

‘Come and Kill me!’: Killing Mehrjui and the Repeat of 1990s Chain-Murders

‘I am a protester! [...] I am a victim of [your injustice]. ... Who are you [to act] like ghosts behind curtains and issue orders [arbitrarily]? ... Mr Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance! I can’t take this [injustice] anymore! I declare war against you and your organisation! Look! Here is my chest – Come and kill me! Destroy me! Do what you want to me! But know that I will seek my rights with my life!’

In an emotional and eerily prescient video message, some eighteen months before he and his wife, Vahideh Mohammadi, were savagely stabbed to death on Sunday, October 15th, 2023 in their home in a Tehran suburb, Dariush Mehrjui, pulled at his chest and railed against the Islamic regime and its stifling culture policies. Dariush Mehrjui a scholar of cinema studies at the University of California, Los Angeles in the 1950s and 60s, became known as a founding member and doyen of the New Iranian Cinema movement. With his early film *Cow (Gaav)*, winner of the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1971, he put Iran as a ‘film-nation’ on the map. According to Dariush Mehrjui himself, his film *Cow* in a way single-handedly saved Iranian Cinema from being completely cancelled under the Islamists who took over Iran after the 1979 revolution toppled the Shah. In his interview with me (S. Rahbaran, *Iranian Cinema Uncensored* 2016, pp.79-101) he pointed out that the burning down of Cinema Rex, which killed over 600 viewers in the city of Abadan, was a life-threatening sign for cinema: ‘At the beginning of the revolution, Iranian cinema was nothing! All the studios, film institutes and film theatres were dead. [...] Remember that one of the first revolutionary acts that people committed was to burn down a cinema. Why? Because they thought that cinemas were centres of immorality; the core of vulgarity, corruption and Western decadence. So, we entered a complicated stage: fanatics burning down cinemas and intellectual film-makers saying that they wanted to make films! It was a most precarious situation. We were on a knife’s edge.’

Were it not for Ayatollah Khomeini watching *Cow* by chance on TV, Mehrjui believed, cinema might have died in Iran - just as it did in Saudi Arabia, where theatre movies were closed from the early 1980s onwards before being reopened in 2018 (S. Nordwall, VOA, 04.04.2018). ‘No one knew what to do until, by chance, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 revolution, watched my film *Gaav*, i.e. *The Cow* (1969) on

television. The next day he made a speech and said, we are not against the art of cinema at all. We are in favour of educational and cultural films such as this film, *The Cow*.' Mehrjui's role in the resurrection of New Iranian Cinema in the Islamic Republic has always been a point of contention, especially amongst certain Iranians in Diaspora. This has become particularly clear from the varied reactions to his savage assassination, with some going as far as saying that it 'served him right'. According to these people, Mehrjui was not only believed to be an 'appeaser' of the regime but also an active part of the anti-imperialist Marxist ideology that found its ally in the anti-west Islamist school of thought, which directly contributed to the onset of the brutal and backward theocratic regime in Iran.

Fact is that the founders of New Iranian Cinema in the 50s and 60s had left-leaning (sometimes downright leftist) inclinations. These inclinations were very typical in the global flora and fauna of the 'art world' in those days. Iran, being very much in the midst of that world - not least because of the Pahlavis' enthusiasm and subsidies for culture - was no exception. Despite all this, Mehrjui always saw himself and his art as a part of Iran, its people and its culture. Iran was where he got sustenance from. And like many of his colleagues in Iran who continued to stay, for fear of losing that creative connection between their country and their art, he too was forced to accept the same role that most artists in totalitarian regimes have to play; namely, that of the *engagé* intellectual, while simultaneously working under an oppressive regime that restricted artistic and intellectual activity. Mehrjui told me that he saw it as his artistic mission to show the injustices in such a society. 'I am always pulled towards those who don't accept oppression and extortion. For instance, before the revolution I concentrated on the oppressed and disgruntled working class, and my ideology and philosophy were based on Marxism and the socialist ideologies of the time. [...] After the revolution the class for which I fought became dominant, so addressing that group was ridiculous. Now I concentrate on the middle class, the bourgeois – especially the bourgeois women. I mean, universally, women do not have the same rights as men, but in the post-revolutionary Iranian society and under the pressure of religious fanaticism, Iranian women face worse deprivations than women elsewhere. Especially the compulsory hijab in Iran has become a symbol of oppression and deprivation globally.'

