

FIRST THINGS

MULLAHS AT THE MOVIES

by
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Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-makers Since the Iranian Revolution

BY SHIVA RAHBARAN

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In July 1988, the Ayatollah Khomeini accepted the cease-fire that brought the Iran-Iraq War to a close. He likened it to downing a “poisoned chalice.” Iranian and Iraqi forces had spent the previous eight years grinding each other down in the trenches. Saddam Hussein resorted to poison gas. The Iranians used children to clear minefields. All told, more than a million people were killed. The result was a stalemate.

For all its horror, however, the war inspired few memorable Iranian movies. This is odd. Beginning in the late 1980s, Iran’s postrevolutionary cinema captivated festival juries and Western audiences with its idyllic imagery and contemplative themes, its poetry and simplicity. Martin Scorsese, Akira Kurosawa, and Jean-Luc Godard championed Iranian film, and a number of productions even found Hollywood distributors. You would think that the twentieth century’s longest conventional conflict would also provide the raw material for many a great Iranian film. Yet it wasn’t until last fall that a truly compelling Iranian war movie appeared. Only, it wasn’t a war flick—or even strictly Iranian.

Under the Shadow (2016) is a conventional haunted-house picture, impeccably executed. It adheres faithfully to the rule that supernatural horror is all the more terrifying when it is barely seen or explained. But the U.K.-Jordanian-Qatari coproduction, directed by Iranian-born Babak Anvari, has more than genre tropes on its mind.

Set in Tehran in 1988, *Under the Shadow* is about a middle-class family struggling to carry on in wartime. Shideh (Narges Rashidi), her husband, Iraj (Bobby Naderi), and their young daughter, Dorsa (Avin Manshadi), are caught between Saddam's missiles and the ayatollah's morality police. The authorities bar Shideh from finishing her medical studies. She had flirted with leftist politics during the revolution, and "every mistake has a price," as a bearded regime apparatchik tells her in the opening. An Iraqi missile strikes a nearby building as he says this, but the man barely registers it. He keeps sucking a sugar cube, sipping tea, and foreclosing on Shideh's professional dreams. Every Iranian will recall similar interactions with the ruling Islamists.

At home, a fight erupts between husband and wife. Iraj kept his head down and managed to finish his own medical studies—is it his fault that Khomeini's revolution and childbearing interrupted Shideh's? But the war doesn't even permit the couple a good shouting match. Lights go out, and the family rushes to the basement to ride out the sirens. Soon Iraj must ship off to the front. All this happens before the arrival of the *djinn*s, evil spirits that figure in the Qur'an and Persian lore.

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As with all great horror, the supernatural terror in *Under the Shadow* extends from all-too-natural malice and anxiety. The ghosts pose historical dilemmas: How did we end up in this state? What possessed us—Iran's comfortable, secular middle class—to replace the shah's benign autocracy with Khomeini's totalitarianism? Where did all these pious fanatics come from, anyway, these *djinn*s who seemed to ride the wind and soon conquered our streets and

our homes? Why do our lives remain hostage to the same obsessions, while others seem to move ahead?

Iranian cinema has revolved around these questions since 1979. But Anvari articulates them with more honesty and immediacy than do many of the Iranian filmmakers who are the toast of Cannes and Berlin. His genre movie is more realistic—more capable of expressing contemporary Iranian-ness—than much of Iran’s celebrated social-realist cinema.

Anvari doesn’t appear in *Iranian Cinema Uncensored*, Shiva Rahbaran’s fascinating collection of interviews with many of Iran’s major auteurs. This is partly because the interviews were conducted earlier this decade, before Anvari arrived on the scene, and partly because Rahbaran focuses on filmmakers who chose to work in the country despite the prevailing censorship.

Yet the question—why hasn’t Iran produced a great film about the war?—comes up in nearly every interview. The answer offered by film artists who are comfortable with the establishment and those who see themselves in opposition is the same: ideology and censorship. The war question thus serves as a proxy for the more fraught question at the heart of her book: Has the restrictive creative atmosphere post-1979 been good for the moving image in Iran?

By interviewing both pro-regime industry figures and dissident directors, Rahbaran illuminates a great deal about the realities of filmmaking in Iran and the myths that distort those realities in the West; about the Iranian regime’s efforts to revise the past, including its own relationship with the cinema; and ultimately about the connection between creativity and freedom.

