Encyclopædia Iranica

Published: December 15, 1991
Last Updated: June 18, 2013

CINEMA II. FEATURE FILMS

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Feature-film production in Persia spans six decades and can be divided into four distinct periods, each reflecting contemporary social, cultural, and political realities.

The pioneering years (1308-15 Š./1930-36). The first Persian feature film, a silent comedy called *Ābī o Rābī* (1309 Š./1931), was an imitation of a series of Danish comedies entitled *Fyrtārnet og Bivognen* (The lighthouse and the trailer) that had fared well with Persian audiences (Akrami, 1987, p. 134; see i, above). The film depended for its comic effects largely on a battle of wits—and a play of visual contrasts—between a pair of protagonists, one tall and thin, the other short and squat. It is culturally significant that this first Persian feature was a remake of a foreign film, for it is clear that not only the technology of the new medium but also the related aesthetics and narrative structures were brought in from outside. The director of *Ābī o Rābī* was the Armenian Āvānes Ūhānīān (Ohanian, also called Oganiants), who thus established the precedent for producing Persian imitations of foreign films.

In his second film, *Ḥājī Āqā āktor-e sīnemā* (Ḥājī Āqā, movie actor, 1312 Š./1934), Ūhānīān cleverly confronted religious conservatives who maintained that Islam prohibits any form of pictorial representation. The central character is a *ḥājī*, a devout Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca; at

the beginning of the film he expresses his contempt for the cinema. His daughter and son-in-law, both students of acting, concoct a scheme to soften his hostile attitude. They follow him around the city and photograph him surreptitiously; then they lure him into a theater to show him the footage. Ḥājī Āqā, as expected, enjoys watching himself on the big screen and finally voices his approval (Omīd, 1363 Š./1984c, p. 58). In retrospect the film itself seems a cleverly devised promotional piece for the new medium.

Ḥājī Āqā āktor-e sīnemā opened in Tehran in 1312 Š./1933-34, a few months after the first sound film in Persian, *Doḵtar-e Lor* (Girl of the Lors; Meḥrābī, pp. 23-27). *Doḵtar-e Lor* was not a truly indigenous work. The film maker, ʿAbd-al-Ḥosayn Sepantā, a Bombay-based Persian writer and poet, shot it entirely in India (where feature films had been made since 1912) with an Indian crew headed by a Parsi director named Ardašīr Īrānī, which led the Persian sociologist ʿAlī Asadī to observe that Persian cinema was born of a Western father and an Indian mother (Graham, p. 6). Not surprisingly, *Doḵtar-e Lor*, like most Indian films, includes several musical numbers. The simple plot of the film, set amid the turmoil that followed the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1324/1906, involves Golnār, a beautiful Lor girl, who is enslaved by the local bandit chief, Qolī Khan, but falls in love with Jaʿfar, a government inspector (played by Sepantā himself). Their love affair angers the chief, who is killed by the inspector in a showdown. The lovers, fearing retaliation by the bandits, flee to Bombay in search of peace and security. They marry and live there for many years until, learning that the rule of law and order has been restored in Persia by Reżā Shah Pahlavī, they return home. The film, partly because of its novelty and partly because of the favorable light in which it shows Reżā Shah's regime, had a very successful run in Persia; unfortunately, only an incomplete copy has been preserved (Omīd, 1353 Š./1984a, pp. 49-78). The importance of *Doḵtar-e Lor* is twofold; on one hand it represents a major technological breakthrough in Persian cinema, and on the other it had great sociological importance, for in it a woman's face was shown unveiled for the first time in a Persian film. In fact, it has been suggested that Sepantā may have chosen his Indian base in order to circumvent the expected protests of the clergy, who considered pictorial representation of women against the precepts of Islam (Graham, p. 6).

Encouraged by the success of *Doḵtar-e Lor*, Sepantā remained in India and made four more films for the Persian market, mostly on historical subjects or period pieces focusing on melodramatic love stories: *Ferdowsī*, *Šīrīn o Farhād*

(both 1313 Š./1934), *Čašmhā-ye sīāh* (Black eyes, 1314 Š./1935) and *Leylī o Majnūn* (1315 Š./1936). His return to Persia in 1316 Š./1937, unlike that of his characters in *Doḵtar-e Lor*, was disillusioning. On one hand, he faced hostility from the representatives of foreign film distributors, who perceived his work as a threat to their business interests (see iv, below), and, on the other, Reżā Shah's government failed to support his film projects (Graham, p. 6). Until his death in 1348 Š./1969, Sepantā never managed to make a professional feature film in Persia (see i, above).

Another Persian pioneer was Ebrāhīm Morādī, whose film *Bu'l-hawas* (Capricious, 1313 Š./1934) is the story of a man who abandons his peasant wife for a city woman. The wife attempts suicide but is saved by a peasant man. The husband, not finding happiness in the city, returns to the village, but the wife no longer wants him. The contrast at the center of the film—the purity of village life versus the corruption of life in the city—became one of the major themes of Persian cinema during the subsequent period. In spite of its merits, *Bu'l-hawas* was a box-office failure. It had the disadvantage of being a silent film at a time when sound films had been introduced. In fact, with the exception of *Doḵtar-e Lor*, none of the early Persian films generated much public enthusiasm. The resulting professional disenchantment, coupled with the turbulent political climate preceding Reżā Shah's abdication in 1320 Š./1941 and the outbreak of World War II, brought Persian film production to a virtual standstill.

