mosaffa
Alireza Aghakhani

Year:

2012

Synopsis

Through his narration and recollections, we are guided through the final days of Khosro, a successful but dissatisfied architect. He is already dead but he is the person who is cheerfully telling us his version of the story and his complicated but loving relationship with his wife, Leili. Light is shed upon the relationships, desires and inner thoughts of the deceased and the people close to him, as well as the circumstances of his demise.

After his death, we linger amongst the living as revelations about his marriage to his wife, the actress Leili, and their friendship with Dr Amin are uncovered. We follow this couple back and forth in time, finding that Leili was in love with Dr Amin, who has been in Germany for many years but has returned to his elderly mother (who is concerned about contracting Alzheimer's disease) and also to pursue Leili, his old love.

Amin also auditions for a part in the film that Leili is acting in, just to be next to her. Haunted by the loss of her husband and the guilt of having betrayed him, Leili struggles to act in the film and continues to see Khosro alongside her. The truth about this love triangle and the complicated relations between the trio is revealed step-by-step.

Critique

The Last Step is a groundbreaking step in modern Iranian film-making, blurring the lines between the reality of the story and the medium of film.

Not merely comprising of a straightforward series of events, the film takes pride in its non-linear, structurally convoluted, stream of consciousness approach to narrative. From the outset, the narrator tells us that the order of these events is irrelevant: it is left to the viewer to make what they will of the scenes presented to them.

The unconventional story is mostly recounted from the perspective of Khosro (played capably by Ali Mosaffa, who also directed, wrote and produced the film), who is killed by the end of the film. This gives the film a thriller/noirish feel, as we retrace moments from his life in non-sequential order.

The Last Step, Road Movies Productions.

The Last Step, Road Movies Productions.

The Last Step, Road Movies Productions.

The blurring of reality and fact is evident in the repetition of some scenes that unfold differently the second time around. This is further emphasized by subtle scene transitions that we often don't realize have occurred at first.

Several scenes pertain to a film that's being made within a film, and it is made deliberately unclear what is taking place inside this film or what is the reality of the one we are supposed to be watching.

The film's opening shot is a close-up of Leili (Leila Hatami) in funeral attire, repeating phrases about the death of her husband, but she can't help giggling and messing up. We learn that she is actually reciting dialogue for a film about a woman who's lost her husband. By the end of the film, she's able to say her lines convincingly, with her actual husband shown to be by her side.

Highly ambitious in terms of scope, this is an original amalgamation of diverse literary and cinematic influences. Although not a straight adaptation, there are overt and thematic similarities to James Joyce's short story 'The Dead', and Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886).

In one scene, Dr Amin (Ali Aghakhani) is dictating the ending of Joyce's 'The Dead' for his mother, who types it out. But instead of reading from it he transforms the story into a confession of how, out of jealousy, he tricked Khosro into believing he has cancer and not long to live, and of how he wished Khosro had been killed during their time in the Iran–Iraq War, where they were both serving as soldiers.

The deviation from Joyce's story is that Dr Amin, unlike Joyce's character, is not standing behind Leili's window in the rain/snow, longing for what might have been. He has led a successful life, moving to Europe where he married and completed his education, and returning to Iran with the hope of pursuing the woman he longs for, Leili, who is married to his friend Khosro. He doesn't wish to sacrifice himself in this pursuit, but is willing to make Khosro a victim.

When Khosro is ostensibly diagnosed with terminal cancer by Dr Amin, we are presented with many other foreboding hints of his demise, driving Khosro to consider his impending mortality in his actions. Coming to terms with dying is the objective of Ivan Ilyich, and it is what Khosro must overcome on his journey, even after his death has occurred.

His immediate droll impulse is to purchase a skateboard and recklessly weave through downhill traffic, leading to an encounter with an old school bully, someone he still regards with contempt and whom he settles old scores with. The light and ironic approach goes a long way to establishing him as a tragic, yet genuine character.

Whilst alive, his attempts at rekindling love are shown to be misguided and futile, perhaps even a fatal error. The distance between them is too great and she remains unaffected by him.

A song that is heard at a gathering early on in the film strikes a melancholy chord with Leili, and when Khosro asks her about this she explains its significance, saying she was reminded of an old love who would come to her father's house in Tafresh and serenade her with this song, claiming that the young boy died of a broken heart. We later learn Dr Amin is that same boy.

Khosro drives to their old town of Tafresh, but not for sentimental reasons: in an attempt to amend his relations he wishes to sign his old village house over to Leili before his death. In a later scene, he is trying to locate the grave of Leili's old love interest but finds nothing and discovers the truth: at that point, he suffers his true death as he is eliminated from Leili's life.

Due to the lack of chronology to these scenes, we are presented with multiple vague possibilities of the cause of his death – from the cancer diagnosis, to the ominous shots of the steps to his house, to the fight in the kitchen – though to what extent these are moments of déjà vu or

The Last Step, Road Movies Productions.

'visions' in his head whilst he is alive or merely reflections of the narrator cannot be confidently ascertained. Khosro himself regards his memory to be fickle and the doubt that arises from this is carried on throughout the film.

Khosro accepts defeat in love. After his demise, as the narrator he tells us, he is no longer agonized by the insignificant role he had had in Leili's life. He was unaware of the affair between his best friend and his wife until after his death, yet does not feel betrayed.

He falls from the last step because of the blow inflicted by Leili. The step is the only imperfection upon his meticulously built house, the harbinger of his demise and a metaphor for the imperfection of death itself.

The film also pays homage to a host of cinematic sources: Alain Renais's *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) and John Cassavetes's *Opening Night* (1977), in particular.

The gallows humour is reminiscent of the works of John Cassavetes, taking themes of death and heartbreak and delivering them in a pithy and light-hearted manner. Yet the film still maintains its emotional impact – something that Cassavetes excelled at in his films. He would use the absurd and comical situations of life to create dramatic tragedies.

In fact, the dynamic of the wife and husband, who are also playing such roles in the film they are making, brings to mind that of John Cassavetes and Jenna Rowlands playing a wife and husband whilst also being married in real life in *Opening Night*.

In *Opening Night*, Martel is involved in a role that she does not like performing, to the point of frustrating the entire troupe and the directors and scriptwriters. She feels she has no sympathy for the character and that the role has not been written for her at all.

Whilst in *The Last Step*, the male actor playing opposite Leili in the film misconstrues the cause of her incapability to perform her lines. He confronts Leili about her lack of professionalism, and she explains that he of all people should be more understanding; that in their line of work, emotions can get the better of you. Yet he expects her to separate herself from her inner feelings and identity in order to take on the character.

This notion is very much in line with the approach and conceit of Cassavetes that actors are not merely mechanical objects, completely available to the director's whims. What are considered performances in his films are rather processes in which the actor's role and identity and script are put alongside each other and reworked in unison.

In *The Last Step*, Ali Mosaffa masterfully delivers his grim and melancholic story with a pleasingly comic tone. It is one of the best examples of Iranian independent cinema that has come to the scene in recent years.

The film gathered worldwide success after its world premiere at the 47th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in July 2012, and won the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) Prize for Best Film.

Parviz Jahed

Tales, Noori Pictures.

TALES IS MY WILL AND TESTAMENT
INTERVIEW WITH RAKHSHAN BANI-ETEMAD

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad has long been known as the premier female director in Iran and one of the leading exponents of social drama in Iranian cinema. Thanks to films such as *Nargess* (1992), *Gilaneh* (2005, co-directed with Mohsen Abdol Wahab), *Roosari-e Abi/The Blue-veiled* (1995) and *Zire Pooste Shahr/Under the Skin of the City* (2001), she also enjoys an international reputation. This interview took place at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival where she was participating in the Narrative Films Competition with her latest film *Gheseha/Tales* (2014), fresh from winning the Best Script Award at the Venice Film Festival.

She starts the interview by turning the tables on the interviewer!

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad (RB): Interview in a different style! Assume that you don't know Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and have not seen her previous movies. Briefly state your impressions, having just watched *Tales*. Ali Moosavi (AM): I can't wait to see it again! Both from form and content it was a film that I

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, photographed by Ali Moosavi.

appreciated very much. Each tale had its own style and the dialogues were truly memorable. For example, the technically challenging minibus scene in the tale with Golab Adineh, which has a single ten-minute shot; the sequence with Mehdi Hashemi and Hassan Majooni (respectively playing a pensioner claiming medical insurance and the official in charge of claims) was a master class of combining comedy with tragedy; the performances of Fatemeh Motamed-Aria and Farhad Aslani in their section are so natural that you forget they are actors; and finally, the story with Payman Maadi and Baran Kowsari is a heart-wrenching love story free from any clichés. In my view, *Tales* is your best film to date.

