# A Colourful Presence

# A Colourful Presence:

## *The Evolution of Women's Representation in Iranian Cinema*

By

Maryam Ghorbankarimi

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

A Colourful Presence:
The Evolution of Women's Representation in Iranian Cinema

By Maryam Ghorbankarimi

This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library



ISBN (10): 1-4438-8272-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8272-9

In honor of my loving parents …

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# LIST OF FIGURES

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I found the process of turning my PhD thesis into a book to be a growth-fostering experience and I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and honor the people who supported and inspired me. First and foremost I want to thank my cinephile family for their endless support. I could not have written this book without the generous support and encouragement of my mother, Mahvash Tehrani, and my father, Hosseinali Ghorbankarimi, whose life experience as people who dedicated their lives to cinema also added to this research. In addition to being my parents, they are also my best friends and have always provided me with help and inspiration throughout my life. I also want to thank my filmmaking siblings, Mahsa Ghorbankarimi and Mohammad Ghorbankarimi, and their lovely families for their unflagging confidence in me, and the financial support they freely offered at the most critical times. My dear husband, Dr Orhan Elmaz, encouraged and supported me every step of the way to bring this project to a conclusion despite all the difficulties and obstacles I may have faced.

I would also like to thank the supervisors of my PhD thesis on which this book is based, Dr Kamran Rastegar who supervised this project from the first brainstorming sessions until, unfortunately for me, he left for another university, and Professor Marilyn Booth who stepped up as my supervisor during a difficult time of transition toward the end of my second year. She has been a mentor, advisor, and sounding board as I waded through the dissertation process and I will be forever grateful to her.

Many thanks also to the members of the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies and the Department of Film Studies at the University of Edinburgh who provided me with guidance, for the numerous conversations that helped to shape my critical thinking. I am also indebted to the colorful film community in the wonderful city of Edinburgh for many an opportunity to gain experience — from making films through the Edinburgh College of Arts to organizing film festivals through Filmhouse and the Edinburgh Festival Theatre.

I would also like to thank all Iranian filmmakers and industry members who readily shared their knowledge and experience with me in interviews in support of this project. Finally, I want to thank all my friends, and I hope they know how much they contributed to my growth as a person during the last couple of years that I have been working on this project.

# A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND STYLE

For the transliteration of Persian terms and names, the full range of vowels is used: a, e, i, o, u; and the diphthongs ‘ow’ (as in Nowruz). *‘Ayn* and *hamza* have been retained and distinguished. Proper and personal names, wherever possible, are given in conventional forms.

Film titles are always — at least in the first instance — given in transliterated Persian and in English along with the date, but from the second time onward, only the English title is used. Where there is more than one English translation, the English title given in the International Movie Data Base (IMDB) is used.

# INTRODUCTION

## Overview of the Project

The HSBC ad from their "Unlocking the world's potential" campaign in 2010, demonstrates the position of female directors in Iran and created uproar in North American media. There are many discussions on the statistic used in an HSBC ad ("Only 4% of American films are made by women. In Iran it's 25%), which this study does not enter into, but among the different responses, Eli Clifton, in a blog in answer to the negative reactions, argues that this ad "did not imply that women in Iran are 'better situated' than American women… distort[ing] the text of the ad shows total lack of empathy for challenges that Iranian female filmmakers have overcome to hold an astonishing 25% of the filmmaking market."[1]


Figure 1 HSBC ad from "Unlocking the world's potential" campaign in 2010

This book will demonstrate the overall shift in the representation of women since the early 1990s — an especially significant turning point — and investigate the motives behind it. This evident shift in the films under exploration presents the basis of this study and raises the questions of why and how it occurred at that time. Indicative of the change in the

[1] Undermining the challenges that Clifton mentions was exactly my point of departure and it is what calls for this study. The shift in the representation of women in films since the 1990s has not been free of challenges, and both female and male directors are responsible for achieving the more nuanced representation of women in films, either by overcoming the existing obstacles or by finding new ways of depicting the reality perceived on-screen.

representation of women, this study also discusses the role of women in Iranian cinema, both behind and in front of the camera, and offers an overview of changes and developments throughout the history of Iranian cinema. This book highlights several specific films as a tool for tracing attitude changes in Iranian society, culture, and politics toward women. I believe films reflect the society in which they are made, and even work as catalysts for change.