Through his artistic medium, Mehrjui wasn't only interested in showing the injustice of compulsory hijab that women in Iran had to endure, but also wanted to observe what a woman can do in such a situation; what means of manoeuvring she has. He has made many

films that address women's issues in Iran, such as *Sarah* (1993), *Pari* (1995), *Leyla* (1996), *Banoo* (1998) and so on. In these films he shows that he was in fact a pioneer of women's rights in the Islamised Iranian society long before the Woman_Life_Freedom Uprising.

The conundrum that Mehrjui and his comrades-in-arms faced since the founding of the Islamic Republic was how to carve out intellectual and artistic spaces within the censorship restrictions of the regime and at the same time guard their artistic and intellectual honesty. This was and continues to be extremely difficult in a system that not only restricts art, but also uses it as a means of propaganda. That made artists such as Mehrjui a target for both the proponents of the Islamic regime and its adversaries. Both of these groups criticised him and his colleagues for continuing to stay and work in Iran. He was attacked for being both a non-conformist and an appeasement artist. Mehrjui told me that this was one of the regime's tactics, leveraging both of these sentiments to create a large 'double' divide in a sense – between artists and their works on the one hand and the audience on the other. This divide is the biggest tragedy affecting the film industry in Iran after the Islamic revolution. In the context of the Woman_Life_Freedom Uprising, this tragic divide is not only damaging the film industry but also the unity of the opposition against the Islamic regime.

After his and his wife's dead bodies were found by their daughter, the police immediately released a statement saying that the incident had happened for an unknown reason by an unknown person or persons, with the motive of the murder still unknown. However, judging by the storm of anger and resentment, it is clear that nobody in Iran believes this statement. Faced with the greatest wave of protests since 2009, the regime has resorted to increasingly brutal methods of oppression in an effort to stem the Woman_Life_Freedom Uprising. Blinding, jailing, torturing, poisoning, and killing of protestors is what people risk every time they openly raise their voices against the regime. Assassinations are on the everyday agenda. Most Iranian people view this 'mysterious murder' in the same light as the assassinations of public intellectuals in the 1990s - infamously known as the 'Chain-murders.' The death of Mehrjui and Vahideh Mohammadi serve as a particularly gruesome reminder of the double murder of Dariush Forouhar and his wife Parvaneh - another intellectual couple that was murdered in an eerily similar way 25 years ago. Dariush Forouhar - Mehrjui's namesake - the leader of the Iran National Party at the time, and his wife Parvaneh were butchered by savage stabbings in their home, too. The

‘mysterious assailants’ were never found and tried.¹ Now as then, it is widely believed in Iran, the regime aims at scaring public intellectuals: ‘no one is safe; you won’t be spared! Even the great Master Dariush Mehrjui wasn’t!’ – that is the message.

In the last days of his life, Mehrjui was collaborating with Hassan Solhjoui, a filmmaker and a senior producer of BBC World Service, on a (unfinished) documentary in which he passionately expressed his opposition to the regime and the compulsory hijab by beseeching his wife to remove her hijab. After some deliberation she does and they both laughingly hang the pink scarf from a tree. Sadly, it took his and his wife’s bloodied corpses to show that Mehrjui stood on the right side of history.

¹ Sarah Fowler, ‘Iran’s Chain Murders: A wave of killings that shook a nation’, BBC News, 2 December 2018.