RB: I think what was apparent from your impressions is that the stories in *Tales* are highly believable. This is my ultimate aim in cinema. In every film that I have made, I have tried to get close to reality and make the characters believable. You can approach this aim from different angles such as scriptwriting and technical aspects of film-making. Sometimes I have closely followed a documentary format and used non-professional actors, and other times by reducing the narrative allowing more scope to develop the situations without having to move the story forward. You can see this in

my films from *Nargess* onwards. For me it is apparent how in each film I have tried to get close to realism. I have used various means for this: from concentrating more on working with actors to the format of the script and technical aspects such as lighting, *decoupage*, etc. It can be said that *Tales* is the closest that I have come to realizing these aims and perhaps for this reason it is my favourite among my films. From another angle it is the summation of my works and is not just characters appearing from my other films.

From the start I knew that *Tales* would have a different structure and it was natural that, for instance, the segment with Mehdi Hashemi would be humorous and therefore would be in contrast to the other stories. But really this was one of the attractions of the film, like life itself with all its contrasts, up and downs, happiness and sadness. When I was arranging these stories the characters who were appearing from my previous films were bringing with them their conditions and situations from those movies. Naturally for me the Mehdi Hashemi character was the same Mehdi Hashemi as in *Kharej az Mahdoodeh/Off Limits* (1986), which had a comedy format. What I want to say is that the attractive element in *Tales* for the viewers and me is getting close to believability.

AM: The story with Golab Adineh and Farhad Aslani which takes places within the confines of a minibus, done in a single ten-minute shot, must have been very challenging and a new experience for you.

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, photographed by Ali Moosavi.

RB: The experiences that I had when making *Tales* were weird and wonderful! As they say, I dived in, and tried to achieve what I believed to be realism in the film. I cannot say that I knew beforehand that I would achieve my goal. Not at all. But it was a new experience and I was brave enough to give it a go. In a scene like the minibus with a number of actors, non-actors and extras, who were each selected for a reason, in that situation I had to make them believable as laid-off workers. Well, you can do this with professional actors. With non-actors I had to follow a method where they believe their character so much that they just don't read aloud the dialogue from the script. I mean, without any technical gizmo I wanted to obtain the same result from a non-actor that seasoned actors such as Adineh and Aslani were providing. In the minibus scene, which is a single shot, throughout the scene the camera had to operate like a documentary camera. It had to follow the events happening in the minibus. I told the cameraman that the camera must act as both your eyes and ears. From wherever you hear someone talking, first you hear him and then you switch the camera to him. Meaning that the camera must follow the events, like documentaries. Even for each take I switched the people around so that the cameraman, from the knowledge he has obtained of the arrangement of people, does not switch too quickly to the person talking. All these endeavours were in an attempt to reach the borders of believability which is both my desire and the type of cinema that I've always loved.

AM: The final tale with Payman Maadi and Baran Kowsari [Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's real-life daughter] is really unique and outstanding. One of the most effective love stories without any clichéd expression of love by the two protagonists, and again within the confines of a car. How did you approach this tale?

RB: This tale has so much attraction for me that I would like to make a feature film with a similar structure. I myself know of no other example where the form has been bared to such a degree. I have reduced the form and structure before but never to this extent. This is crossing the border from a fictional world to reality where not just the camera but also the performers are made less conspicuous. An interesting fact which I don't think I've said in any of my interviews is that the two actors are put in a situation where they don't see each other and even the glances in the mirror are not real. I did not want to use a car mount and Payman had to really drive the car in the highway. This may seem unprofessional because with the tools available in film-making the actor only has to pretend to be driving. And perhaps this pretense will look real enough, but for me the act of driving is not important. The effect that real driving has on the actor is part of getting close to the believability that I mentioned earlier. As a result, we have two actors whose camera angles are fixed with no room for movement. Their bodies don't move. The *mise-en-scène* is fixed. They don't see each other and with these limitations have to convey the ups and downs of their situation to the viewers. It was a strange challenge. I want to say that in this film I crossed some boundaries in cinema.

The tale of Sara and Hamed (Kowsari and Maadi) was marked from the beginning to be a challenging situation between two characters from today's younger generation: a generation who exchange few dialogues and mainly communicate through the virtual world; a generation facing the realities of today's society; young people who have their own aspirations from their own viewpoints. We have always considered ourselves a generation with defined aims but I think that the new generation also have their own defined aims and targets but with a different view of the world. Therefore, they are different to my generation and they

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, photographed by Ali Moosavi.

have taken on some responsibilities which may not be known to us.

The fact that we get close to these two young people through their existing challenges and problems was one of the main layers of this tale. In my view, every situation in a screenplay is multilayered like life itself. The other layer of this undeclared love is the emotional bond between two people who constantly bicker and argue but love each other without externally showing or declaring this love. For instance, in the last shot of the tale set in the centre for sheltering abused women, when they are going out the door we hear Sara who is teasing Hamed and Hamed answers back. So from there the grounds for teasing each other which leads to an undeclared love relationship are laid. From the beginning it was obvious that there was not going to be a conventional declaration of love, which is the norm in these situations. So this proclamation of love would be of the type where the dialogue starts with some teasing. So this was the general concept that I had for this story and the script was written on this basis. From the start this tale was dialogue-based. We wrote it keeping in mind in which direction the dialogue should progress, with several disagreements, and from these differences of opinion we would get some indication of their perspectives on life. We designed the structure this way. We therefore knew where the discussions would start, on what topics they would disagree and where it would end. These were well-defined and at this stage we started the rehearsals. We were continuously having discussions with the actors as we went along.

There were hours of dialogue and improvisation between the two actors and whenever they went off the rails I would put on the brakes and put them back on the right tracks. They would continue their discussions and arguments along the path that I had determined in order to achieve the results that I had in mind. From within these improvisations, on the basis of the things that I had written, the end dialogue would be determined and little by little we reached the final draft. As is my habit, we filmed the final rehearsal so that all the little details that we have come up with in rehearsals are not lost during filming. During all the rehearsals, Payman and Baran could never see each other. That virtual car mirror didn't exist and they had no idea about each other's performances. When the final rehearsal was filmed and they watched each other throughout every moment of the scene, their reaction was one of amazement!

Some critics have written that this final tale resembles a radio play and can be just listened to. Or others have written that if someone takes a handheld camera and interviews people in a minibus, we can't call that a movie! Which means that they had believed that the film is a documentary! I therefore told myself that I had succeeded!

AM: How did the actors react to repeating the roles that they had played years ago?

RB: When those actors who were invited found out that they were going to play characters from my first film – *Outside the Boundaries*, 37 years ago – to my most recent film, *Khoon Bazi/Mainline* (2006, co-directed with Mohsen Abdol Wahab), they were astonished but found the concept very attractive. Each one of them had a very positive reaction to playing the character which they had created before. I recall that when Farhad Aslani was invited and saw that I was making a feature film again, he was very happy and excited. I told him that it will be a short story, which together with other short stories, will become a feature film. *The Blue-veiled* was Aslani's debut as a cinema actor, in which he plays a young factory worker who is in love with Nobar (Motamed-Aria) but she marries the factory boss. I will

never forget that when he read the story, tears flowed from his eyes and he said, 'for twenty years I have suffered losing Nobar, and now I get to be her husband?' I mean, this belief was so real to him that he would regain the love of a girl he lost twenty years ago!

If I want to summarize, I can say that *Tale*s is my favourite among the movies that I have made and the closest to me. It is the summation of my years of work in cinema, and all the characters in it and their experiences are those that I have not just written but have experienced to be able to write them. You can say it is like an album, not just of my characters but of the periods in my life from my first film till now. Situations that I was in, lives that I lived, lives that I witnessed; and perhaps *Tales* is my will and testament; my epitaph. I don't know whether I will make another movie, but if I were to make one final film and think that it would be my final work, *Tales* would be it.

Ali Moosavi

DIRECTORS
FARROKH GHAFFARI, THE FOUNDER OF IRAN'S NATIONAL FILM ARCHIVE

Farrokh Ghaffari was a unique figure in the history of Iranian cinema, a veteran film-maker, film historian and film critic he founded Iran's National Film Archive and is to be regarded as one of the forerunners of Iranian New Wave cinema.