Commercial cinema (1326-47 Š./1947-68). After experiencing a dormant phase that lasted more than a decade, Persian film makers had to start afresh in 1326 Š./1947. Esmāʿīl Kūšān, an entrepreneur with a degree in economics and some dubbing experience in Europe, dubbed a few European films in Persian and brought them home (see i, above). They received an impressive public reception, and from that time on dubbing foreign films in Persia became quite popular. The handsome profit garnered by these films enabled Kūšān to set up his first company, Mītrā Fīlm, and to produce *Ṭūfān-e zendagī* (Storm of life, 1326 Š./1949), the first Persian sound film actually made in Persia; it was directed by a respected theater director, Moḥammad-ʿAlī Daryābīgī. The plot is a melodramatic variation on the boy-meets-girl theme, in which the girl is forced to forgo her true love and marry a rich older man. The marriage does not work out, and at the end the boy, who has made something of himself, returns to win the girl. Against all expectations, *Ṭūfān-e zendagī* failed to win an audience; its failure was blamed primarily on the technical inadequacies

from which Persian films still suffered and which were severe in comparison to the sophistication of foreign films.

Despite the disappointing reception of his first feature film, Kūšān remained optimistic about the prospects of commercial cinema in Persia. In 1327 Š./1948 he set up a new company, Pārs Fīlm, and continued to produce pictures—and to lose money. His string of box-office disasters was finally snapped by *Šarmsār* (Disgraced, 1329 Š./1950), which, in addition to its higher level of technical production, initiated the vogue of casting popular singers (in this instance, Delkaš) in leading roles, which gave producers an excuse to insert musical numbers at intervals throughout the film. This practice became a hallmark of commercial cinema in Persia. The melodramatic plot of *Šarmsār* involves the same type of stock characters and situations that had been introduced in *Bu'l-hawas* sixteen years earlier: An innocent village girl is seduced and abandoned by a city slicker. She is later discovered to have a good singing voice and subsequently finds fame and fortune as a popular singer. By the end of the film the villain has been eliminated, the singing star and her peasant fiancé are reunited in their village, and the sun shines brightly on their happiness. Although the commercial success of *Šarmsār*—it ran for 192 days at the Rex cinema in Tehran (Graham, p. 7)—helped the struggling Persian film industry through a difficult period, it also had the unfortunate effect of establishing a formula, which came to be known contemptuously as *fīlm-fārsī* (a term originally used to distinguish Persian films from foreign films dubbed into Persian [*dūble be fārsī*]) and can be characterized as aesthetically vulgar and socially uninformed. The basic elements were a handful of scenes of singing, dancing, and brawling inserted into a familiar moralistic plot with a saccharine ending. Aside from a few attempts at making films of higher artistic caliber in the 1330s Š./1950s and 1340s Š./1960s and a movement toward quality films in the early 1350s Š./1970s, this formula remained dominant until the Islamic Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79, when it was supplanted by a new, ideological formula prescribed by the government as part of its cultural agenda (see i, above).

Owing to an absence of intrinsic cohesiveness, *fīlm-fārsī* can hardly be characterized as a genre. Rather, it is a term for the combination of common elements in established patterns to produce familiar products. Within this framework, however, several identifiable themes and plot structures emerged over the years. Foremost were "village films," which celebrated the purity and innocence of village life, in contrast to the complexity and corruption of urban

life. Majīd Moḥsenī, an actor-director who later became a member of parliament, proved himself a master of this formula, with movies like *Bolbol-e mazraʿa* (The nightingale of the farm, 1336 Š./1957), *Āhang-e dehkada* (The village song, 1340 Š./1961), and *Parastūhā be lāna bar mīgardand* (The swallows return to their nests, 1342 Š./1963). A second group consisted of family melodramas, in which the standard story line involves a family member who must leave home because of unfortunate circumstances; at the end, however, there is a happy reunion. *Velgard* (Vagabond), *Mādar* (The mother, both 1331 Š./1952), and *Ḡeflat* (Neglect, 1332 Š./1953) were early examples of this group. In still another group farcical fantasies are centered around characters caught in an imaginary situation or as victims of mistaken identity. Prime examples are *Šab-nešīnī dar jahannam* (Soirée in hell, 1338 Š./1959), *ʿArūs-e ferārī* (Bride on the run, 1337 Š./1958), *Doqolūhā* (The twins, 1342 Š./1963), *Mīmīram barā-ye pūl* (I'd die for money, 1338 Š./1959), *Kolāh-maḵmalī* (The man with the felt hat, 1341 Š./1962), and *Setāra-ī čašmak zad* (A star twinkled, 1342 Š./1963). Finally, there were period films, though they were somewhat less popular because resources were inadequate to produce spectacles to match those in foreign imports of this type.