Tracing changes in the representation of women in Iranian cinema is like examining the journey of a woman into self-realization. The journey is divided into four stages: from the faceless, utterly good (vs. the bad) woman in pre-revolution films, to the even more one-dimensional — almost holy — woman in the cinema of the 1980s, to women who make mistakes and are subjected to hardship the same way that men are, and women who are striving for independence and freedom from the 1990s onward. This development can be summarized as the journey of a woman who is silenced by society or by what society dictates and becomes a woman with agency and a voice.

The development in these four stages depicts the evolution of women's status and their living conditions in the past 60 years. The struggle of women is demonstrated in the selected Iranian films from that period. Women's lives have often been dealt with in Iranian films; at times, this alternate reality depicts a more passive character, and at other times a more active one. I argue that the change in the representation of women in cinema started in the late 1980s, coinciding with the entrance of female filmmakers in the feature film industry. To demonstrate this, I will analyze the ongoing efforts of people involved in the film industry in Iran from the 1960s onwards which helped further to develop Iranian cinema and make it known internationally, as well as to open the field to female filmmakers in the late 1980s.

Twelve representative films from the period under study will be analyzed individually focusing on their cultural aesthetics and social and cinematic contexts. The two main factors that helped shift the screen persona of the Iranian female subject are due firstly to the continuous evolution of the Iranian film industry and secondly, to the increase of women's agency in society in general, and in the film industry in particular.

In order to map the change in the portrayal of women in Iranian films, the first chapter "Captive Bodies Lost in Oblivion," offers an overview of

the history of Iranian cinema with respect to the representation of women by looking at three films. Stage One of the four stages mentioned above relates to the films made before the revolution and those made in the first decade after it. In those films, the "good" woman character is pure, chaste, and untouched. She is defined by her relation to, and protection of, a man be it a father, husband, or son. This chapter presents a historical and socio-political overview of Iranian cinema through the close examination of Masud Kimiai's *Qeysar* (Gheisar, 1969), Bahram Beizai's *Ragbār* (Downpour, 1969), and Ali Zhekan's *Mādiyān* (The Mare, 1986).

After the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s, women entered the stage of "awareness." In real life women had lent a big hand to the revolution and have been struggling to keep their new social status ever since. The environment of the late 1980s was finally receptive to this shift and the first female directors started making feature films soon after, focusing their lens more directly on female subjects. Chapter 2, "Woken up with a Patriarchal Hangover," looks at the works of the first three female directors: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Pouran Derakhshandeh, and Tahmineh Milani. Their bodies of work are very strongly marked by their lives and personalities, as well as their particular directing styles. These films are grouped together because they are among the first examples of women-centric films in Iran that are also produced by female filmmakers. Interviews offering insights into how these filmmakers work and how they develop their stories were conducted with all three directors, enhancing the analysis. This chapter offers a close reading of their works, focusing especially on one very significant work by each director, which best demonstrates her cinematic authorship. At this stage women were still living under the pressure of the same social values around gendered behaviour as before, but they had started voicing their opinions. They were still dealing with issues of marriage and motherhood, but they no longer did so silently and passively. In these films, women no longer stand in the peripheries: this is the first time they take center stage.

It is worth noting that the number of female directors in Iran has been growing fast since the above-mentioned female directors started their careers. Now, there are many other critically acclaimed directors, such as Samira Makhmalbaf, who has become the youngest director in the world to be included in the official selection of the 1998 Cannes Film Festival with her film *Sib* (The Apple, 1998). Only the three aforementioned directors who changed the modes of representation of women in films are included in this study, however, as including more recent directors would go beyond the scope of this study.

In the next stage, women achieved momentum as a result of a difficult situation, for example war or economic hardship. Not only were women no longer just passive supporters of their men, but they had also become forces of life themselves — alongside their men or in their absence. Because the men were at war or simply because they were unable to support their families on their own, women's roles became more significant and were just as instrumental in shaping the family's future. Chapter 3, "Contingent Presences: Little Strangers in the Land of Patriarchy," presents female-centric films from three prominent male directors and demonstrates that the change in the representation of women in Iranian cinema is a phenomenon that is evident throughout the Iranian film industry, and is not limited to a specific group of films, although its presence may be more evident in some films than in others. This chapter begins with a close reading of one of the most famous Iranian films, *Bāshu Gharibeh-ye Kuchak* (Bashu, the Little Stranger, 1985/86) by Bahram Beizai. It then focuses on a film by Daruish Mehrjui, one of the leading directors who shaped the independent cinema of the 1960s. *Sara* (1993), the first of Mehrjui's three films made in the 1990s focuses on a prominent female character. The third film in this group is *Bu-ye Pirāhan-e Yusef* (The Scent of Joseph's Shirt, 1995) by Ebrahim Hatamikia, one of the most outstanding directors of the war genre, which due to its focus on female subjects, is very relevant to the overall argument of this book.