According to the regime’s cinematic defenders, censorship helped purify the medium. By barring images of immodestly dressed women, sex, drinking, and other varieties of Western decadence, the revolutionaries forced filmmakers to get serious. Censorship became a crucible of creativity. Banning some movies opened space for others, films that were more

authentically Iranian and dealt with spiritual things and the inner life—themes the West associates with Iranian cinema.

“Yes, it is true that we had to forbid some things and introduce certain measures,” says Mohammad Beheshti, the former director of the Farabi, a quasi-governmental foundation that, during his tenure, did much to promote Iranian art-house cinema in the West. Rahbaran wisely chooses to open her book with Beheshti, the only interview with a non-filmmaker. Beheshti functioned as an enlightened censor when he ran the Farabi.

The new regime had to censor, Beheshti says, “in order to be able to have an . . . environment in which the nightmare of Film Farsi would not be repeated, chomping on the tender buds of our intellectual art films.” Film Farsi refers to the vulgar genre films and Bollywood knockoffs that were popular under the shah, typically featuring women in miniskirts and scenes of debauchery in second-rate cabarets. “We wanted New Iranian Cinema to breathe and grow and that is why we treated Film Farsi as a nasty weed. In your garden you too would tear out such weeds so that your flowers could breathe, wouldn’t you?” Even censoring the female form was a liberatory act, he says, since it allowed women to be seen as individuals rather than as mere sex objects.

Like the Stalinist interrogators in Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, Beheshti and the director Majid Majidi—the two establishment-friendly figures featured in the book—make an *almost* compelling case for dictatorship. It’s a reminder that Islamism as much as communism is a modernist enterprise, led by intellectuals who hold that a total state can bring man to a deeper and truer freedom.

Majidi’s 1997 feature *Children of Heaven*, about an impoverished brother and sister forced to share a single pair of shoes, remains among Iran’s best-known cinematic exports. Well-conceived if a little sappy, the film is typical of the New Iranian Cinema in its preference for marginalized subjects: the urban poor and those who dwell in remote country places—people ennobled by hard circumstances and granted access to authentic experiences that are denied to intellectuals and those with soft bourgeois hands.

Miramax picked up *Children of Heaven* for distribution, and it was nominated for a best foreign language film Oscar in 1998. Majidi doesn't reciprocate Hollywood's regard. Echoing Beheshti, he contends that without censorship, Hollywood and Film Farsi would have suffocated a body of work like his. Censorship can even enhance filmmakers' dramatic powers, he tells Rahbaran, by impelling them to think symbolically and poetically. Scenes have "a much deeper effect," he says, when directors can't express everything directly.

Which is often true. The history of great art is mostly the story of artists toiling under various forms of censorship. But as the rest of the interviews in the book show, placing social limits on art is one thing, and the Iranian revolution's destruction of a generation of artists in the name of ideology quite another. Khomeinist revolutionaries in 1978 burned down a movie theater, the author reminds us, killing some 470 cinemagoers. The suggestion that their regime propelled Iranian cinema to new spiritual heights is perverse and ahistorical.

The New Iranian Cinema didn't begin with the Ayatollah Khomeini; in fact, it predated the revolution by several decades. Iranian directors made intellectual films under the decadent and "Westoxicated" shah, and the country's art-house scene flourished even as the vulgar Film Farsi melodramas also found an audience. By giving directors who worked under both regimes a chance to recount the real history, Rahbaran has rendered a tremendous service to the cause of historical truth—a truth the current regime has sought to erase.

As the author notes, directors such as Bahram Beyzaie, Dariush Mehrjui, and the late Abbas Kiarostami (all interviewed here) were attracting international attention well before Khomeini returned from exile to herald the Islamic Republic. These filmmakers view the revolution mainly as a corrosive force that nearly ruined Iranian cinema. That a certain strand of Iranian art film has survived is thanks to the persistence and courage of the filmmakers, not the cinematic wisdom of the mullahs.