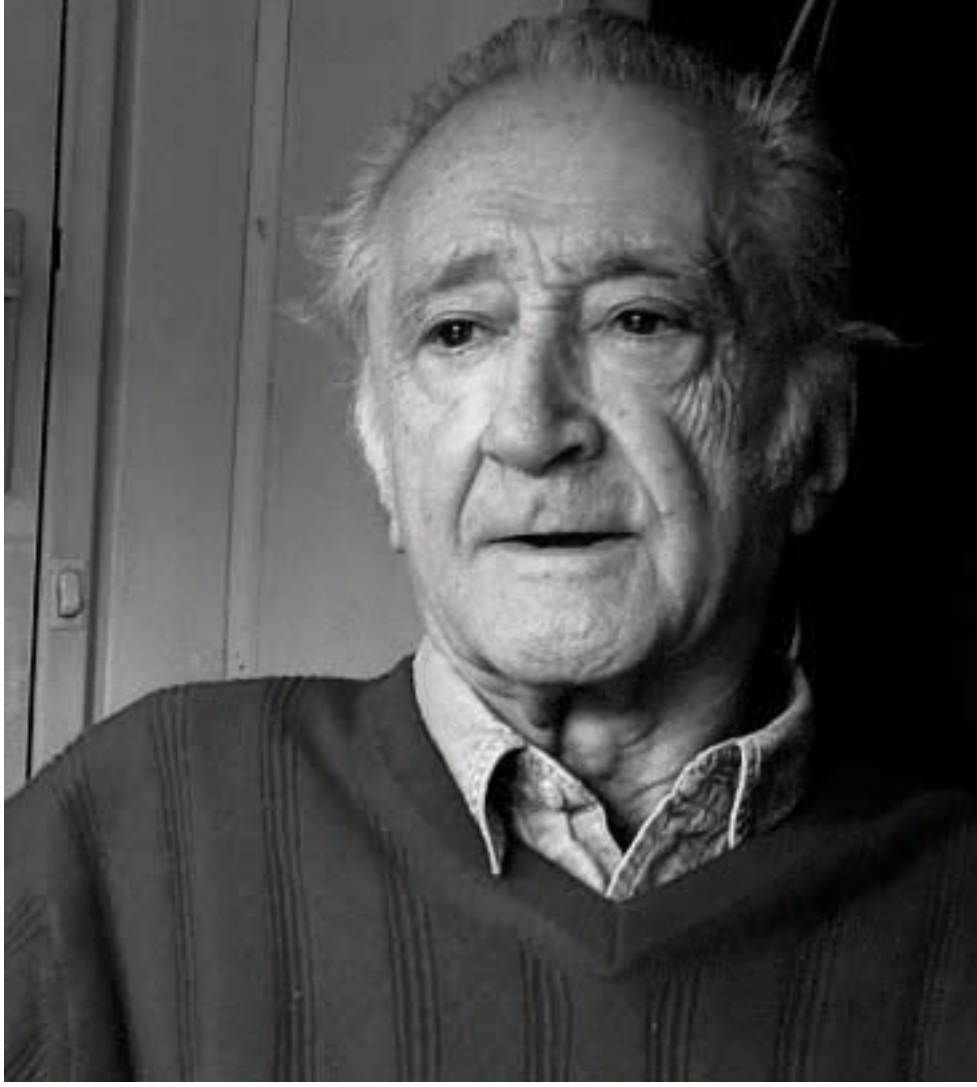
He is familiar not only to Iranian cinephiles, but to the French film society for his film criticism, writing for *Positif* film magazine, and for his collaboration with Henri Langlois as an assistant at the Cinémathèque Française Film Centre in Paris. Since 1978, following the Islamic Revolution, Ghaffari left Iran to live in Paris. Having been accused of affiliation with the former regime by the Iranian government, he was never able to return.

Ghaffari's legacy for Iranian cinema is significant, yet overlooked. Almost all of his own film-making endeavours had their true impact taken from them, being subjected not only to debilitating censorship by the authorities during the rule of the Shah, but also being woefully neglected by Iranian film critics. Jalal Moghaddam, who wrote the script for *Jonoob-e Shahr/The South of the City* (1958) and *Shab-e Ghuzi/The Night of the Hunchback* (1964) for Ghaffari, described him as 'a martyr of Iranian Cinema' (Moghaddam 1968: 8)

Inspired mostly by Italian neo-realism and the *nouvelle vague* (French New Wave), he made a few films, including *The South of the City* and *The Night of the Hunchback*, which are regarded as the first examples of modern cinema in Iran, setting forth the potential to create meaningful and artistic cinema in Iran and the beginnings of the Iranian New Wave movement.

His works and his legacy as one of the founders of modern cinema in Iran have not been acknowledged by critics or film researchers to the extent that is deserved. A highly influential early figure, Ghaffari's role in the development of the film industry and film culture in Iran cannot be overstated.

Farrokh Ghaffari was born in Tehran in 1921. At the age of 11, he went to Belgium with his father, Hasan-'Ali Khan Mo'awen al-Dawla (1886–1976) aka Hassan Ali Ghaffari, a high-ranking officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the Qajar and Pahlavi period and plenipotentiary minister (*vazir-e mokhtar*) at the Iranian embassy in Belgium in the early twentieth century. He finished high school and then studied accounting in Belgium but did not complete the course and moved to France where he graduated in literature at the University of Grenoble. At that time, he was infatuated with cinema and started to write about films for local magazines and newspapers.



Farrokh Ghaffari, photographed by Parviz Jahed.

Ghaffari's writings about films were published in various French film magazines and newspapers such as *Positif*, *Jean Define*, *Variete* and *Le Monde*. When Ghaffari was in Paris, as a cinephile and a regular attendee of La Cinémathèque Française, he was fascinated by film culture and the history of cinema and was contemplating founding a film club in Iran upon his return.

Returning to Iran in 1949, he became involved with writing about cinema under the pen names M Mobarak and Azargon for Iranian film and cultural journals such as *Setareh Solh*, *Saddaf*, *Ashena*, *Film va Zendegi* and *Setareh Cinema*. In 1950, Ghaffari published his first book, *Cinema va Mardom/Cinema and People*, a collection of his writings about cinema and film in Iran. The influence of the French leftist film critics and historians such as Georges Sadoul is evident in this book and in his other writings.

Speaking to the author, he says of the subject: 'My friendship with Georges Sadoul formed after the World War II. I knew that he wrote about cinema before the war but I came to know him afterwards. He had some very unique ideas about cinema' (Jahed 2014: 88).

At the time when Ghaffari returned to Iran, the cinematic output of Iran was almost entirely superficial, low-quality Film Farsi productions derivative of Egyptian or Indian popular cinema, with singing and dance numbers. He realized that those who were involved in the dominant Film Farsi production suffered from a lack of film knowledge and were completely unaware of the art form of cinema in Europe and all around the world.

In order to improve the state of affairs and culture of film in Iran he decided to provide a service akin to La Cinémathèque Française, creating the first film club in 1949 called the National Iranian Film Centre (Kanoon-e Melli-e Film). In his article 'San'at-e Cinema dar Iran'/'Cinema Industry in Iran' he showed concern for the situation of the film industry in Iran:

> In our country, with a population of 12 million there are about 60 cinema theatres. This number is really disappointing […] there should be many cinema theatres made in Iran. The country has the capacity for 500 cinemas. These theatres will serve as a place for airing the artistic and cultural thoughts of people. (Ghaffari 1950: 11)

After a few months, the National Iranian Film Centre held the first British film season. In a bulletin published for this event, Ghaffari explained the aims and objectives of the National Iranian Film Centre:

> The current commercial cinema that is the unwanted child of real cinema, has become a dangerous tool in the hands of merchants that are after their own benefit, who have no goal but to stimulate and stupefy the non-human passions and feelings of spectators. It is a great pity that films exported to Iran are mostly likewise. They are films that intellectuals consider dangerous and harmful to Iranian audiences. These kinds of films are against their interests and 'Kanoon-e Melli-e Film' is intended to show the real cinema to Iranian spectators and intellectuals who are fed up with these types of imports. The commercial cinema imported to Iran isn't compatible with the needs and interests of Iranians and it is the responsibility of intellectuals to fight against these vulgar and misleading films. Kanoon-e Melli-e Film hopes to take steps in the way of propagating and defending the real art of cinema, with the help of Iranian intellectuals, and pave the way for the creation of an artistic cinema in Iran. (Omid 1995: 948–49)

From the very beginning, Ghaffari tried to develop Iranian film culture, within his own limits but with the utmost care. In the British film season, he screened films made by Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, Carol Reed and some British documentary films. The aim of the programme was to introduce the different genres and styles of British cinema to Iranian audiences. The bulletin of this event clearly stated Ghaffari's intention to develop artistic approaches towards cinema. At that time, due to his Marxist views and his political engagement with Iran's Toodeh Party/Hezb-e Toodeh,[1] his articles were only published in political and leftist journals such as *Kabootare Solh* and *Setare Solh*. In his interview with me he talks about his activities during this period:

> After 1950, leftist intellectuals supported us. They asked me to write film critique in Toodeh Party's publications. I brought over whatever I had learnt in France. My references were Georges Sadoul and André Bazin. From the very beginning, I decided to write about Iranian cinema, too […] I was never a communist party member in France or in Iran. When I came to Iran, I gave my writings to a friend and that friend published my work in a political newspaper, but I was not aware at the time that the newspaper was a Toodeh Party publication. And the person, who was publishing it, suggested that I use a nom de plume for security reasons, and I chose Mobarak, as that is a synonym for Farrokh. (Jahed 2014: 46)

Having a controversial political view towards cinema and film criticism, Ghaffari started to challenge the prominent approach to film criticism in Iran. He wrote:

