



CINEMA IV. FILM CENSORSHIP

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Persian cinema has been subject from its beginnings to official censorship responding to the concerns of the government, religious establishments, professional groups, and even film distributors.

The earliest film censorship in Persia occurred in the 1320s/early 1900s, when the pioneering film distributors instructed the interpreters hired to read aloud the captions of foreign silent films to change dialogue or plots or both (Meḥrābī, p. 522; Akrami, p. 154). The earliest official censorship of films in Persia was based on a Tehran city ordinance of 1309 Š./1930, which required theater managers to screen films for a city official before exhibiting them to the public (Meḥrābī, p. 523). In 1329 Š./1950 the government created a screening commission (Komīšion-e nāmāyeš) to license the public exhibition of films of any sort. The commission consisted of representatives from the ministries of the interior and education, the general police department, the department of publications and propaganda, and the theater owners' association. The commission issued fifteen guidelines prohibiting films that might undermine respect for religion, the monarchy, government, law and order, morality, or national unity. In 1347 Š./1968 the screening commission was placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of arts and culture and renamed the Commission of dramatic arts (Šūrā-ye honarhā-ye nemāyešī). Its membership of fifteen consisted of experts in a variety of fields, as well as



representatives from the ministries of the interior, arts and culture, and information. It adopted several additional prohibitions, ranging from offending friendly countries to lowering public taste.

In practice the censors were little concerned with threats to aesthetic standards. Instead they targeted films with political points of view that were not endorsed by the regime or that dealt with social taboos and assumed ethical standards, for example, those related to adultery. In particular, the censors were extremely sensitive about any film belittling a king, real or fictitious. Politically provocative foreign films like Constantine Costa-Gavras's *Z* (1969) and Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) were banned completely, or objectionable scenes were cut. Censors also sometimes used dubbing into Persian to alter offensive films, for example, changing unfaithful wives into mistresses or fiancées, as in Jules Dassin's *Phaedra* (1962) and Richard Brooks's *The Professionals* (1966).

Government censors also considered civilian and military officials beyond criticism, in both domestic and foreign films. Elio Petri's *Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion* (1970) was completely reedited so that the story about a psychotic police chief who murders his mistress to test the police was changed into a story about how diligent detectives solve a murder. The ending of Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry* (1971) was changed to show that Clint Eastwood's character retained his respect for law and the police. Persian film distributors, legally and morally at ease with making alterations, sometimes for purely commercial reasons, in any films to which they had domestic rights, sometimes made such alterations even before submitting films to the commission; examples included Norman Jewison's *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), Sam Peckinpah's *The Getaway* (1972), and Martin Ritt's *Hombre* (1967).

Restrictions on domestic films were more severe. Although most Persian cinema was commercial and escapist, occasional documentaries attempted to probe the darker side of contemporary social realities. Curiously, most of these films were produced by government agencies, but the censors or the agencies themselves prevented their general release. Among such suppressed documentaries were Kāmran Širdel's *Zendān-e zanān* (The women's prison, 1344 Š./1965) and *Qaḷ'a* (The citadel, 1345 Š./1966), both of which portrayed the victimization of Persian women, and Manūčehr Ṭayyāb's *Adyān dar Īrān* (Religions in Iran, 1350 Š./1971), which provided a controversial view of Islamic rituals. Feature films also encountered difficulties with the censors. Farroḡ Gaffārī's *Janūb-e šahr* (The southern part of the city, 1337 Š./1958), a



melodrama about a waitress wooed by two men, showed life in the slums of southern Tehran. The censors at first banned the film and allowed its release five years later only with a change of title to *Raqābat dar šahr* (Rivalry in the city, 1342 Š./1963), a title that alludes to the plot, rather than the setting.