Throughout this period new variations on plot and theme were developed within the context of *fīlm-fārsī*. One particular plot formula developed in the 1340s Š./1960s was focused on a somewhat idealized character type known as *jāhel-e kolāh-maḵmalī* (lit. "illiterate in a felt hat"), a tough but principled man with a heart of gold who is a kind of boss in his neighborhood. He normally wears a felt hat and an extra-large Western-style suit. In addition to beating up villains, he usually becomes romantically involved with a woman of questionable virtue, who turns out to be a victim of circumstances. The *jāhel* eventually saves and purifies the girl by putting her through an act of *tawba* (repentance). The *jāhel* was, in fact, developed from a less flamboyant character introduced by Moḥsenī in *Lāt-e javānmard* (A chivalrous rogue) in 1337 Š./1958. In a popular variation on the boy-meets-girl theme a working-class man falls in love with an upper-class girl but refuses to compromise his ideals. At the end, of course, the power of love easily resolves all the differences in values. This variation was fully exploited by Sīāmak Yāsamī in his box-office hit *Ganj-e Qārūn* (Qārūn's treasure, 1344 Š./1965).

Yāsamī and an Armenian director, Sāmūel Ḵāčīkīān, were probably the most influential forces in commercial cinema during this period. It is curious that they made their better films at the beginning of their careers and that, as they

became more "bankable," the quality of their work steadily declined. Yāsamī's less objectionable films were straightforward melodramas set in villages and small communities: *Ṭelesm-e šekasta* (The broken spell, 1337 Š./1958), *Sāḥel-e enteẓār* (Beach of waiting, 1343 Š./1963), and *Laḏḏat-e gonāh* (1343 Š./1964). Ḵāčīkīān's mastery of the medium and his flair for suspense distinguished him from other film makers. In contrast to the earthy backgrounds of Yāsamī's films, Ḵāčīkīān's thrillers were set in urban milieus and heavily influenced by the style and formal structures of commercial American and European movies: *Čahār-rāh-e ḥawādeṯ* (Crossroads of incidents, 1333 Š./1954), *Ṭūfān dar šahr-e mā* (Storm in our town, 1337 Š./1958), and *Faryād-e nīma-šab* (A cry at midnight, 1343 Š./1964) are among his best work.

Annual production of feature films rose steadily throughout the period, from about fifteen a year in the mid-1330s Š./1950s to thirty in the early 1340s Š./1960s and ninety in 1351 Š./1972 (Arms, p. 191; see Table 43). Although the Persian film industry was growing, the films themselves left much to be desired in artistic terms. Escapist melodramas completely detached from the social environment in which they were set continued to predominate.

There were, however, also a few educated and independent filmmakers who tried to depict at least the surface realities of Persian life in the face of censorship and lack of public enthusiasm. Farroḵ Ḡaffārī's *Janūb-e šahr* (The southern part of the city, 1337 Š./1958) deals with the difficulties of life in a poor area of Tehran, but its realistic treatment of its characters was too strong for the government censors, and it was banned after a brief screening. Five years later, in 1342 Š./1963, a toned-down version of the film was permitted to open under a new title, *Raqābat dar šahr* (Rivalry in the city; Meḥrābī, p. 86). Ḡaffārī is better known for *Šab-e qūzī* (Night of the hunchback, 1342 Š./1963), a modern adaptation of a tale from *A Thousand and One Nights* in which several people try to dispose of a dead body. Although the film lacks the gritty realism of *Janūb-e šahr*, its biting social satire was unprecedented in Persian films.

Ebrāhīm Golestān's *Ḵešt o āyīna* (The mud brick and the mirror, 1334 Š./19655), an austere account of social pressures and interpersonal discord, and Fereydūn Rahnemā's *Sīāvoš dar Taḵt-e Jamšīd* (Sīāvoš at Persepolis, 1346 Š./1967), a stylized rendition of the clash between myth and reality, were two highly personal independent films that made no concessions to mainstream commercial tastes. Despite their cinematic merits and innovative approaches, however, they were not popular.

The progressive cinema (1348-58 Š./1969-79). The most significant turning point in the history of Persian cinema came in 1348 Š./1969, when two directors whose first efforts had been disappointing released their second films almost at the same time. Masʿūd Kīmīāʾī's *Qeyṣar* was a phenomenal box-office hit and broke the commercial monopoly of cheap *fīlm-fārsī* products. Although it received considerable favorable critical attention at the time, in retrospect it seems a self-conscious realization of a poorly scripted revenge plot marked by unrelenting emotional intensity. Kīmīāʾī's directorial skills are apparent only in two murder scenes, at the public bath and the slaughterhouse, and in the final chase scene at an abandoned railway station.