> A film critic should find fault with works of art, based on a particular social philosophy. Impartiality while judging and not getting any results from this judgment is a futile act. As we know, impartiality is a meaningless word. In artistic issues one must follow a special political and social philosophy and based on this philosophy the entire reactionary and anti-humanistic aspects of art should be oppressed. We should take the hand of the artist and put it in the hand of the people once more. (Ghaffari 1951: 46)

Later however, he had become disillusioned with such hardline leftist views and was severely critical of Georges Sadoul for his pro-Soviet Union approach in film criticism:

> I had retained my left wing creed until after 1953 when Stalin died, the next year at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party Khrushchev stood behind a podium and exposed what a murderer Stalin was, and when I learnt that Stalin had spilt more blood than Hitler had in all his years in power, I cut myself off from all of it […] when I found out that my mentor Georges Sadoul showed great support for the Soviet Union and for their substandard films, I made an ideological departure from Sadoul very early on, and I adopted a different approach towards understanding the history of cinema from Sadoul's ideological approach relating to the Soviet Union. (Jahed 2014: 47)

In his writings about film Ghaffari, attacked the poor plots, the stereotypical characters and the superficial aspects of Iranian commercial cinema and intended to liberate it from its conventions. His cinematic views and film criticism had an impact on the improvement of film culture and knowledge among Iranian film-makers and audiences. He was upset by the vulgarity and low quality of Film Farsi and dreamt of the formation of an Iranian national cinema (*Cinama-ye Melli*). In his review of Esmaiel Kooshan's *Sharmsar/The Ashamed* (1950), a very popular Iranian film of the time, he criticized the stereotypical characters and other weak elements of the film:

> We see hundreds of conventions used in low-grade foreign romances that are made for a group of asleep bourgeois or teenage girls who love Hollywood stars. All the characters are shallow, monotonous and arbitrary. A good guy is good and remains so till the end of the film. The city is a gutter of corruption and of course the villager is initially a good guy who returns to the right path after thousands of mistakes. (Ghaffari 1951: 46)

Ghaffari was using the disparaging term 'band-e tonbani' (which literally means waistband) to describe the weak aspects of Film Farsi. In his review of *The Ashamed*, he also pointed out that

> The script of the film is nonsense and groundless and has nothing to do with the real lives of Iranian peasants and villagers. Thousands and thousands of arid and drought-stricken villages of our country, with the oppressed life of peasants and the brutality of government officials and the oppressive masters and landlords have not been featured in *Sharmsar*! (Ghaffari 1951: 46)

The National Iranian Film Centre was active until July of 1951, when Ghaffari went back to Paris and worked as assistant to Henri Langlois at La Cinémathèque Française.

Fereydoun Rahnema, a prominent Iranian film-maker and poet (1930–1975) expressed his lament at the closure of the National Iranian Film Centre in his article published in *Sokhan* literary magazine: 'The first Iranian film club was closed down due to the trip of its organizer Mr Ghaffari to Paris. At the time the club opened, lovers of true and noble cinema were few but the situation has changed now' (Omid 1995: 955)." The National Iranian Film Centre was reopened in March 1956 when Ghaffari returned from France to Iran for the second time in his life.

Ghaffari spoke of his collaboration with Langlois and the formation of Iran's National Film Centre:

> In 1949, I came to Iran and founded Kanoon-e Melli-e Film, by the suggestion of Henry Langlois. But, after 20 weeks of weekly shows, unfortunately it closed down subsequent to my return to Europe. In 1951, at Langlois's demand I accepted the position of executive manager at the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF). I kept the position for five years from 1952 to 1956. I learned a lot from Langlois during this time. He was full of love, enthusiasm and excitement towards cinema and had exceptional taste in choosing films. (Jahed 2014: 45)

The National Iranian Film Centre became a favourite gathering place of Iranian cinephiles and people who were interested in modern and arthouse films. There, with the help of Ebrahim Golestan, another forerunner of modern Iranian cinema, Ghaffari managed to screen some masterpieces of European and American cinema including those of Ingmar Bergman, Orson Welles and of modern French cinema.

Ghaffari was among the first to collect documents about the history of Iranian cinema. He published his notes on the collection of these documents in 1950 in Iran with the aid of 'The Commission of Historical Research' and some parts of it were given to FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives) and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

He intended to publish his research as a book, but did not succeed and only some chapters were published in volumes of *Elm o Honar* magazine in September 1951 and another chapter in Volume 5 of *Film va Zendegi*, under the editorship of Fereydoun Rahnema.

The National Iranian Film Centre was officially relaunched in November 1959 with the screening of Robert Flaherty's documentary *Louisiana Story.* The promotion of film culture among Iranian audiences by showing artistic and cultural films and masterpieces of world cinema was the main object of the National Iranian Film Centre. The club ran under the new name of the Iran National Film Archive until the Islamic Revolution in 1978/79.

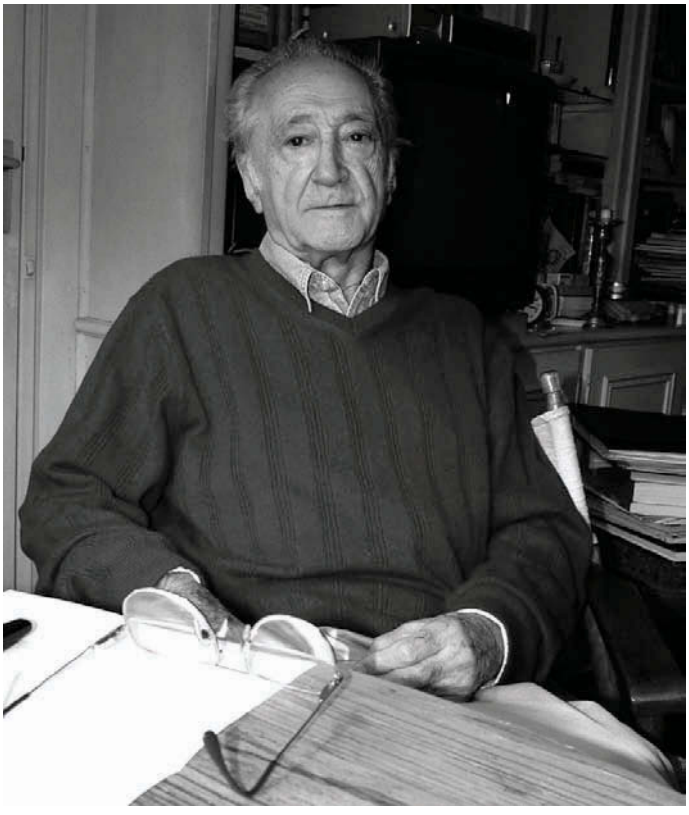
But running the National Film Archive and writing about cinema were not Ghaffari's only activities. He was also involved in making documentary films for different organizations such as the National Iranian Oil Company and the Ministry of Culture and Art. His first documentary film was an educational piece about the prevention of tuberculosis, called *B.C.G.*, which he made for the Pasteur Institute in 1950 but left unfinished and returned to Paris. During his stay in France, he made a short film called *Bon Bast/Cul-de-Sac (*1957) with the help of Claude Bonardo and Fereydoun Hoveyda (the Iranian diplomat and also one of the members of the editorial board of *Cahiers du Cinéma*) in Paris.

Ghaffari makes the bitter, dark political and social condition, particularly that of the underclass, the focal point and subject of his films. At a time when intellectuals held universal indifference or even contempt towards the mainstream cinema in Iran, Ghaffari's intention was to create a sort of balance between the tendencies in Iranian cinema made for a mass audience and the more artistic, challenging cinema that was closer to the European arthouse style of film-making.

Upon his return to Iran, he opened his film studio Iran Nama in 1957 and made his debut feature film *The South of City*, a film few have seen in its original state, which was banned and copies of which were destroyed afterwards by the board of censorship for its critical look at the impoverished of Tehran and showing the distressed economic situation of Iran's lower classes. It was the first Iranian film made with a neo-realistic tone and looked at the real life of the bottom rung of society in deprived areas that were so typical of Tehran. Several years later, a heavily censored and renamed version of the film entitled *Reghabat dar Shahr/Rivalry in the City* was released in 1962.

In our interview, Ghaffari explains how he was inspired to add a sharper bite of realism to the film and subsequently had to challenge the censorship department of the Ministry of Culture and Art for its public screening:

> At that time I had just come to Iran, Jalal Moghaddam (film-maker and scriptwriter) wrote a script for me based on the life of lower-class people. Then together we went to the lower part of Tehran to find some locations for the film and we saw the real lives of people that have never been captured in Iranian cinema. I felt that there are differences between the way characters spoke in the script and the real people that I saw in the street. So we changed the script and created realistic people instead of superficial characters. The main character of the film was a cowardly macho man who had delusions of being a champion. We also added a hoodlum and a prostitute. (Jahed 2014: 69)



Farrokh Ghaffari, photographed by Parviz Jahed.