Finally, this journey into realization reaches its ultimate goal: women asking for more agency. Women who put everything on the line when their families are in need, like the characters in Chapter 3, found that after the hardships had ended, they were not rewarded with the positions they deserved and started to question patriarchal values. As a result, women became rebels. They are seen to have achieved so much confidence that not only do they no longer need the presence of a man to define them, but they have become strong enough not to be afraid to break free and assume independent lives. Chapter 4, "Girls Gone Wise: Women, Rebellion, and Liberation," examines a group of films that depict the changed attitude in the portrayal of women in Iranian cinema. This chapter examines a film by the most internationally acclaimed Iranian director, Abbas Kiarostami's *Dah* (Ten, 2001), a film which openly discusses important gender issues and taboos in an Iranian woman's life. The other two films in this chapter are from relatively younger directors. From Asghar Farhadi, who is now most famous for his Oscar-winning film *Jodāyi-ye Nāder az Simin* (A Separation, 2011), I will discuss one the earlier films, *Chahārshanbeh Suri* (Fireworks Wednesday, 2006). I believe this film establishes the direction of his career quite well. The last film in this chapter is Reza Mirkarimi's

*Be Hamin Sādegi* (As Simple as That, 2008), a simple film about one day in a housewife's life. This is a rather surprising and challenging film by this director; the interview conducted with him reveals very clearly how and why he felt it necessary to depict such a story. All the females in these films are portrayed as independent women who actively confront the common patriarchal society, questioning its necessity, and who are prepared to leave their husbands and/or ask for a divorce.

By offering a close reading of a selection of Iranian films, this book compares and traces shifts in the representation of women in Iranian cinema since the 1990s in comparison with films made before the Islamic Revolution and those made in the first decade after it. Informed by feminist film theories and considering the unique social and political situations dominant in Iranian media production, this study analyzes the content of these films.

## The 1960s: Iranian New Wave

Iranian society was on the verge of an upheaval in the 1960s, and this is directly reflected in the films produced in that era. On the one hand, as Hamid Dabashi asserts, the socio-political changes in Iran were in part due to a shift in the Shiite clerical authority.[2] This shift resulted in Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology, finally surpassing *Nehzat-e Āzādi-ye Irān*'s (Liberation Movement of Iran) moderate theocracy that led to a major and brutally suppressed uprising against the Shah's "white revolution" in 1963. On the other hand, the rejection of the uncritical adoption of foreign values by foreign-educated intellectuals led to a shift in the intellectual discourse, best represented by Jalal-e al-e Ahmad's popular treatise *Gharb-Zādegi* (Westoxication), published in 1962. Through this climate, when the clergy had already started actively opposing the Shah's plans for developing the country, many literary activists, poets, writers, and filmmakers emerged. As Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa explains, "Their work was charged with political rebellion and existential despair, as well as a skeptical view of progress and development."[3]

Sadegh Hedayat in fiction, Nima Yushij in poetry, and Jalal Al-e Ahmad in social criticism were among the literary intellectual leaders of

[2] Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 25.
[3] Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, "Ebrahim Golestan: Treasure of Pre-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema," Rouge, www.rouge.com.au/11/golestan.html. "Accessed Jan. 2012".

this opposition. The political changes of the 1960s also produced some ideologues such as Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati with their strong Marxist/socialist and anti-colonial backgrounds. It is obvious that these intellectuals' "embrace of Islam forced them to create a radically alternative form of revolutionary socialism,"[4] but as Ali Mirsepassi asserts, the "Iranian Revolution was not a simple clash between modernity and tradition but an attempt to accommodate modernity within a sense of authentic Islamic identity."[5] Mirsepassi explains movements such as the Iranian Islamic Revolution as ones that "promote social and cultural institutions, which are modern but 'authentically local'." He goes on to say, "These 'local' forms of resistance confront a global problem — the universalizing and homogenizing tendencies of 'Western' modernity — and thus they have a distinctly universal character. The politics of modernity is therefore neither local nor authentic. What matters is that it is grounded in some construction of 'local'."[6]

This intellectual movement was not confined only to the literary and political realms, but also spread to other cultural outputs such as films. There were some significant and memorable films produced in the 1960s, which are often referred to as the pioneering films of Iranian New Wave cinema.

