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## The 'New Iranian Cinema' New Cinema? New Iranians?

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Iran

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In June and July 1999 the National Film Theatre in London screened over 50 Iranian films, made before and after the 1978–79 Revolution. The proceedings of the accompanying SOAS conference have now been published. Contributors review the development of Iranian cinema before the Revolution, efforts to create an Islamic cinema afterwards, and the growing international success of the 'New Iranian Cinema'. Typical features of this cinema are examined: the blurring of boundaries between documentary and fiction, the focus on children, the constrained portrayal of women, and the way the success of Iranian cinema has provided both a focus and a forum for Iranians to reconsider their national and cultural identity.

During the 1990s, films from Iran were increasingly acclaimed at international festivals. The 'New Iranian Cinema' became recognized not merely as a distinctive 'national cinema' but as one of the most innovative and exciting in the world. International media interest was doubtless aroused by two paradoxes: films of poetic and simple beauty coming from a country reputed, since the 1978–79 Revolution, for religious fanaticism; and a successful national cinema emerging in conditions of political and cultural repression. These paradoxes are more apparent than real. Contemporary Iranian cinema has firm and deep roots, both before the revolution, and in richer and more profound Iranian cultural traditions of drama, poetry and the visual arts that have survived many centuries of political and social change.

#### An Islamic cinema?

Before the Revolution, the ulema either rejected cinema or ignored it: their only method was to apply juristic (*feqh*) rules in relation to the depiction of images. Generally, the religious classes disapproved. For some pious families, going to the cinema was tantamount to committing a sin: it was *haram*. When the state became Islamic and subject to the rulings of the jurists, they could no longer ignore the issue of cinema. They had two options: either to do away with it (as the Taleban decided in Afghanistan 15 years later) or to Islamicize it. Realizing its usefulness and power, they decided to bring it under proper control, and use it for proper political purposes.

The Islamic revolutionaries sought to undo and to rectify 'non-Islamic' elements in Iranian society and culture; to establish an Islamic political and economic base and popular legitimacy through a new Constitution; and to reinvent culture, society, intellectual life, education and learning, 'Islamized' and cleansed of the pollution of Western and Pahlavi elements. The new cultural policy imposed new regulations: all forms of media and arts were forced into the ideological straightjacket of *feqh* rules of *halal* and *haram*. The most powerful media, television and radio, were brought firmly under state control. The arts (including cinema), press and publishing, were made subject to the new Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

How much did the Revolution mark a break from pre-revolutionary cinema? While some scholars focus on differences, others stress continuities, pointing to many accomplished directors who made films both before and after, to the abiding connection of cinema with politics, and to the continuation of censorship in various forms. The main break was the public's reduced exposure to Hollywood films. By the mid 1980s, however, the failure to establish an Islamic ideological cinema was evident. Iranian cinema, like Iranian society, gradually stretched the limits imposed by the jurists, and further redefined and rein-

vented Iranian culture. In the arts, some Muslim militants and radicals who had won the earlier battle with the secularists now became moderates and liberals themselves. Among key players in this group who formulated cultural policies in the 1980s, was Mohammad Khatami, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, who, with a team of Muslim intellectuals, laid the foundation for an independent press and a new, national cinema.

#### Back to the festivals

Pre-revolutionary directors such as Daryush Mehrju'i, Bahram Beyza'i, Mas'udKimia'i and Abbas Kiarostami were allowed to resume their interrupted careers. Prominent newcomers included women directors. A period of recovery and qualitative growth started, and films like Mehrju'i's *The Tenants* (1986) and Beyza'i's *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1988) attracted international attention once more. Important foreign critics and filmmakers were invited to the seventh Fajr Film Festival in 1989. The next year came a breakthrough, with the success of Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House* at Locarno.

Meanwhile inside Iran, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and Khomeini's death in 1989, cinema became a focus for ideological and political dispute. Official attitudes and conditions changed. Morality codes were relaxed. Strict censorship continued, but a process of cultural negotiation and accommodation resulted in a lively cinema and cinema culture.