For these directors, the postrevolutionary triumph of the New Iranian Cinema in the West is bittersweet. Yes, Kiarostami's existentialist meditation *Taste of Cherry* won the 1997 Palme

d'Or. But for every *Taste of Cherry*, there were piles of scripts that were barred from production for political reasons; films that were made but never saw the light of day; and those that were released but in such truncated form as to be unrecognizable to their creators.

Of all the directors interviewed, Bahram Beyzaie is the most embittered. He argues that no account of postrevolutionary Iranian cinema would be complete without considering artists “who left Iran because of extreme pressure or those who live in Iran and can't make their films.” He goes on:

Those who dictate what can and cannot be shown are just as much a part of this universally admired New Iranian Cinema as filmmakers like me! . . . In the past 30-odd years my films have been so badly sabotaged, banned, censored and mutilated that you cannot really speak of a career.

Beyzaie's *Death of Yazdgerd* (1982) is set against the backdrop of the Arab invasion of Persia in the seventh century. How the Arabs Islamized Iran—it wasn't through interfaith dialogue—is a bigger taboo in the Islamic Republic than anything to do with alcohol, sex, or women's bodies. By broaching this subject shortly after the revolution, Beyzaie invited the permanent enmity of the new regime. The movie remains banned inside the country more than three decades after it was made.

What about the supposedly socially enlightening effects of censorship? Again, it helps to ask the prerevolutionary directors. Says Beyzaie: “I hope you are aware of the fact that a considerable percentage of people in this country are still watching illegal copies of those cheap and superficial films.” Most Iranians, like most people everywhere, turn to the movies for entertainment, not uplift. They did so under the shah, and they do so now.

“Or worse,” Beyzaie goes on, “they are consuming legal, Islamic copies of them.” In other words, the Film Farsi form never died. It lives on in regime-approved melodramas and potboilers that mimic the old ones. Only the accidentals have changed (the women now wear hijabs instead of heels, etc.). Beyzaie, Mehrjui, and many others of their generation managed

to compete with Film Farsi and foreign imports. There is no reason to assume they couldn't have carried on but for the revolution. "Do you honestly believe that without a revolution we would not have attained the highly esteemed position we have in the world today?" Beyzaie asks.

As for the poetic film language of Iranian cinema: It didn't take the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwas to translate the rhythm and sensibility of Persian verse into film language. That process, too, was already underway before the revolution, with films like Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1969). Khomeini was a fan of that movie, and Mehrjui tells Rahbaran with justified pride that, had he not made the film a decade before the revolution, the ayatollah may have banned cinema altogether when he first came to power.

Yet as several of the interviewees point out, critics in the West read too much into Iran's "poetic" film language. There is a reason the New Iranian Cinema is mainly concerned with rural life and the poverty shacks of south Tehran. It is because filmmakers can go to these places and portray life as it really is without running afoul of Islamic rules. "That's what makes someone like Kiarostami prefer villages," observes Mehrjui. "In our villages, women have always worn scarves; they wear them in a more natural way than the up-town, urban Tehrani women, who, since the revolution, have been forced to wear them. So you wouldn't be lying as a filmmaker if you showed a woman going to bed in her scarf!" In the West, however, the austere film language that results from censorship is often mistaken for profundity.

Not every good movie needs to be poetic. I sometimes suspect that the poetic style in Iranian filmmaking functions as a mask for its lack of technical virtuosity and storytelling skill. Crafting a tight, well-paced movie—one that raises the stakes for protagonists with clear motives until things come to a satisfying conclusion—isn't easy. The greatest films find their way to whatever social or psychological insight through, not outside, these narrative conventions.

But for many Iranian cineasts—dissident or otherwise—all that smacks of Hollywood and exploitation. There is no middle ground between the degradation of Film Farsi and following in the footsteps of Godard, Antonioni, and Tarkovsky. Torn between Islamist censorship at home and the craving for “poetic Iranian cinema” abroad, they do their best. Sometimes the results are terrific. Often they’re insufferably ponderous and boring.

The contrast with Babak Anvari’s *Under the Shadow* is sharp. While adhering closely to popcorn genre conventions, the film offers a visceral account of what Iranians suffered amid war and revolution. Freed in exile from the press of censorship and ideology back home, and indifferent to the expectations of the Western festival circuit, Anvari aimed “low.” He set out to tell a good ghost story—but ended up making what is perhaps the most important Persian-language movie since 1979.

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