In the 1960s, films also started to become the subject of intellectual debates and began to have some political charge. Filmmakers used the typical protagonist inherent to what is known today as *film farsi* genre and gave a slight edge unique to the films made in this period. Although there may be some differences of opinion among Iranian film scholars as to which film was the point of departure for this Iranian New Wave movement, they all collectively acknowledge its existence.[7] The first two films discussed in Chapter 1 are considered part of the New Wave.

A crucial development alongside mainstream cinema was the formation of several independent and semi-independent companies whose aim was to create more meaningful, artistic, and expressive films that were not under the same financial pressure as those in mainstream cinema.

---

[4] Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and Politics of Modernization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 155.
[5] Ibid., 1.
[6] Ibid., 127.
[7] Ibid.; Dabashi, *Close Up*.

A specific and critical event was the establishment of the *Madreseh-ye Āli-ye Televiziyon va Sinamā* (College of Television and Cinema), a film school based on the idea of creating a better cinema under the flagship of the *Sāzmān-e Rādiyo va Televiziyon-e Melli-ye Irān* (National Iranian Radio and Television [NIRT]). Surprisingly, this school is not mentioned in any of the texts that examine the evolution of Iranian cinema in the 1960s. A possible explanation for this omission is that the Iranian film industry of those days was quite elitist and exclusive, and had kept itself separate from the newly introduced technology — television. In fact, many of the film producers did not at first welcome the idea of their films being broadcast on television. It was only later in the 1970s that some producers agreed to sell the rights for a one-off showing of their films on television in order to compensate for their losses due to a lack of revenue.[8]

This school is highly significant for several reasons. Firstly, it was a base of contact for several of the key figures of this intellectual movement, and a good number of people who are responsible for the Iranian New Wave were among its first lecturers. Secondly, it was the early graduates of this school who made up a good portion of the backbone of the Iranian film industry of the post-revolutionary years. The advent of such a school represents the very first steps taken by the Iranian film industry to become more accessible and less exclusive. As a result, I find this period of Iranian cinema particularly important not only because of the production of a number of influential films, but also because of the creation of an ideology promoting better cinema that was not bounded by the profit it could make. While this ideology may not have stemmed from the same source as the Islamic Republic's ideology, which incorporated a set of modesty rules on all levels of the Iranian film industry to cleanse it from the associated corruption, at face value they were both in search of a more meaningful cinema. This is particularly important because the students of the New Wave school of Iranian cinema formed the majority of the film industry after the revolution. This gave rise to a paradox that Dabashi observes at the heart of Iranian contemporary cinema, which "speaks of the dialectical

[8] Masoud Mehrabi, *Tārikh-e sinamā-ye Irān: az āghāz tā sāl-e 1357* (Tehran: Entesharat-e-Film, 1984), 366.
Many texts do not even mention NIRT as a role player in the Iranian film industry before the revolution, although NIRT created the Telefilm fund, which produced several films that fit well into the framework of the Iranian New Wave. Mehrabi's book on the history of Iranian cinema, a valuable source, does include a whole section on NIRT but unfortunately fails to mention the newly established College of Television and Cinema.

outcome of the sets of oppositional forces that are competing for dominance in the post-revolutionary Iranian culture at large."[9] This perhaps can be explained through the meeting point and the simultaneous work of these two ideologies alongside one another.

## Iranian Independent Cinema of the 1960s

In reaction to the manipulated cinema of the 1960s, a group of foreign-educated intellectual filmmakers started their own film studios. In 1969, several key figures in Iranian cinema established a movement under the name *Sinamā-ye Āzād* (Free Cinema),[10] which was endorsed by Fereydoun Rahnema, one of three figures responsible for the inception of the Iranian New Wave. *Sinamā-ye Āzād*, in its ten years of activity until the 1979 revolution, had an outreach program that brought cinema to other cities. By the end they had held film workshops in more than twenty cities throughout Iran.[11]

In 1973, fifteen leading members of *Ettehādiyeh-ye Honarmandān* (The Artists' Union) resigned and created a new guild under the title *Kānun-e Sinamāgarān-e Pishro* (The Progressive Filmmakers' Union). They named several reasons for their protest: (1) they did not believe in the cinema that the Artists' Union promoted; (2) the members' rights were undervalued by some powerful (executive) producers within the system, whom the union had employed; and (3) the union was protecting the profit of those who promoted worthless cinema, which had no identity and which misrepresented the national culture.[12]