Whereas *Qeyṣar* was influenced by Hollywood modes of storytelling, Dārīūš Mehrjūʾī's *Gāv* (The cow), which Persian film critics in two polls of 1351 Š./1972 and 1367 Š./1988 chose as the best film ever made in Persia, demonstrates an original approach to film making that can be identified as Persian in both theme and style. Based on a play by the renowned playwright Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Sāʿedī, *Gāv* is the story of the disturbing impact on the life of a village when one of the villagers loses his only cow, his sole source of support. The film's subtexts endow it with depths of meaning that can otherwise be found only in the rich textures of great Persian poetry. *Gāv* seemed shockingly different from other Persian "village films." The characters are not idealized but presented simply as economically deprived peasants besieged by an ever-present threat from outside, watching helplessly as the destitute owner gradually assumes the identity of his lost cow. Mehrjūʾī's re-creation of the grim village ambiance is both realistic and evocative, and his weaving of several village rituals into the context of the film adds an aura of authenticity. The slow pace, reflecting the relaxed Persian sense of time, is perfectly suited to an emotionally draining viewing experience.

Gāv was made just as Moḥammad Reżā Shah was launching his modernization campaign, the White Revolution (*enqelāb-e safīd*), promising to lead his nation to a "great civilization." The brutal honesty with which it portrays the miseries of life in a desolate village in an oil-rich country could not have been more distressing to the regime. Government censors allowed the film to be shown only with a disclaimer at the beginning, in which it was stated that the story was set in a period prior to the White Revolution. Its strong showing at foreign film festivals, particularly in Venice and Chicago in 1971, at both of which it received awards, not only protected it from further attack by the government but also introduced the newborn artistic Persian cinema to an international

audience.

The simultaneous presentation of these two landmark films represented a break from the dominant commercial cinema and provided the kind of impetus necessary for a host of young and promising directors, as well as established artists and literary figures, to join forces and contribute to the flowering of a new Persian cinema. Four years later, in 1352 Š./1973, some of them left the official filmmakers' union, charging that it represented only the interests of the commercial film makers, and formed the Progressive filmmakers' group (Gorūh-e sīnemāgarān-e pīšrow). But the trend toward quality films did not affect the increasing flow of commercial productions. Furthermore, the poor box-office performance of *Gāv* signaled that quality films without crowd-pleasing elements could not succeed commercially. In the ten years preceding the Islamic Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79 the Persian cinema thus encompassed three distinct production categories.

Mainstream commercial films were still the most viable, but they began to be more polished. Occasionally directors even experimented with new plot variations within the framework of *fīlm-fārsī*. The main components of these films remained the same, though an increase in sex and violence was notable. Ironically, the blockbuster movie in this category, a youth-oriented romantic melodrama called *Dar emtedād-e šab* (In the course of the night, 1356 Š./1967), was produced by Bahman Farmānārā and directed by Parvīz Ṣayyād, two leading figures in the Progressive filmmakers' group. As with the first commercially successful Persian sound film, *Šarmsār*, success was ensured by the casting of an enormously popular entertainer and singer, Gūgūš, in the lead.

Combination formula films constituted a category of features representing attempts to combine the originality typical of the more daring progressive films with the tried-and-true packaging of commercial films. The extraordinary success of *Qeyṣar* proved that it was possible to make serious films within the predefined limits of public taste. The major practitioners in this category were Kīmīāʾī, Noṣrat-Allāh Karīmī, Ṣayyād, ʿAlī Ḥātamī, Nāṣer Taqwāʾī, Amīr Nāderī, Jalāl Moqaddam, Ḵosrow Harītaš, Kāmrān Šīrdel, Moḥammad Motawasselānī, Šāpūr Ḡarīb, Fereydūn Gola, and Esmāʿīl Nūrī ʿAlāʾ.

Finally, makers of visionary films were strongly committed to their ideals and refused to choose themes because they were popular or to work within conventional frameworks. They charted new territory and probed Persian life from new points of view. The leaders were Mehrjūʾī, Sohrāb Šahīd(-e) Ṯāleṯ,

Bahrām Bayżāʾī, Parvīz Kīmīāwī, Farmānārā, ʿAbbās Kīārostamī, Golestān, Ḡaffārī, Hažīr Dārīūš, Rahnemā, and Ovānesīān. It was primarily through their efforts that Persian film blossomed into one of the more promising cinematic movements of the 1350s Š./1970s, though such combination formula works as Karīmī's *Doroškačī* (The cab driver, 1350 Š./1971), Taqwāʾī's *Ārāmeš dar ḥożūr-e dīgarān* (Tranquility in the presence of others, 1348 Š./1969, first released five years later), Kīmīāʾī's *Dāš Ākol* (after a story by Ṣādeq Hedāyat, 1350 Š./1971), Ḥātamī's *Ḵᵛāstgār* (The suitor, 1351 Š./1972), Nāderī's *Marṯīa* (Requiem, 1348 Š./1969), and Ṣayyād's *Bonbast* (Dead end, loosely based on a story by Anton Chekhov, 1358 Š./1979) contributed as well. Despite respectable showings at international festivals, however, visionary films failed to attract large audiences at home. The average Persian filmgoer, after years of exposure to commercial American and European products, had developed a taste for them and resisted any different film experience. Without popular support and concomitant private investment, filmmakers had to turn to the government for financing. The government did help, and it is difficult to imagine how some of the more uncompromising films (for example, the works of Šahīd(-e) Ṯāleṯ and Kīmīāwī) could have been produced without such assistance.