The emergence a decade later of a new generation of politically committed directors calling themselves the Progressive filmmakers' group set the stage for a confrontation with the censors. Daryūš Mehrjū'ī's *Gāv* (The cow, 1348 Š./1969), based on a stage play by Ġolām-Ḥosayn Sā'edī, heralded the new wave and was also its first casualty. The film, a disheartening tale of poverty in a desolate village, was kept from distribution for several months until it was smuggled out to the Venice film festival. The censors, reluctant to prevent an internationally acclaimed film from being screened domestically, released it with a caption at the beginning claiming that the story was set in the period before the shah had launched his modernization campaign (Enqelāb-e safīd, "the White Revolution"). A second collaboration between Mehrjū'ī and Sā'edī, *Dāyera-ye mīnā* (The cycle, 1356 Š./1977)—a story of corruption in a big-city hospital—faced objections not only from the censors but also from the physicians' union and was released only after three years, when the shah intervened personally. Ebrāhīm Golestān's *Asrār-e ganj-e darra-ye jennī* (The mystery of the treasure of the valley of the genies, 1353 Š./1974) was suppressed in the midst of a successful run, when censors realized that audiences saw it as an allegory of the shah's rise and eventual fall. Mas'ūd Kīmīā'ī's *Gavaznhā* (The deer, 1354 Š./1975) was released by the censors only after scenes involving a heroic urban guerrilla were reshot to reduce him to a murderous bank robber.

In the turmoil leading up to the Islamic Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79 as many as 185 movie theaters were targets of arson (Akrami, p. 138). Immediately after the Revolution screening permits for all domestic and foreign films were revoked subject to reinspection. Only 200 of about 2,000 such films were approved, most with significant cuts (Naficy, 1990, p. 451). Filmmakers were frequently summoned to Islamic courts to answer charges of corrupting moral standards, connections with the preceding regime, prostitution, and other similar crimes (Motavalli, p. 59). A few filmmakers were accused of following the [Bahai faith](#) and were forced to recant publicly. One of them, Maṣṣūr Bāqerīān, was executed on charges of having connections with Israel and importing pornographic films (Naficy, 1990, p. 452). Another, Maḥdī Mīṭāqīya, was jailed, his studio closed, and his theater confiscated.



The first years after the Revolution were marked by stagnation in film production and extreme confusion over what exactly Islamic cinema should be. Ayatollah Khomeini's declaration "We are not against cinema; we are against prostitution" made clear the regime's sensitivity to the portrayal of women (Allameh-zadeh, p. 13). In practice, very few foreign films could meet the the new guidelines, though the government sometimes justified restrictions under the guise of protecting the domestic film industry (*Iranian Films of the Eighties*, p. 5). As a result most imported films came from the eastern bloc, Japan, and China, where the plots tended to be didactic and women characters more likely to be properly dressed. Those foreign films that were shown were almost always cut—even when invited to government-sponsored film festivals. In domestic films female characters were required to wear head scarves, even in films set in pre-revolutionary times or foreign settings.

Since 1361 Š./1982 the Ministry of Islamic guidance (Wezārat-e eršād-e eslāmī) has been responsible for issuing screening permits under a set of guidelines similar in substance and intent to those under the shah. The censors are emphatic about religious deviations and also bar films contrary to such major political positions of the regime as the "neither West nor East" doctrine in foreign affairs and the policy of economic self-sufficiency (Naficy, 1990, p. 455). Scripts, casts, and crews must be approved in advance, and a representative of the ministry must be present during shooting. After release a four-tier rating system ensures that only favored films will have access to the media, the best theaters, and the most desirable bookings.

Nonetheless, by 1370 Š./1991 filmmakers had begun once again to deal critically with serious themes like the disenchantment of youth with the revolution, the difficulties of post-revolutionary society, love and sexual desire, and adultery. The daily newspaper *Keyhān* has denounced a number of recent films as contrary to the cultural and ethical values of the Islamic Republic and has criticized the government for not censoring them: Taqwā'ī's *Ey Īrān* (Oh, Iran, 1369 Š./1990) for not fully acknowledging the "Islamic dimensions" of the Revolution, Kīmīā'ī's *Gorūhbān* (The sergeant, 1370 Š./1991) for showing the disillusionment of a revolutionary guard, and Maḵmalbāf's *Nawbat-e 'āšeqī* (A time for love, 1370 Š./1991) for depicting physical love. In response to the article the Ministry of culture and Islamic guidance maintained that the filmmakers' attention to love and passion was inspired by Khomeini's love poems ("Wezārat-e eršād," p. 11).



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