In spite of the general commercial film industry, the Iranian New Wave came into existence, seeking new ways of expression and a more meaningful cinema. Introducing the Iranian New Wave movement of the 1960s, Mirbakhtyar talks about three key figures, filmmakers and theoreticians, who helped shape this movement: Ebrahim Golestan, Farokh Ghaffari, and Fereydoun Rahnema. Ghaffari and Rahnema were educated in France and were well acquainted with French cinema, more specifically the French New Wave. As Mirbakhtyar says,

---

[9] Hamid Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large: The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 16.
[10] Mehrabi, *Tārikh-e sinamā-ye Irān*, 194.
[11] Cinemaye Azad, www.cinemaye-azad.com/karnameh/karnameh.html, "Accessed Jan. 2008."
[12] Mehrabi, *Tārikh-e sinamā-ye Irān*, 194.

> There is little doubt that New Wave in Iranian cinema, which is also known as cinema of intellect, was generated under the shadow of French New Wave cinema and Italian Neorealism. The three filmmakers, while differing in attitude and technique, shared a common goal: to work against commercial cinematic forms, and create films that expressed not only new ideas, but also the values and traditions of the society they were portraying.[13]

The two filmmakers and theoreticians, Ghaffari and Rahnema, had very significant and influential roles in Iranian cinema, and will be discussed in more detail later in this introduction. Ebrahim Golestan, the third pillar of this New Wave movement, established his own company and took charge of the films he produced. He recruited many young filmmakers and gave them the chance to develop their art with complete freedom.

## Golestan Film Unit

Ebrahim Golestan, a filmmaker, writer, and translator, launched the Golestan Film Unit in 1955 — the first filmmaker in Iran to have established his own film studio — while he was working on six documentary shorts under the title *Cheshm Andāz* (View Point). The films concern the establishment of some of the oil companies in the south of Iran. The main purpose of the Golestan Film Unit was to produce documentary films by providing the best available technical equipment, while giving their filmmakers complete artistic freedom to approach the subject and allow for experimentation. By creating an ideal environment for talented young artists, the Golestan Film Unit, as Mohammad-Reza Sharifi explains, became an educational institution, where some of the more prominent Iranian directors such as Naser Taghvai and Forugh Farrokhzad started their filmmaking careers. Naser Taghvai started his career at the Golestan Film Unit as a technical assistant and moved up the ladder. The same is true for Forugh Farrokhzad; she started there as a typist and moved to editing and later, directing.

*Khāneh Siyāh Ast* (The House is Black, 1962), is one of the first films made by a female director, the prominent poet Forugh Farrokhzad. *The House is Black* is a short documentary about a leper colony in the northwest of Iran. In this film, Farrokhzad breaks social clichés not just by

[13] Shahla Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006), 40.

showing the darkness and horrifying reality of leprosy, but by looking past the ugly and finding beauty, love, and hope for the future — all that has given meaning to the lives of those suffering from the disease. This is an influential film, and one that to this day still has the ability to connect with its audience, for two reasons. Firstly, because this film, now removed from the time and place in which it was shot, does not just present the physical place and people it depicts; it represents a larger scale of places and people. Secondly, because it is based on an allegorical concept: life in the leper colony as a metaphor for life in general. People do not need to have leprosy to be trapped; they often live in the traps they have built with their own hands.[14] Very much ahead of its time, *The House is Black* is "a film that, with its poetic treatment of leprosy, anticipated much that was to follow in Iranian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s."[15]

## Kanun

These yearnings for a better cinema in contrast to the dominant commercial film industry were not confined just to the filmmakers themselves. Some official members of the government also lent a hand to this movement. For instance, Farah Diba, Mohammad Reza Shah's wife and queen of Iran, acted as Iran's ambassador of art and culture. As a result, she had a significant role in the progress and preservation of art and culture in the country.[16] In 1969, *Kānun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri-ye Kudak va Nowjavān* (The Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults [CIDCYA]) or, as it is known in Iran, *Kānun* (Kanun), was established with Farah's endorsement. Mehrabi explains that this center was created as an avenue to make films, which, despite popular cinema, was to produce a cinema far from banality and the profit motive.[17]

As the name suggests, this center was created to make films with children and young adults as their main target audience. It would ask for a simpler and purer cinema with educational values, resulting in more