Political skirmishes reached a peak at the Fajr Festival of 1991 and led to Khatami's resignation and a new period of uncertainty. Rafsanjani's rightist government banned many high quality films, and accused internal opponents of supporting 'Western cultural invasion'. But the change of policy was too late, and backfired. It politicized the filmmakers and forced them to take positions. In the 1997 presidential elections, when Khatami was a surprise candidate, the artistic community, including prominent filmmakers, took an active role in politics for the first time. Those producing art and progressive cinema openly supported Khatami. With the latter's election, a new phase in Iranian cinema began. Many long-suppressed films were screened, and new films like Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* (1998) and Tahmineh Milani's *Two Women* (1999) addressed issues that had been taboo.

With the phenomenal success – and Festival exposure – in the late 1990s of new films by established masters like Kiarostami, Mehrju'i, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, as well as newcomers such as Majid Majidi, Abolfazl Jalili, Samira Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi and Bahman Ghobadi, the international progress of Iranian cinema seemed unstoppable. No respectable festival could be without at least one film from Iran. Seasons of Iranian movies multiplied. In summer 1999, the National Film Theatre staged the largest season so far

(and the third in London that year), screening some 60 Iranian films, both pre- and post-revolutionary, over two months. The same year, Chicago had its tenth annual festival, and there were seasons devoted to Iranian films, or particular directors, elsewhere in the USA, France, Canada and other countries.

#### Renegotiating Iranian cultural identity

The new success of Iranian cinema has provided both a focus and a forum for Iranians to reconsider their national and cultural identity. The main elements of Iranian national identity (*iraniyat*) and the dialectic between them have been much discussed recently: Iran as homeland and Persian as dominant language and culture; modernity, Western or otherwise; and Shi'a Islam. The question is complicated currently by the existence of a varied and articulate Iranian diaspora, interacting with many different host cultures and different versions of modernity, and now into second and third generations, with hybrid/hyphenated identities, and differing ancestral linguistic and religious roots in Iran. Extreme versions of all three original elements (Iranian nationalism/Persian chauvinism; Western top-down modernization; Islamic fundamentalism) have been tried in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and failed. There is now a widely perceived imperative to negotiate an acceptable balance for the new millennium; and a strong movement, with mass support among women and youth in Iran, to reject the traditional politics of monopolization of power, control, secrecy and violence, in favour of democracy, transparency and political, religious and ethnic pluralism.

Cinema has become a major focus and arena for these discussions and debates. The distinctive forms and achievements of Iranian cinema, owing little to Hollywood or Western models, have shown that, culturally at least, a fear of 'Western invasion' is a chimera. Cultures always borrow from each other, then appropriate what is borrowed and transform it into their own style. Iranian cinema has much to teach the world about poetry, children, emotion, class. But what do audiences see – and want to see?

Audiences and critics have predictable (if contradictory) expectations of 'international cinema': an appealing aesthetic, professional filming and editing; a focus on universal human themes such as family relationships, loss/search, survival; 'documentary' portrayal of a little-visited country; images that contradict media stereotypes of a given people (Iranians, for example, as anti-Western, irrational, terrorist); and alternatively, a lively, country-specific social and political critique, confirming stereotypes created in Hollywood productions such as *Not without My Daughter* (Brian Gilbert 1991).

In terms of style and content, Iranian movies have drawn international attention by neo-realism and reflexivity, a focus on

children, and difficulties with portrayal of women. In the age of ever-escalating Hollywood blockbusters, part of their attraction (like much 'third-world' cinema), comes from shoe-string budgets and use of amateur actors. Many successful films have had strikingly simple, local, small-scale themes, which have been variously read as totally apolitical, or as highly ambiguous and open to interpretation as politically and socially critical.

Given such contradictory expectations and interpretations, manifested in any number of film reviews in both popular and intellectual presses, it is not surprising if Iranians abroad themselves show confused reactions and understandings of foreign audience responses to images of 'their' country in the films. The mixed – and often heated – responses of Iranians abroad to the new Iranian cinema (and other aspects of Iranian culture and politics as viewed in the West) reflect not merely their different politics, but different assumptions about what foreign viewers look for, and see, in these films.

Not least of the achievements of Iranian cinema has been that it provides both a social critique and a forum for discussion between Iranians inside and outside the country. The international success of Iranian cinema has been for many in the diaspora a source of renewed pride in their culture and heritage, as well as a channel for reconciliation between Iranians of different persuasions inside Iran and in the diaspora. It has become an important medium – through viewing and debate – for renegotiating Iranian cultural identity.

### The New Iranian Cinema Politics, Representation and Identity

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