In his view a good national cinema was one based on Iranian culture and literature, and can show the life of the people in a realistic manner and maintain its appeal to ordinary people at the same time and communicate with them: 'Steps need to be taken to fill the huge gap between the commercial films and art films.' (Ghaffari 1970: 156).

In Ghaffari's view:

> A film is either good or bad. A good commercial film is called a good film and a good intellectual film is called a good film too and vice versa. Though some are only after the selling of their film and some others don't think of the market at all. I think Fereydoun Rahnema's *Siavash dar Takht-e Jamshid/Siavaush in Persepolis* (1965), Ebrahim Golestan's *Khesht va Ayeneh/The Brick and the Mirror* (1964) and my films, *Jonoob-e Shahr/The South of the City* and *Shab-e GhooziGhuzi/ The Night of the Hunchback* (1965) were the first stepping stones in the building of Iranian modern cinema. This new movement was not only seen among a few intellectual film-makers, it was also seen among the so-called commercial film-makers. (Ghaffari 1970: 156)

But Ghaffari would continue to be critical of Film Farsi and its pandering to the lowest and basest of the public's taste. In his argument about the responsibility of Iranian film-makers, he said:

> Any knowledgeable filmgoer can understand how the Iranian film-makers are just copying the most vulgar and worthless cultural products to make their so-called populist films. I would say it is OK for film-makers to make films to match the interests of people in order to make money but they also have a responsibility to promote the level of general understanding and knowledge of the audience, otherwise we have no choice but to get closer to the tastes of the ignorant. Unfortunately, not only in Iran, but all across the world, people want the simple and worthless things. We should fight against this love for all things facile and superficiality in Iranian cinema. (Ghaffari 1970: 161)

Ghaffari's effort in *The South of the City* to mix artistic and commercial cinema was not successful and the film not only did not find a mass audience but received harsh and negative criticism from well-known Iranian film critics of the time like Hooshang Kavoosi. Kavoosi, a veteran film critic and film-maker, had had his film *Hefdah Rooz be E'daam/17 Days to Execution* (1956) hammered by Ghaffari, and he retaliated in the same spirit by publishing a negative review of Ghaffari's film: 'This film [*The South of the City*] consists of a few scattered and ordinary scenes, and the only thing that has connected them together is the tape splicer of the editing, not cinematic thought.' (Kavoosi 1958).

After the low box office turnout and poor critical reception of his second film *Arus Kodum-e?/Which One is the Bride?* (1959), Ghaffari made his third film *The Night of the Hunchback* in 1964, which was a modern satirical adaptation of one of the stories from *A Thousand and One Nights/The Arabian Nights*.

The original story is set during the time of Caliph Harun al-Rashid but Ghaffari changed the setting to modern Tehran in another gritty portrayal of 1960s society. It was a black comedy about smugglers who try to hide the body of a dead hunchback who is left on their doorstep.

In *Night of the Hunchback* Ghaffari allegorically deals with the notion of 'fear' within the Iranian society after the military coup of 1953 in the form of an attractive and joyful Iranian satire:

> I wanted to somehow talk about the concept of fear not only in Iran, but within the eastern mentality in my film, a fear with unknown origins. That is why I chose this particular story of *Thousand and One Nights* and worked on it for three years with Jalal Moghaddam. Iranian audiences didn't like the film because I heard that people don't like to see the corpse being dragged from one place to another but it was the only element that led to the success of this film abroad. In my main story, the hunchback would come alive in the end and for some reason, we were forced to forgo his resuscitation. So, the difference between *Jonoob-e Shahr* and *Shab-e GhooziGhuzi* was that the first was related to the language and culture of ordinary people and the latter had a more personal aspect and gauged specific issues. (Jahed 2014: 109)

A challenging and controversial film, it was not likely to be welcomed by the ordinary people of society that the film was trying to address, particularly when the taste of the public audience had been shaped by the mainstream Film Farsi productions. *The Night of the Hunchback* was well received by international viewers after being presented at international film festivals such as the Cannes Film Festival, Karlovy Vari Film Festival and Lion Film Festival, but on domestic viewings it received mostly negative criticism, although a few film critics like Hajir Dariush admired the film and declared that from it 'a real Iranian cinema has been born' (Dariush 1964).

With a darkly joyous, amusing atmosphere, *The Night of the Hunchback* addressed some critical issues within Iranian society. In his review of the film, film critic Hajir Dariush brought forward the idea that

> *Shab-e Ghoozi Ghuzi* is addressing the current problems of the society and intellectually criticizes the different classes of people. But, the ingenuity of the filmmaker is to the extent that when in the last scene the police officer says: 'The death of the hunchback unveiled many issues,' it makes you contemplate and you don't have the peace of mind you had before seeing the film. But if you are not intelligent enough you can't correctly find the reason for your discomfort. Something has been said, a fundamental talk about you and people like you, belonging to this time and this place. But a certain ambiguity has deliberately covered this utterance. In short, it's a film that won't mesmerize the stupid. (Dariush 1964)

Ghaffari himself recognized the modern style of the film as the cause of its failure to communicate with Iranian audiences:

> When I finished *Shab-e Ghoozi Ghuzi*, Fereydoun Rahnema made *Siavaush in Persepolis* and Ebrahim Golestan made *The Brick and the Mirror*. My film was shown in six cinemas in Tehran, but was not welcomed by spectators. Golestan was forced to rent a cinema, but his film was not noticed either. I believe the outlook and style of these films were too modern for the people who were used to the Egyptian and Indian junk films. (Jahed 2014: 64)

Farrokh Ghaffari's efforts were different in their superior intents to the acclaim-seeking approach of the films of Fereydoun Rahnema and Ebrahim Golestan, whilst retaining his tendency towards popular cinema, though the results were similar:

> Our film-makers were in touch with what's happening around the world. They know that modern cinema has existed in the world for 15 years. They got to know of the movements in Brazil, England, Japan, France and Ingmar Bergman's film tendencies in Sweden and America. And in turn, they tried to create a movement

> in Iranian cinema […] I started this tendency from 1956 to 1961 when I retired, and afterwards. People with capital should come and give a chance to these new and different film-makers, a chance with a limited budget. If producers are encouraged like this, a big step will be taken. Now I am talking to new up and coming intellectuals who want to make a pure and absolute cinema: come and take a look at other countries. See that others have taken the same path and reached somewhere. Like Buñuel, who was forced to make his living through cinema from 1940 to 1949. He now condones his films of that era. You start like this and then later say that you don't believe in parts of your own films. Taking a dogmatic position is only an acceptable action to take against vulgar films, otherwise try to make use of the first chance you get, when a producer gives you money to make a film. (Ghaffari 1970)

Ghaffari's fourth and last film, *Zanborak* (1975), was a comedy film inspired by Iranian folktales. The story occurs in the eighteenth century in central Iran and is about a soldier who gets lost in the middle of a war and is stranded from his squad, following the disastrous defeat of the army. He is in charge of a *zanborak*, a small running cannon mounted on a camel which was real technology used in Iran from the Safavid period to the end of the nineteenth century. The narrative structure of the film was inspired by the structure and style of medieval chivalric and picaresque novels such as *Don Quixote* (Miguel de Cervantes, 1605) and also Pasolini's *Decameron* (1971) and *The Canterbury Tales* (1972). Following the style of picaresque novels, the film consists of disconnected stories taking place in different settings with little exploration of the life of its main character.

Apart from film-making and writing about films, Ghaffari served in an administrative role at the Iranian state TV before the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In the late 1960s, Ghaffari was appointed Cultural Deputy to Reza Ghotbi, Head of the National Iranian Radio and Television, and became the main organizer of the Shiraz Arts Festival, an annual cultural and art event that was founded on the suggestion of Farah Pahlavi, the former Queen of Iran in 1967, and ran for eleven years until 1977. It was a festival of traditional and modern theatre, music, dance and an extraordinary meeting place for artists from East and West, as was desired by Ghaffari throughout his life.

Ghaffari was also interested in the craft of acting. He played one of the main characters in his film *Night of the Hunchback* and also the protagonist of Parviz Kimiavi's surrealist political satire *O.K. Mister* (1979), William Knox d'Arcy, an English oil explorer and one of the principal founders of the oil and petrochemical industry in Iran in 1901. It is the fictional story of a historical character who arrives in a remote village in Iran with the intention of exploiting the natural resources of the land.

After the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, Ghaffari moved to France and resided in Paris, and spent the rest of his life in exile. He died on 17 December 2006 of heart and kidney problems.