[14] Maryam Ghorbankarimi, "The house is black; a timeless visual essay," in *Forugh Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran: Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry*, eds. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Nasrin Rahimieh (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010).
[15] Dabashi, *Close Up*, 27.
[16] I do not want to enter into a political discussion of whether or not her decisions with regard to the bigger picture of Iran were sound, I am merely observing the results of some of her actions with regard to the Iranian film industry.
[17] Mehrabi, *Tārikh-e sinamā-ye Irān*, 400.

meaningful films. This also partly explains the reason for the seemingly excessive number of memorable films in the history of Iranian cinema that portray young subjects. It is also worth noting that the prominent animation film industry of Iran owes its existence in part to the formation of Kanun. Key figures in Iranian animation, such as Noureddin Zarrinkelk, Akbar Sadeghi, and Farshid Mesghali, worked with and were supported through this institution, which had a permanent group of employed filmmakers but also invited guest filmmakers to work on different projects. Another significant achievement of this center was to form a film archive, which remains one of the most important treasures of the Iranian film industry to this day. Many significant films were produced through Kanun, and many filmmakers found free space there to make films that could not otherwise have been made. Zarrinkelk asserts that in the first few years some filmmakers pushed the boundaries of intellectual expression to such an extent that some of the films were not only beyond the comprehension of children — the supposed target audience — they were not even comprehensible to adults. He goes on to say that experimentation was inherent to such an intellectual movement, explaining why it resulted in such a positive outcome.[18] The center enabled the production of a number of experimental and short films. Directors such as Abbas Kiarostami and Naser Taghvai started their careers through Kanun, and some prominent directors of the time, such as Bahram Beizai and Masud Kimiai, used this environment to make short films. Kanun is one of the main institutions that continued its work after the revolution without significant change. There was, of course, a large turnover in its administrative staff, but most of its creative personnel remained. Most importantly, what was unchanged was its mission statement. Kanun was one of the first organizations to resume film production after the halt imposed by the revolution. Three very important films of the post-revolutionary years, *Davandeh* (The Runner, 1985) by Amir Naderi, *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1986) by Bahram Beizai, and *Khāneh-ye Dust Kojāst?* (Where is the Friend's Home?, 1987) by Abbas Kiarostami were produced through Kanun.

## College of Television and Cinema

Another significant institute briefly mentioned earlier was the *Madreseh-ye Āli-ye Televiziyon va Sinamā* (College of Television and Cinema), formed in 1968. This college was a film school based on the

[18] Mehrabi, *Tārikh-e sinamā-ye Irān*, 403–404.

very ideas of creating a better cinema under the flagship of the *Sāzmān-e Rādiyo va Televiziyon-e Melli-ye Irān* (National Iranian Radio and Television [NIRT]). Reza Ghotbi Gilani, a young intellectual politician who had been educated abroad and who acted as the head of NIRT from 1967 to 1979, established this college.

Ghotbi shared the same ideology as the filmmakers of the Iranian New Wave and helped create an open environment which, I would like to argue, was very significant. At a time when it was impossible to pursue a career in the film industry without some kind of personal connection, NIRT announced an entry exam for a newly established film school in newspapers, and television. Anyone was eligible to take the exam. Unlike the majority of filmmakers in the Iranian film industry up to this point, most of whom generally came from affluent families who could afford to send their children to Europe or America to attend film school,[19] the participants of this school did not necessarily come from wealthy backgrounds.[20] Potential students who took the exam, however, tended to have a general interest in the arts, and specifically a keen interest in cinema. Not a widely acceptable medium in the public's eye, cinema had, indeed, been rejected by the clergy. According to Mir-Hosseini, cinema was among those fields of art considered forbidden; some religious families deemed going to a movie to be a sin.[21]

Hosseinali Ghorbankarimi, one of the first graduates of this school, came from a traditionally religious family. He explains that his family not only forbade him to watch films, but also discouraged him from attending the College of Television and Cinema. Associating cinema with sin, Ghorbankarimi's brother offered him everything he had to persuade him not to pursue a career in cinema. As the Iranian patriarchal society has an even more biased outlook toward women taking part in unsanctioned activities, it is not difficult to imagine the public opinion regarding a woman attending this college. I argue, therefore, that although these students did not necessarily come from upper-middle class families, they

[19] Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 47.
[20] Mahvash Tehrani and Hosseinali Ghorbankarimi, Personal interviews. September 2009. Toronto, Canada.
[21] Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Iranian cinema: art, society and the state" *Middle East Report* 219 (2001), 2.

still had to come from open-minded and intellectually aware families, and thus could not represent society as a whole.[22]

My interviewees explained that cinema and television were considered to be detached from one another; they were not seen in the same light. Bani-Etemad agrees with this point and says that television was not tainted with the same corruption as cinema in the general public's opinion.[23] The corruption to which Bani-Etemad alludes can be compared to the classic Hollywood film industry concept of the "casting couch": the trading of sexual favors by actresses with producers in return for career advancement — an abuse of power and degrading to women in any culture — and especially dishonourable in a closed culture like Iran's.