But the government was also very sensitive to content that seemed in any way subversive or unpalatable. Strict censorship codes were in effect (see iv, below), which partially accounts for the heavy reliance on symbolism and metaphor in serious Persian films, a reliance probably reinforced by a traditional tendency toward indirect communication in Persian art and literature. The use of symbolic devices and multiple levels of meaning is perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of quality films produced in this period. For example, in *Sāyahā-ye boland-e bād* (Tall shadows of the wind, 1358 Š./1979) Farmānārā used scarecrows as metaphors for the destructive dictatorial forces that people unleash upon themselves in their search for liberation and justice. (His earlier work *Šāzda Eḥtejāb* "Prince Ehtejab," 1353 Š./1974, is the only Persian film ever to have been included in the annual list of the top ten films published by *International Film Guide*.) Bayżāʾī's *Ḡarība wa meh* (The stranger and the fog, 1354 Š./1975), about a mysterious stranger who emerges from the sea to disrupt the quiet life of a seaside community, evokes mythical interpretations of life and death in a cinematic style worthy of the Japanese Akira Kurosawa and the Hungarian Miklos Jancso. *Asrār-e ganj-e darra-ye jennī* (The mystery of the treasure of the valley of the genies, 1353 Š./1974), directed by Golestān, is an elaborately composed allegory about a naive villager who discovers an underground treasure and decides to start a new life

by making cosmetic changes in his environment—including bringing electrical appliances to a village without electricity. The film is widely considered an indictment of the shah and his attempts at modernization. In retrospect it also appears amazingly accurate in its anticipation of the revolution that was in the making.

Kīmīāwī's *O.K. Mister* (1356 Š./1977) is another lampoon of the shah's modernization campaign, which is represented in the film as an unscrupulous rush toward westernization. The allegory at the center of this film, which was shot mostly in English, involves a balloon full of fictional and historic characters (including Cinderella and William Knox D'Arcy, the first foreigner to have been awarded oil-drilling rights in Persia) who land in a Persian village and begin to teach the villagers Western ways. In Kīmīāwī's first feature, *Moḡolhā* (The Mongols, 1351 Š./1972), the coming of television to Persia was compared with the 7th/13th-century invasion by the Mongols, especially in the way that it wiped out oral traditions.

Šahīd(-e) Ṯāleṯ's films were probably the least compromising of all the progressive filmmakers' works. His brilliant early releases, before his emigration to Germany in 1354 Š./1975, were focused on themes of isolation and social deprivation, expressed in a cinematic language that was totally original in Persian cinema. The films *Yak ettefāq-e sāda* (A simple incident, 1352 Š./1973), about a lonely child who loses his mother; *Ṭabīʿat-e bījān* (Still life), about the hopeless lives of an elderly couple; and *Dar ḡorbat* (Far from home, both 1354 Š./1975), about the loneliness of an immigrant worker in Germany, beautifully exemplify Šahīd(-e) Ṯāleṯ's style, which is marked by a slow and natural pace, lengthy shots, and little camera movement. They earned him respect and recognition from film critics at home and abroad.

Kīārostamī, arguably the best director of children's films in Persia, did not receive just recognition in this period. His most memorable work, *Mosāfer* (The traveler, 1953 Š./1974), is about a small-town boy who dreams of watching a big-time soccer match. He finally beats the odds and makes it to the capital city on the day of the big game, but he is so exhausted that he falls asleep before the game and misses "the dream." Kīārostamī's first feature film was *Gozāreš* (The report, 1356 Š./1977), a shockingly frank study of a young government employee on the verge of a breakdown under familial and professional pressures. *Gozāreš* was the first Persian film to deal with the real problems of contemporary urban life in a forthright manner. This theme was difficult to explore in a politically repressed society and in the context of both

censorship and a tradition of oblique expression.

In 1357 Š./1978, though the progressive filmmakers had yet to capture the essence of Persian culture fully in their films, the prospects for further artistic, if not economic, growth seemed quite bright. Then, in less than a year, the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution threatened to put an end to those prospects.

The post-revolutionary period (1358 Š./1979-present). With the memorable exception of the few months immediately following the Revolution, the political climate in the Islamic Republic grew increasingly repressive. Censorship, already extensive under the shah, became even more restrictive. The government insisted that a revolutionary cinema must reflect Islamic and anti-imperialist values. After much confusion about the exact nature of those values and how they are to be realized in visual terms, Mahdī Kalhor, deputy for cinematographic affairs at the Ministry for Islamic guidance (Wezārat-e eršād-e eslāmī), proposed a blueprint for a "new Islamic cinema," citing two films as "admirable examples" (Kalhor, p. 10). A look at the plot summary of the first of these films, *Berenj-e ḵūnīn* (Bloody rice, 1360 Š./1981), may provide some hints of the direction in which the government has sought to steer Persian cinema: "The story centers around a plot by U.S. agents to paralyze rice cultivation in Iran. They introduce a stalk-eating worm in the rice fields of northern Iran, but the farmers, guided by a sympathetic engineer, manage to destroy the pest. The shah, his ministers, and the dreaded SAVAK [Sāzmān-e eṭṭelāʿāt wa amnīyat-e kešvar, the security police] do not want any living witnesses, and as soon as they find out that the engineer, Ḥamīd, has discovered the truth about the plot they eliminate him. But the engineer Ḥamīd had already told his friend Nāderī about his discovery and now it is Nāderī's duty to disseminate the knowledge among the farmers and prepare them for the revolution" (Kalhor, p. 20). The second example is a feature entitled *Farmān* (The command, 1361 Š./1982), in which the main character, Sayyed, a farmer, leads a revolt against the "tyranny of the khans [big landowners] and their corrupt bailiffs." He is later joined by "a young man with an aristocratic background" who is "awakened to the social values of equality and love under the guidance of a clergymaṇ . . . ." During the course of their struggle they kill the British consul, who is on a hunting trip with the khans. "The incident provides the British with the necessary pretext to prepare for a large-scale attack on the guerrilla group." At the end, after a series of battles, as the British troops open fire, Sayyed "falls and his blood