Parviz Jahed

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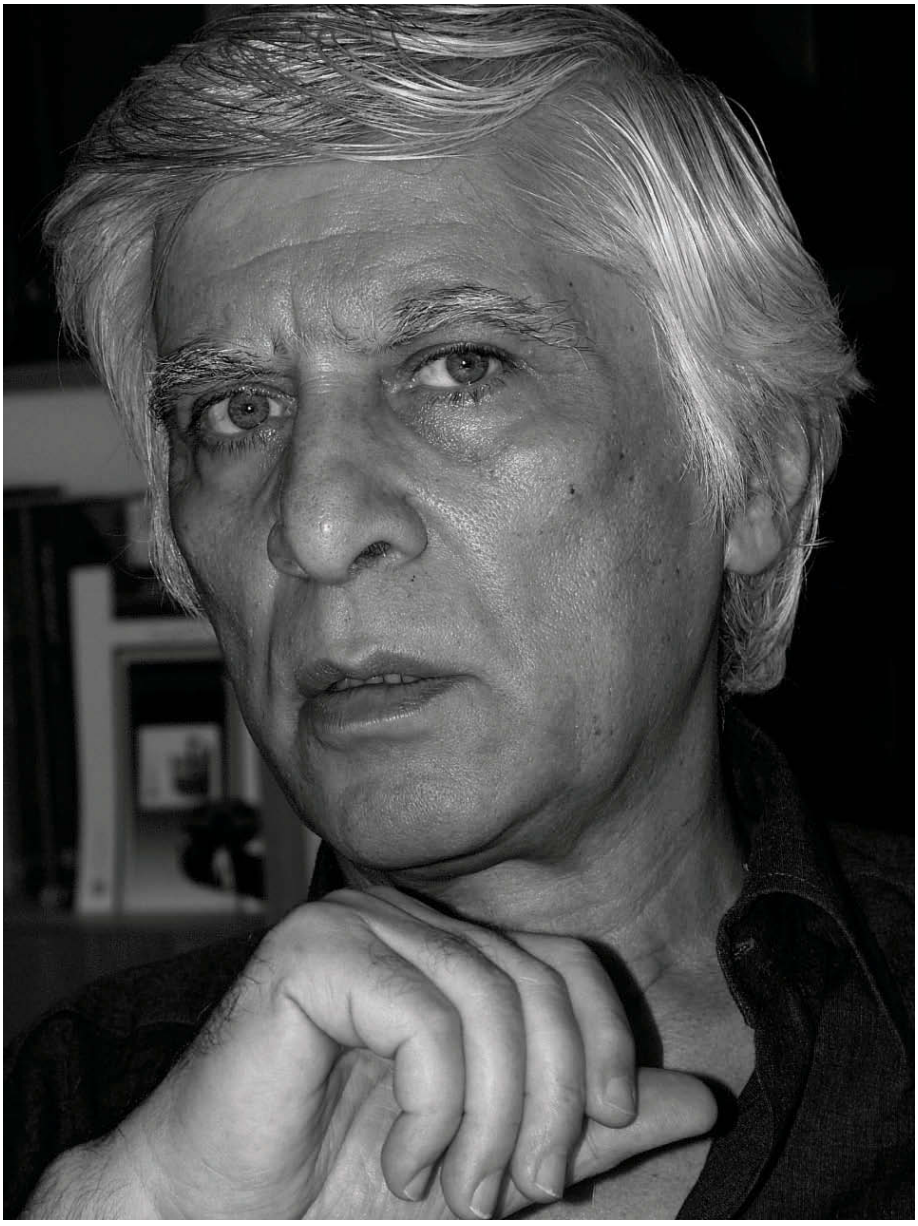
Note

1. The Toodeh Party (*Hezbe Toodeh*) was among the first communist parties in Iran that established in the early years of Reza Shah's reign in Iran. After the Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlawi military coup on 19 August 1954, the party was banned and oppressed severely and many of its members were arrested or executed. After years of illegal and undercover activity, in 1979 and after the Islamic Revolution of Iran it resumed its activities freely, but after a short while it was banned and oppressed again by the new government.



Bahram Beyzaie, photographed by Parviz Jahed.

DIRECTORS
BAHRAM BEYZAIE

Bahram Beyzaie was born in Tehran on 25 December 1938 in an art- and literature-loving family. His was one of those modern employee families who were to become the building block of the modern Iran of the 1930s. His father, a poet and a scholar from the Aran region near Kashan, was an employee of the General Notary Office, and his mother had a refined literary taste. His father's job played a significant role in Beyzaie's life as Beyzaie himself joined the office for several years to earn a living. The experience of working in the office was so intense that it became a source of inspiration for special scenes in his works, where it was given a Kafkaesque twist as a nightmarish space in which people's existence could only be proved if it was reduced to numbers, photos or words filed away in folders. Like many educated families of the transitional period, the family was defined by an ambivalent, yet constantly developing attitude towards modernity and tradition to maintain a sense of cultural authenticity while accommodating change to give a sense of coherence to their everyday lives. In the first decade of Beyzaie's life, however, this coherence, which was regularly being challenged and tacitly negotiated due to the authoritative modernization plans of the first Pahlavi (1925–41), went to a new level of disturbance due to the Allies' Occupation of Iran between 1941 and 1946, the conflicts over the nationalization of oil (1949–53) and the military coup of August 1953. The result was a series of rapid, drastic changes in the cultural and political lives of Iranians, which made Beyzaie acutely conscious of how dominant cultural and political discourses suppress alternative discourses to gain hegemony and to homogenize people into subjects of nation-building plans.

Another factor influencing the young Beyzaie was his family background as members of a demonized religious group. Though Beyzaie was agnostic and never practised Baha'ism as an adult, he suffered the consequences of his parents' religious identity on a daily basis, a situation that made him increasingly aware of the distorted nature of ideological marginalization and of how the mainstream suppresses alternative beliefs and practices. Due to his educated background and the fact that the family had centrality in its cultural knowledge and practice, this minority awareness developed into 'epistemic privilege', allowing him to see the failures of dominant discourses much more acutely than others.[1]

Thus when Beyzaie began writing in the late 1950s, his primary focus was to deconstruct and offer alternatives for the reductive narratives of dominant discourses about nation and cultural belonging, heroism, intellectuals, women, history, myth, cultural rejuvenation and collective identity. In his first decade, this alternative gaze was focused on reformulating *naqqali* (dramatic storytelling), *kheimeh shab bazi* (puppet show theatre), and comic (*taqlid*) and tragic (*ta'ziyeh*) forms for modern theatre. He also wrote extensively on Iranian as well as Japanese, Chinese and Indian performing traditions, which suggested his attempts to balance the westward gaze of many of his contemporary theatre practitioners. These lines of activity and his engagement with theatre as a director and playwright made him one of the prominent figures of Iranian theatre. This prominence has continued as his divergent perspectives and extensive knowledge of Iranian history, myths, rituals and art forms created new forms and narratives that later influenced other Iranian playwrights. His works have also been important because, as they have been a locus for the revelation of alternative discourses which examine individual, philosophical, historical, sociopolitical and cultural identities of Iranians from diverse perspectives and provide the grounds for paying attention to marginal perspectives, which is necessary for the formation and development of democratic modernity.[2]

Since the late 1960s, Beyzaie brought this defamiliarizing gaze into cinema to create a number of films which, along with the works of other prominent figures of New Wave cinema, gradually transformed the meaning of cinema for Iranians. For

Beyzaie, the turning point of his career came in 1969 when a contract with the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kanoon) enabled him to make his first feature film *Amu Sibilu/Uncle Moustache* (1970). The film, along with Abbas Kiarostami's early films, is one of the few films which functioned as models for post-revolution Iranian films with children in major roles. It is one of Beyzaie's three films, in which he uses the unburdened gazes of children and their resilient but resistant subjectivity to show how they are subjected to extreme control in societies in which the normalizing gaze, advice and threats delivered by unidentified others and violence are constantly used to suppress curiosity, creativity and desire for change. In *Uncle Moustache*, an old man is placed in a position in which he replaces the symbols of violence and obsession with the past – a thick moustache, a knife, closed doors and windows, and old photos – with the ones associated with a modern, multi-voiced society – open doors, smiling, food, flowers, balls, games. Within this final arrangement, violence no longer determines what is right, and the free movement and the voices of the younger generation no longer annoys the old man. The

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children's refusal to take the man seriously and the theatrical shenanigans of the man whose moustache, knife and rolling eyes make him a comic version of *Shemrkhan* (the Villain) in *ta'ziyeh* plays create a comic ambiance. Simultaneously, Beyzaie creates a significant ritual of transformation that links the rights of children and their ability to voice their rights to the requirements of a modern democratic society in which even the people in power are better off.

Beyzaie's *Safar/The Journey* (1972) goes one step ahead because it has children as its protagonists. It uses realistic and expressionistic elements to create a ritualistically distorted quest narrative similar to the Myth of Sisyphus, which traces the quest of two 11-year-old orphans for a mother in the streets of an alienated, violent city. Beyzaie uses the divergent gaze of marginalized children to reveal the failures of his society and the violent attitudes of the adults towards those who are old, weak, too young or less privileged. From this early stage, Beyzaie employs numerous self-reflexive elements to highlight the pressure of living in surveillance societies. Thus large glasses or bespectacled people watching other people are placed in the foregrounds or backgrounds. Or in an era when Iranian cinema was obsessed with glorifying chivalrous roughnecks, the boys are chased by a paedophile roughneck in a scene in which they cut through posters of mainstream Iranian films.