The College of Television and Cinema started offering two programs: *Towlid-e Televiziyoni* (Television Production) and *Fanni-ye Televiziyoni* (Television Technique). This section will focus on the television production program that, based on the array of courses offered to the students, was an in-depth film studies/film production program even by today's standards. During the three-year degree program, students would study twelve to thirteen courses in their first year, work at NIRT to gain experience during their second year, and specialize in an area of their interest while taking twelve to thirteen advanced courses in film studies in their third year. The available specializations included cinematography, directing, and editing. The core courses offered were: Art History, Film Interpretation, Film Esthetics, Scenography, Photography, Cinematography (both theoretical and practical), Directing (both theoretical and practical), Technology (television), and Physics. Some of the specialized courses included Laboratory and Sensitometry, Decoupage, and Colour Television. Among their liberal courses were French and Music.[24]

What made this school unique was the collection of influential New Wave filmmakers and thinkers who were among its main lecturers. Some of the most famous names include Fereydoun Rahnema, Hajir Dariush, Hushang Kavusi, Dariush Mehrjui, Farokh Ghaffari, and Hushang Baharlu. By introducing some of these influential figures, this section will show how progressive this group of intellectual filmmakers was. For instance, Dariush Mehrjui, one of the main figures of the Iranian New

[22] Hosseinali Ghorbankarimi, Personal interview. September 2009. Toronto, Canada.
[23] Bani-Etemad, Personal interview. August 2008. Tehran, Iran.
[24] The College of Television and Cinema, Undergraduate Degree (Tehran, 1971).

Wave, explained why he had dropped out of the film program at UCLA and instead completed a philosophy degree:

> At UCLA they only look at the cinema from a Hollywood perspective and they were not interested in cinema as an art form. Our school was a workshop that had equipment, and the purpose was to learn the equipment so that we might get a job as a cleaner at one of the studios. We could hardly find among the lecturers one who truly believed in cinema as art. All discussions were about who was where and who made what and who knocked down who [*sic*], and how the big boss of that big company was all of a sudden kicked out, and who WB knocked down at MGM and so on. This was not tolerable for me, perhaps the choice of going towards philosophy was in a way a reaction to those Hollywood-infected lectures.[25]

The creator of one of the most celebrated films of the 1960s, *Gāv* (The Cow, 1969), Dariush Mehrjui taught a semester-long directing/scriptwriting course at the College of Television and Cinema. As Richard Tapper states, *The Cow* and also *Qeysar* (Gheisar, 1969) by Masud Kimiai are "generally agreed to mark the birth of the Iranian art cinema, called 'New Wave'."[26] It is also worth noting that Daryush Mehrjui made this film one year after the establishment of the College of Television and Cinema, and it was used as a great example for students the next year.[27] Because of *The Cow*[28] as well as Masud Kimiai's *Gheisar*, which were also both critically acclaimed and box-office successes, Mohammad Reza Sadr claims,

---

[25] Naser Zeraati, ed. *Dariush Mehrjui*, (Tehran: Negah Publishers, 1996), 84. (cited in Mirbakhtyar, 171).

[26] Tapper, "Introduction." In *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 4.

[27] Mahvash Tehrani, Personal interview. September 2009. Toronto, Canada.

[28] *The Cow*, the most significant turning point in the history of Iranian cinema, was based on a famous novel entitled *'Azādārān-e Bayal* (The Mourners of Bayal), by Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi — a well-known political writer — and published in 1964. It is the account of a peasant, Mash Hassan, and his obsession with his cow, the only source of wealth in his village. One day, while Mash Hassan has gone to the city, his cow dies a natural death. The people in the village bury the corpse but do not dare to tell him the truth, so they tell him that the cow has escaped. Mash Hassan has a nervous breakdown and, little by little, transforms into his cow. *The Cow* was also one of the first Iranian films that was well received internationally. In fact, its reception at the Venice Film Festival forced the state censor to release it in Iran. Jamsheed Akrami, "Sustaining a wave for thirty years: the cinema of Dariush Mehrjui." In *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: National Film Theatre, 1999), 129.