splashes menacingly across the British flag" (Kalhor, p. 26).

The government's endorsement of these plots as exemplary was a clear indication of its view of the role of the mass media, particularly film, in disseminating the ideology of the regime. The government also instituted a four-step monitoring procedure to ensure full control over the content of each film, as well as final determination of who is "fit" to work on it. The script must first be approved. Then the producers must submit the names of the proposed cast and crew in order to receive a production permit. When the film is finished, it is reviewed by a board, and, if it is approved, the producers may apply for a screening permit (Akrami, 1987, p. 139).

These restrictions have resulted in a sharp decline in both the quality and the quantity of Persian films. Annual production, which had reached ninety in the early 1350s Š./1970s, dropped to fifteen during the first five years after the Revolution (Cowie, p. 189); on the average fewer than ten films a year received screening permits (Zamanī-Nīā, pp. 339-55). Several talented filmmakers had no choice but to leave the country. Those who remained and tried to resume their activities were forced to make serious artistic compromises and creative concessions. Even after conforming to the rules, however, they still had difficulty obtaining permits for their films. New films by such notable directors as Bayżāʾī, Kīmīāʾī, Ḥātamī, Nāderī, and Moqaddam were denied distribution (*The Film Monthly* 6/66, August 1988, p. 20, and other issues); some of their films, made up to ten years ago, have yet to be released.

As the government used films to propagate its political and religious ideology, heavy-handed message films came to dominate the market. The corruption of the former regime is the primary theme of these films. The Persian-Iraqi war, which broke out in 1359 Š./1980, is another subject given top priority. But the architects of the Islamic cultural campaign do not stop at dictating a film's content. Equally important to them is whether or not the style of presentation is suitably reflective of Islamic culture. They have insisted, for example, that filmmakers must avoid exposing a woman's hair or accentuating the curves of her clothed body on the screen. To depict a woman dressed other than in prescribed Islamic fashion, they believe, would affront the social and moral standards of the Islamic community. Even films about the atrocities of the former regime must abide by the new censorship code, which explains many anachronisms in post-revolutionary films dealing with pre-revolutionary situations. In *Taṣwīr-e āḵer* (The last image, by Mahdī Ṣabbāḡzāda, 1365 Š./1986), for example, the wife of a physician (as well as the entire female cast)

is shown fully covered according to the Islamic dress code, even in the privacy of her living room. In films like *Šāyad waqt-e dīgar* (Maybe some other time) by Bayżāʾī and *Ḵārej az maḥdūda* (Eng. title: *Off the Limit*) by Raḵšān Banī Eʿtemād, both released in 1367 Š./1988, the leading female protagonists are shown wearing their head scarves even in bed. And, although married, they are shown sleeping alone. Another film, *Otobūs* (The bus, 1365 Š./1986) by Yad-Allāh Ṣamadī, features a bride covered from head to toe in a *čādor*, rather than in the traditional wedding gown that she would actually have worn.

Compliance with the new regulations has proved so burdensome to film makers that they have gradually turned away from pre-revolutionary subjects and sought refuge in the harmless old "village films." They can avoid the problem of dressing female characters, as rural Persian women traditionally wear head scarves and large outer garments congruent with the Islamic dress code. They can also avoid more complex urban issues, which are subject to harsher scrutiny by the censors. Some of the better films made after the revolution have thus been village films: *Mādīān* (The mare, 1364 Š./1985), directed by ʿAlī Žakān, a story of survival in the face of hostility; *Tanūra-ye dīv* (The demon's flight, 1365 Š./1986), directed by Kīānūš ʿAyyārī, an allegorical celebration of the human will; *Jāddahā-ye sard* (Frosty roads, 1365 Š./1986), directed by Masʿūd Jaʿfarī Jowzānī, a story of compassion set against a background of treacherous nature; *Šīrak* (The little lion, 1368 Š./1989), about the heroics of a teenage boy in a village, made by the veteran Mehrjūʾī; and the highly praised Bašū, *ḡarība-ye kūček* (Bašū, the little stranger, 1365 Š./1986), a strong antiwar film directed by Bayżāʾī, about the cultural and emotional communication barriers encountered by a teenaged boy from the south, orphaned by war, as he tries to resettle with a struggling housewife in the north. In a poll of Persian film critics, conducted by *Māh-nāma-ye sīnemāʾī-e fīlm* in its Āḏar 1369 Š./December 1990 issue, *Bašū* was selected as the best post-revolutionary Persian film.