While challenging the contemporary obsessions, however, these two children's films also suggest Beyzaie's future-directed gaze. Juxtaposing the happy faces on the commercial billboards advertising western goods with the realities of child labour, poverty and the constant violation of children's rights and their potential for growth, Beyzaie offers a critique of Iran's distorted journey towards modernity, which seemed to be more obsessed with appearances than creating the actual requirements. The emphasis on the vicious circle of hope and despair and the differences between the two boys also suggest an allegorical layer that links the destiny of the two with the destiny of Iranian modernity. Razi, the self-reliant, practical and down-to-earth working boy has to support the dreams of the visionary Tal'e, who keeps looking for his parents who may build a better life for them. Yet their journey seems to be the only meaningful act in the ritualistically mechanical lives of the people around them, which is characterized by imitative repetition of traditions and obsession with the mundane with no clear understanding of their roots or the necessity to think and change their world. Thus while suggesting the necessity of hope and transcending one's normal functions and the drudgery of obsessive practicality to gain a deeper understanding of one's conditions, Beyzaie offers a critique of being obsessed with dreams of a glorious past or looking for saviours.

Though these two films are in intertextual dialogue with Beyzaie's later film, *Bashu, Gharibeye Koochak/Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1986), they are chronologically and thematically closer to *Ragbar/The Downpour* (1971), an award-winning film which established Beyzaie as a leading director. The ambiance of the second film is also closer to Beyzaie's city films in general, which share some inter-filmic narratives.

The Downpour is Beyzaie's first full-length feature film; a curious medley of interesting images, forms and symbols organically assembled together to create Beyzaie's earliest tour de force. As a marker of growth in Beyzaie's *oeuvre*, it is the first film in which the prototype of positive Iranian intellectuality – a self-defacing, honest yet non-idealized teacher – appears in a dramatic template traditionally preserved for sacrificial heroes. A stranger enters a closed community, falls in love, tries to help people, is victimized by and then reconciled with traditional holders of power, but is finally deprived of his role as a saviour and educator by existentially or politically Kafkaesque forms of surveillance which banish him from the community. The film is similar to *Uncle Moustache* in that the protagonist's journey of individuation, reconciliation with people and quest for love takes place due to occasionally comic encounters with children and the realization that he is one of the

people around him, and therefore, needs to understand and help them. It is similar to *The Journey* in highlighting the necessity of finding the best ways to improve social conditions through constant probing.

The film is special as Hekmati's encounters with the roughneck butcher and their rivalry for winning Atefeh's heart takes a meta-filmic turn to suggest the necessity of replacing the roughneck hero of mainstream Iranian films with new protagonists. It is also one of the first Iranian films in which the female protagonist does not function as a simple love challenge for the male protagonist's journey of initiation. Though not entirely dynamic, Atefeh is characterized as a responsible, working adult who takes care of her brother and old mother. This is important as female protagonists became a key feature of Beyzaie's later films. Stylistically, the film is a medley of Italian neo-realism, formal and thematic technics borrowed from *ta'ziyeh* and *taqlid* and a peculiar love of individual, meta-filmic images which seem to transform figures of speech into exaggerated, photographic images and scenes with occasional multi-layered dialogue that disturb the natural course of the narrative to comment on human behaviour or cinema. Important among these meta-filmic or inserted scenes are the scenes of the teacher bowing recurrently to his colleagues, the line made with coal on the wall by children, which brings Hekmati and Atefeh together; the meeting between Atefeh and Hekmati with children watching them from everywhere; the fight between Rahim and Hekmati and their eventual drinking together and talking before fighting again; the dressmaker and her imaginary customer; or Hekmati's final, funeral-like exit which echoes the scene of Jesus carrying his cross uphill to an inevitable fate (21:00–22:00; 58:00–61:00; 99:00–110:00; 114:00–118:00). Though considered theatrical or exaggerated by some critics, these images and scenes, which create performative moments of Brechtian alienation to communicate directly with the spectator, became a constant presence in Beyzaie's cinematic style.[3]

Up to this point, Beyzaie's protagonists, unlike the roughneck protagonists of mainstream films, were either the members of the new generation questing for their rights or lost identity or a creative teacher redefining his identity by aligning his interests with those of the underprivileged around him. With his next city film, however, Beyzaie brought women into the centre of his Kafkaesque depiction of the city and family, which incorporated elements from psychosocial drama films and noir-like thrillers to examine the lives of middle-class families in the violent wonderland of Tehran. In these city films two eras are of great importance: the years of occupation and nationalization of oil (1941–53) and the eight years of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88), which had great impacts on the transformation of the public lives of Iranians and their collective national and religious identities.

The major films of this group, *Kalagh/The Crow* (1977), *Shayad Vaghti Digar/Maybe Some Other Time* (1987), *Sag Koshi/Killing Mad Dogs* (2001) and *Vaghti Hameh Khabim/When We Are All Asleep* (2008), are also similar in using black comedy. They also increasingly include ritualistic depictions of violence on-screen, show gender behaviours as acquired rather than inherent, and belabour the movement of the narrative with theatrically symbolic scenes or individual multi-layered images or dialogue in the background or foreground. One can also observe an extensive use of non-viewpoint images in which the camera distinguishes itself from the narrative and the characters to create a multi-layered commentary on life. These may be explained in term of Gilles Deleuze's 'perception-image' in its unidentified, anonymous form or camera consciousness. [4] They can also be interpreted in terms of Jacques Ranciere's theory as the result of the creative gaze of the author/camera in the 'aesthetic regime of art' through which the fluid meanings in random objects are released.[5] Yet set besides the other decelerating, alienating and meta-filmic elements that Beyzaie borrows from Iranian performing traditions, these scenes create forms that some Iranian critics cannot swallow, particularly because their definition of cinema is defined

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by Hollywood or, at best, European art films. Yet those who are familiar with Beyzaie's plays and screenplays find numerous codes and functions for these stylistic features and often extol Beyzaie for turning his films into sites of cultural probing.[6]

Positive or negative, the combination of these elements creates a type of 'cinematic performativity' which annoys and constantly pulls and pushes the spectator in and out of the visual world of the films. In other words, the arrangement of the images and the scenes as a visual essay or narrative perform an effect on the spectator rather than just narrate a story. Performativity as a term entered the world of cultural theory from linguistics. In JL Austin's works, it signified those statements that do something at the time of utterance. For instance, if a priest or magistrate ritualistically utters from the position of power: 'I now declare you husband and wife,' his statement results in a change in the status of the two people involved. In Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida's works, the term is used to refer to processes through which linguistic or non-linguistic expressive tools are used to reinforce, or perform the effects of, dominant models of identity, class, gender and social and artistic aesthetics or the alternatives that advertently avoid using these to effect change. In Beyzaie's work, this avoidance of straight filmic narration is designed to make the spectators experience the absence of the clichés that divert their attention from the tools of domination.

Though successful in their temporary deconstruction of habitual communication, Beyzaie's performative image-making does not violate his narratives. They only disturb them momentarily as he usually manages to justify them in realistic or meta-filmic twists. One of the good examples of this is the dark comedy that he constructs around the subject of death in *The Crow*, both in the scenes in the morgue (45:00–47:00),

or the scrapyard (49:00–51:00) where the fate of missing people, violence, rape and death become subjects of jokes or later when the actress playing the corpse in the TV documentary gets upset and starts cursing the unruly children (70:00–72:00). Another good example is when the Mother and Asiyeh walk in the streets of old Tehran. Beyzaie inserts these elements into straightforward narratives of getting lost and being found which are also strengthened by surrealistic journeys from the present to a past that transformed the meaning of the present and distorted the journey of the Iranian people towards modernity. In *The Crow* and *Maybe Some Other Time*, this point of reference is the years following World War II, when a disrupted nation lost its only chance for democratization and non-authoritative modernization. This shared historical point of reference, the centrality of women in both films and the role of the husbands as unassuming documentary film-makers concerned with the loss of old values, corruption and pollution, makes the two films similar. They also contain extensive meta-filmic scenes about the technology that enables us to record the image and the voice of humanity for posterity, suggesting that it has changed the meaning of time and being. In both films the reference to the past is not to glorify or condemn it, but to understand it in order to create a better future. The old woman in *The Crow* was in love with a photographer who was lost in the war; Asiyeh married a photographer/presenter/film-maker, and having found that he is far from being what his name, Esalat (authenticity), suggests, she transformed him by her own probing gaze and by finding out about the history of his mother's loss; and finally Kian in *Maybe Some Other Time* has a curious, though suspicious, photographer/film-maker husband who helps her find her other self, the woman that she could have been. As seen in the examples, cinema and its ability to create alternative realities about the origins of contemporary selves and the pitfalls of Iranian modernity, play an important role in Beyzaie's city films. As I put it in my review of *Maybe Some Other Time*,

> 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. (Talajooy 2013: 150)

In this context, junkyards with broken cars and carriages, the vestiges of unbridled consumerism, the helplessness of people in the chaos of Tehran's streets in all of Beyzaie's city films, and the focus on the looming, disturbing gaze of surveillance in these films, also suggest the failure of the consecutive state formations to establish new orders that can bring the positive results of modernity into the country without suppressing the people.