"Iranian film was taken seriously as a subject of intellectual debate for the first time."[29]

Hajir Dariush, who studied cinema in London and was one of the most prominent filmmakers and film critics of the time, also taught directing at the college. Hushang Kavusi, educated in France and one of the most prominent Iranian film critics (he also made films), taught the History of Cinema course. Hushang Bahralu, one of the best cinematographers of the time, taught Cinematography.

Farokh Ghaffari, a writer and director, taught film interpretation/reading. He was educated in Belgium and France, returned to Iran in 1941, and established the National Film Center of Iran (an Iranian version of the French Cinémathèque) in 1950. He also established the independent film studio *Irān Namā* in 1957, where his first film *Jonub-e Shahr* (South of the City, 1958) was produced. A critical look at the impoverished south side of Tehran, the film was banned at first, but released after a few years under the new title *Mosābeqeh dar Shahr* (Competition in the City). One of the most important films of the decade, and one of Ghaffari's best films, *Shab-e Quzi* (The Night of the Hunchback, 1964) is "an intellectual analysis of the social makeup of Iranian society."[30] A contemporary adaptation of one of the stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*, the film is about Hunchback, an actor in a popular theatre troupe, who dies accidentally, and the narrative continues with the desperate attempts of the other actors to find a way to dispose of his body. Ghaffari then gave up filmmaking and devoted all his time to researching and writing about Iranian cinema. He left Iran before the revolution and never returned.

Fereydoun Rahnema, a film scholar and filmmaker who studied cinema at the University of Paris, graduating in 1957, taught Film Esthetics at the College of Television and Cinema. As part of his degree, he completed a thesis entitled *Vāqe'garāyi-ye Film* (Realism and Film), which he published with some minor changes in Persian in 1972. Rahnema was one of the advocates of the Iranian New Wave and one of the founders of *Sinamā-ye Āzād* (Free Cinema) in 1969. One of his most celebrated films is *Siyāvash dar Takht-e Jamshid* (Siyavosh at Persepolis, 1967), which was produced by Telefilm through NIRT.[31] The story is

[29] Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*. (International Library of Iranian Studies. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 136.
[30] Ibid., 125.
[31] Mehrabi, *Tārikh-e sinamā-ye Irān*, 133.

taken from the poem Siyavosh, from the epic book *Shāhnāmeh* (Book of Kings) by Ferdowsi. The film is a highly symbolic and poetic representation of good and bad and light and dark through the telling of Siyavosh's story, using the ruins of Persepolis beautifully as its backdrop. In Mirbakhtyar's words, "In the film, the martyrdom of Siyavosh becomes the symbol of Iran herself, and can be considered to signify purity, justice, and light."[32] Rahnema's major influence was in the production of documentary films, and after he joined NIRT in 1966, he established the Center of Documentary Filmmaking with NIRT. One of the most important documentary series that he started was *Irānzamin* (Iran), about the different regions and peoples of Iran.[33] Pouran Derakhshandeh, the first Iranian female director and also a graduate of the College of Television and Cinema, started her career by making a few episodes for the *Irānzamin* series.[34]

Figure 2 shows a newspaper clipping from 1968 listing the names of the first group of students who had been accepted into the *Towlid* (production) program at the College of Radio and Cinema. Almost all the students cited on the list continued working in the Iranian Television and Film industry after the revolution. The hands-on training in the film program at the NIRT College developed some of the best directors, cinematographers, editors, and costume designers in Iranian cinema. Below are the names of some of the people on this list who are still working or have recently retired.

Some stayed in television: Shirin Jahed (TV director), Azim Javanruh (cinematographer). Some, like Hosseinali Ghorbankarimi and Mahvash Tehrani, moved to animation production, while others moved to the big screen, for example Hossein Jafarian (director of cinematography [DOP]), Farhad Saba (DOP), Farrokh Majidi (DOP), Gholamreza Razi (DOP), Hossein Zandbaf (Editor), and Zhila Mehrjui (costume designer/art director).

Hossein Jafarian, one of Iran's most celebrated cinematographers, simultaneously studied two major fine art programs in Tehran. A graduate of Tehran's University of Dramatic Arts as well as a graduate of NIRT College, he began his career working for NIRT, where he shot over 40 documentaries and TV shows before retiring early, not long after the 1979

[32] Mirbakhtyar, Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution, 45.
[33] Mehrabi, *Tārikh-e sinamā-ye Irān*, 361.
[34] Pouran Derakhshandeh, First personal interview. July 2004. Tehran, Iran.