One positive result of the government's film policies has been to put an end to the production and screening of *fīlm-fārsī*, which had dominated the Persian film industry for fifty years. Films no longer contain elements of gratuitous sex and violence or mandatory musical numbers. Instead, they are oriented to issues and to attracting audiences through the appeal of the story and production values.

Another positive development has been the decentralization of filmmaking. Before the revolution Tehran was the sole production center in Persia. Now

films are made in major cities in several provinces, with local talent and local facilities, which has made the medium more accessible to a greater range of potential talent and opened the way to a new generation of filmmakers.

Despite regulations and restrictions, the signs of an artistic recovery began to appear in 1365 Š./1986 (Elley, p. 29). In addition to the promising emergence of new filmmakers, the veterans of years past also began to find opportunities to show their cautiously constructed films. Mehrjūʾī and Kimīāʾī, whose films in the early 1350s Š./1970s heralded a new era in Persian cinema, are still very much on the scene and have made strong contributions to the recent resurgence. Mehrjūʾī's *Ejāra-nešīnhā* (The tenants, 1365 Š./1986), an intelligent comedy with hidden meanings, topped the list of all-time box-office hits in Persia, while his *Hāmūn* (The prairie, 1369 Š./1990), a probing examination of the plight of an intellectual trying to cope with alienating social change, received tremendous critical attention. Kīmīāʾī's *Ḵatt-e qermez* (The red line, 1361 Š./1982), his first film after the Revolution, has been kept from distribution for the past ten years. Set against a backdrop of political intrigue during the Revolution, the film follows the harrowing events of a SAVAK agent's wedding night. Kīmīāʾī suffered a critical and commercial setback with his next film, *Tīḡ o abrīšam* (The blade and the silk, 1367 Š./1988), but seems to have made an impressive comeback with his recent work *Dandān-e mār* (The serpent's tooth, 1369 Š./1990). Similarly, Ḥātamī's first post-revolutionary film, *Ḥājī Vāšangton*, made in 1361 Š./1982, has yet to be released. It chronicles the travails of the first Persian ambassador to the United States, Ḥājī Ḥosaynqolī Khan Moʿtamed-al-Wezarā. Ḥātamī's subsequent films, *Kamāl-al-Molk* (1363 Š./1984) and *Mādar* (The mother, 1364 Š./1985), are further journeys within the same familiar, nostalgic realms, with which Ḥātamī seems to be genuinely obsessed. Bayżāʾī's three consecutive films after the Revolution fell victim to the changing norms of government censorship. His fourth, *Šāyad waqt-e dīgar* (Maybe some other time, 1367 Š./1988), a philosophical tale of search for true identity, sparked great enthusiasm. In an interesting reversal of fortunes, Kīārostamī seems to have become the most honored post-revolutionary Persian film maker, both inside and outside the country. His two most recent films *Ḵāna-ye dūst kojāʾst?* (Where is my friend's house? 1365 Š./1986), a touching story about a schoolboy looking for a classmate's home in order to return his notebook, and *Closeup* (1369 Š./1990), a poignant account of the actual trial of an impostor posing as the film maker Moḥsen Maḵmalbāf, have finally brought Kīārostamī the recognition he deserves. Nāderī also enjoyed tremendous success at international film festivals with the last two films he

made in Persia before leaving the country and settling in New York in 1986. *Davanda* (The runner) is about the political awakening of a deprived teenaged boy, whereas *Āb, bād, ḵāk* (Water, wind, dust) tells the story of a deprived teenaged boy searching for his parents against the backdrop of the arid Persian desert; both were released in 1364 Š./1985. Since joining the ranks of exiled filmmakers Nāderī has yet to make a film. Taqwāʾī's critically acclaimed *Nāḵodā Ḵᵛoršīd* (Captain Ḵᵛoršīd, 1365 Š./1986) is a Persian adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*. Taqwāʾī who is not a very prolific filmmaker (having made only five films in a twenty-year career as a writer/director), had less success with his second post-revolutionary film, *Ey Īrān* (Oh, Iran, 1369 Š./1990), a comedy with subtle political overtones.