Beyzaie's *Killing Mad Dogs* and *When We Are All Asleep*, which were also in the same psychosocial/thriller form, went even further by increasing their critique of patriarchy. Using female protagonists, the films demonstrate that the moral integrity of a society can only be determined by examining the way it treats those in the margins of power – women, children, old people and cultural activists who are at the mercy of the state or opportunistic capitalists. Written and produced in the second and the third decade of the Islamic Republic, they function as scathing critiques of the pitfalls of modernity in Iran and the false revolutionary promises of equality, ethical elevation and honesty which, in Beyzaie's films, are shown to have become their opposites in post-revolutionary Iran. The first film follows an episodic plot. Golrokh, a novelist, who had left her husband suspecting that he had an affair with his secretary, comes back to

Tehran to buy back his cheques from his creditors at one-third of their value with the money remaining in his company's account after his partner took flight with most of the assets. This brings Golrokh, a creative intellectual, face to face with the worst people in Iranian market life where capital is in the service of opportunistic hoarding and trading rather than production, and where ethical values are easily manipulated to become their opposites. With this thriller-like plot, which is also archetypal and quest-like, and the performative and expressionistic methods that Beyzaie uses to decelerate the narratives and make the narration as intellectually painful and alerting to the spectator as it is to Golrokh, Beyzaie manages to depict the moral mire that Iranian society is entangled in.

One of the best examples of Beyzaie's expressionistic performativity is the scene in which Golrokh, the moral centre and sacrificial/epic hero of the film, stands between the five towering construction capitalists and delivers Beyzaie's scathing message about the victimization of the people involved in upholding Iran's culture. Speaking like a *Morshed Naqqal* (the spiritual-guide narrator of Iranian storytelling tradition), Golrokh delivers the message to the camera as if speaking to the state (116:00–125:00). But the moment of anagnorisis in the final scenes becomes even more performative, as with the charged multi-layered dialogue the spectator discovers along with Golrokh that her husband was just exploiting her to clear his debts and escape with the rest of the money. Golrokh, as one of the few sacrificial/epic figures in Beyzaie's works who survive the vicious machinations of power, greed and exploitation, is a creative intellectual, who transcends the vicious circle of false identities and greed through her artistic creativity. To highlight this, the film closes with the suggestion that what the spectators observed was the unfolding of the events of her next novel.

Beyzaie's final city film, *When We Are All Asleep*, exploits this involuted structure to demonstrate the insurmountable corruption of the Iranian film industry where instead of focusing on making films, directors and screenwriters have to deal with a myriad of absurd impediments and impositions. The psychosocial/thriller structure is still present, but this time it is as a film within the film, the actors for which are constantly changed due to the nepotism of the producers whose money is in the service of distorting cultural production rather than facilitating it. Beyzaie, thus, depicts an absurd, chaotic world and a more organic filmic reality within it, but in both of these, his focus is the disintegration of ethical values at religious and secular levels. The film, in fact, functions as Beyzaie's final verdict about a society gone astray with a greedy opportunism that has penetrated all levels of society and state. Within this world, social criticism through cultural production has lost its meaning, and except for a diminishing minority any sense of togetherness and collective identity has been replaced by a shared belief in dog-eat-dog opportunism.

Beyzaie's village films

In 1973, just after making *The Journey*, Beyzaie began making a new type of film set in villages, in which inter-filmic narration creates an extended dialogue about Iranian identity in its existential, mythic, historical and national modalities. Thus *Gharibeh va Mah*/*Stranger and the Fog* (1974), *Cherikeh-ye Tara*/*The Ballad of Tara* (1979) and *Bashu, the Little Stranger* reformulate and mix *ta'ziyeh*, *naqqali* and collective ritual ceremonies of merriment and mourning with the expressive methods adapted from the masterpieces of the world cinema (Asian as well as western) to examine the identity of Iranian humanity in its diverse and at times conflicting modalities. In these films, as in *The Downpour*, a stranger arrives at a closed community, now a village, to enable the director to create situations that reveal the main elements and problems of human cultures.

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The stranger of the first film, Ayat, is a man from the unknown, from the philosophically and mythically charged sea of non-existence. Ayat's aim is to find, through love and hard work, his place in a world of ethnocentric beliefs and rituals. Rather than being interested in his farming and hunting abilities and his love of family and home, the community in which he has landed is engrossed by his power to kill. The film, thus, reveals how society pushes creative, divergent thinkers or physically powerful people into potentially absurd roles that it defines as heroic. Heroes are thus victims of societies which do not accept the responsibility of running their day-to-day lives and are ethnocentric in their beliefs and practices. This narrative of belonging and heroism is particularly interesting for incorporating numerous rituals. Thus Iranian rituals of imitation, quest, mating and marriage, scapegoating, sacrifice, mourning and death are placed in festival constructs that can be easily linked to their modern counterparts while questioning their ethnocentric content and forms. The existential discourse of the film becomes more apparent as the love and the sexual encounter between Ra'na and Ayat is given a sublimated spiritual meaning as one of the only human behaviours that can potentially provide a meaning for human existence. This existential aspect is also reinforced with the final scene in which, with

each stabbing of his enemies, Ayat seems to injure himself. Death seems to be the very part of the self that is fighting to fend it off. At a realistic level, however, the film also comments on the position of women in patriarchal societies, where the ability to distribute violence, pain and, in rare cases, compassion determines one's position in society. Once more, it also depicts a woman who is a survivor rather than a victim, a figure that became the protagonist of Beyzaie's later films.

With the release of *Stranger and the Fog*, some critics who were confused by Beyzaie's unorthodox approach to film-making and his refusal to keep using a template that had proved successful in the case of *The Downpour*, began to criticize Beyzaie for being inaccessible to people and for making intellectual films with which people could not communicate. Beyzaie, of course, did not change his approach and continued experimenting with thematically similar yet innovative templates. In one important interview, he also insisted that bending to what the dominant discourse calls popular taste is an insult to film spectators who always have the potential to elevate their taste and enjoy seeing different kinds of films (Beyzaie 1992: 54–55).

In 1978, after the success of *The Crow*, which introduced an intellectually probing and powerful female protagonist into Iranian cinema, Beyzaie began making his second village film, which, unlike his first village film, had a female protagonist. The reason for this new development is not clear. Beyzaie himself has on several occasions brushed the question away, blaming it on the patriarchal gaze of some critics and highlighting the fact that they never ask why there are so many men at the centre of other films (Beyzaie 1992: 43). Though unlikely, this change may have been due to the rise of new feminist film criticism in the 1970s, or at a personal level due to the fact that he had two daughters and felt the lack of ideal models of modern womanhood in Iranian cinema. Yet what is clear is that even prior to *The Crow*, Beyzaie's films did not lend themselves to cinematic voyeurism and had strong women in their major supporting roles. Furthermore, using women at the centre of his films would allow Beyzaie to display a great range of social problems which could not be shown with male protagonists. In other words, the marginal situation of children and later women in a violent patriarchal society would enable Beyzaie to confront the male spectators with their unseen privileges and the pressure that these privileges impose on women or the other groups in the margins of belonging and power. *The Crow*, of course, was not his first attempt at creating such a figure, as his first and more radical attempt at creating such a protagonist can be seen in the screenplay of *Haghayeghi Darbareh-ye Lila Dokhtar-e Edris/Truths About Lila, the Daughter of Edris* (1975), which was deemed too dark by producers and film companies and was never produced.

Beyzaie's second village film, *The Ballad of Tara*, was made at a time when the streets of Tehran and Iran's other major cities were raging with revolutionary zeal and demonstrations against the Pahlavi dynasty. Interestingly, this film is primarily concerned with the historical identity of Iranian people at a time when history was a major locus of conflict between those archaists who emphasized pre-Islamic Iran as the main source of collective identity formation for modern Iranians and those who emphasized that we can only regrow into a strong nation from the roots found in our Islamic history. The stranger of this second film is a man with a violent history, who has come to reclaim his sword, which Tara has inherited. At a symbolic level this can be read as a woman's curiosity about her past triggered through an object which is endowed with multiple meanings, but in Beyzaie's hands, this is turned into a long poem about the necessity of knowing but not being obsessed with the past. The historical warrior who has travelled in time falls in love with the protagonist, a woman in love with life and earth, and their mutual love enables her to find her historical roots while defining her life in terms of creativity, fertility and the construction of a better life in the present. Though the template of a symbolic voyage in time