Among the numerous filmmakers of the new generation Maḵmalbāf stands out. After a period during which he seemed to sacrifice the formal qualities of his films to their highly didactic Islamic messages he wrote and directed three exceptional films: *Dastforūš* (The peddler, 1366 Š./1987), *Bāysīkel rān* (The cyclist, 1368 Š./1989), and *ʿArūsī-e ḵūbān* (Marriage of the blessed, 1368 Š./1989), in which he portrayed life in post-revolutionary Persia in disturbing images. Other promising young directors are ʿAlī Žakān (*Mādīān*, 1364 Š./1985), Kīānūš ʿAyyārī (*Ān sū-ye ātaš* "Beyond the fire," 1368 Š./1989), Saʿīd Ebrāhīmfar (*Nār o ney*, 1369 Š./1990), Abu'l-Fażl Jalīlī (*Gāl* "Scabies," 1368 Š./1989), Moḥammad Bozorgnīā (*Kaštī Anjelīkā* "The ship Angelica," 1368 Š./1989), Ebrāhīm Hātamīkīā (*Mohājer* "The immigrant," 1368 Š./1989), Moḥammad-ʿAlī Sajjādī (*Bāzjūʾī-e yak jenāyat* "The investigation of a crime," 1363 Š./1984), Moḥammad-Reżā Aʿlāmī (*Noqṭa-ye żaʿf* "The weak point," 1363 Š./1984), Ebrāhīm Forūzeš (*Kelīd* "The key," 1369 Š./1990), Dāryūš Farhang (*Ṭelesm* "The talisman," 1368 Š./1989), Yad-Allāh Ṣamadī (*Istgāh* "The station," 1367 Š./1988), Kāmbūzīā Partovī (*Māhī* "The fish," 1368 Š./1989), Raḵšān Banī Eʿtemād (*Ḵārej az maḥdūda* "Beyond the [city] limits," 1367 Š./1988), and Pūrān Deraḵšanda (*ʿObūr az ḡobār* "Passing through the dust," 1369 Š./1990).

The last two mentioned filmmakers lead an increasingly active group of women directors, representing another significant trend in the post-revolutionary cinema. Considering the extraordinary restrictions imposed on the depiction of women on the screen, the emergence of a notable group of women filmmakers is ironic. Although, compared to their male counterparts, these women do project distinct feminine sensibilities in their films, they seem still to be struggling to master a medium that has not long been accessible to them.

Owing mainly to a policy that does not allow imports from the major film-producing countries in the West, the annual production of films in Persia is again on the rise. In 1367 Š./1988 forty first-run Persian films appeared on Persian screens (Ṭālebī-nežād, p. 6). The same number of films was released a year later (Zīārī, p. 44).

Persian filmmakers in exile. Perhaps the single most important achievement of the Progressive filmmakers' group was the emergence of a number of outstanding individual directors. More than a decade after the demise of the group most of them are still alive and active in Persia and abroad.

Of more than a dozen expatriate filmmakers—including Kīmīāwī, Šahīd(-e) Ṯāleṯ, Ṣayyād, Ovānesīān, Marvā Nabīlī, Reżā ʿAllāmazāda, Qāsem Ebrāhīmīān, Farmānārā, Golestān, Nāderī, Manūčher Ṭayyāb, Arsalān Sāsānī, and Nūrī ʿAlā'—the first seven managed to make films during the first decade after the Revolution. Ṣayyād has been the most visible of this group, with two feature films that have enjoyed both public distribution and festival exposure. *Ferestāda* (The mission, 1984), a strong indictment of ideological tyranny, is the story of a young revolutionary sent by the Islamic government to New York to assassinate a former colonel in SAVAK. Although the film won praise from critics and was awarded the Golden Leopard at the annual international film festival at Locarno in 1983, it took Ṣayyād five years to make another film in the United States. His second film, *Sarḥadd* (Checkpoint, 1987) is partly based on the true story of a group of Persian students from different backgrounds on a weekend tour from Detroit to Windsor, Canada, during the American-hostage crisis. When their visas are suddenly nullified by presidential order, they are stranded at the border and start to take out their anger on one another. Although its point of view is understandable, *Sarḥadd* is at times overwhelmed by political polemics and fails to capture the universal perspective necessary to succeed with non-Persian audiences. That may be why it has not been as well received as *Ferestāda*. Nevertheless, it does convey the sense of displacement and discontent of those who are helplessly uprooted from their native land and hopelessly unsettled in their adopted one.

Šahīd(-e) Ṯāleṯ, who left Persia a few years before the Revolution, has chosen to remain in Germany and to make German films. Kīmīāwī has made a number of documentaries and short films for French television. Ovānesīān, also in Paris, has made an intellectually challenging film entitled *Le tablier de ma mère* (1986). This work and Nabīlī's *Nightsongs* (1984) do not deal with specifically Persian issues. The latter film, shot in New York, is a brilliantly

controlled meditation on a Vietnamese woman's identity crisis in Chinatown.

Both ʿAllāmazāda, who spent several years in jail on political charges under the shah, and Ebrāhīmīān, a New York University graduate, have made films about the plight of Persian émigrés. ʿAllāmazāda's short *A Few Simple Sentences* (Dutch title: *Die paar zinnetjes*, 1987) received the highest award at the third international festival of immigrant film makers in Stockholm (1986); the story is centered around a displaced Persian adolescent boy in the Netherlands who, because of language barriers, finds it difficult to communicate with other people. ʿAllāmazāda's first feature in exile, *Guests of Hotel Astoria* (1989), is about the problems of several Persian characters in Turkey. Ebrāhīmīān's *The Suitors* (1989), inspired by separate incidents involving Persians abroad, was selected for screening during the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes in 1988; it was described in the American trade paper *Variety* as an "offbeat, sometimes intriguing pic[ture] about a group of Iranians in New York who, by trying to maintain tradition, trigger a series of tragic events" (Besa, p. 12).

The absence of new films by expatriate film makers in the late 1980s and early 1990s seems to signal a serious decline in Persian film making in exile.

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