



The Color of Paradise, 1999

Dramatic licence

SARAH JILANI

Asghar Farhadi's domestic drama *The Salesman* took Best Screenplay and Best Actor at Cannes this May. Though this was hardly an unprecedented honour for the Oscar- and Palme D'Or-winning director, it was of particular significance that after two films set abroad, Farhadi had returned to making film at home in Iran. Such inter-dependence between artist and native land is one of the core themes explored by Shiva Rahbaran in *Iranian Cinema Uncensored*, which aims to shed light on the genre in the wake of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the influence of this cinema on post-revolutionary Iranian society. The result is a series of conversations with heavyweights of Iranian cinema, including Bahram Beyzaie, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi and the late Abbas Kiarostami.

Shiva Rahbaran

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CINEMA

UNCENSORED

Contemporary
film-makers since

the Islamic
Revolution

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Iranian films have won more than 300 international awards over the past decade, and the Iranian New Wave is comparable to the French *nouvelle vague* or Italian Neo-Realism as a significant phase in the history of film. Despite the challenges it has faced in terms of distribution, censorship and various forms of creative control, both before and following 1979, including the latest work from the region's *auteurs* is a must for any contemporary global film festival programme. Yet the evolution of Iranian cinema was often a case of luck as well as talent: cinema could have easily been declared haram (forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law) following the Revolution, but its potential for social realism meant that by Ayatollah Khomeini and his senior clerics deemed it to be educational.

So began decades of a flourishing cinema, celebrated internationally for its human stories and poetic cinematography – and an uphill struggle for its creative and financial survival. Films could be banned or screened on the whim of presiding officials; scripts were sometimes whittled down out of recognition; and distribution depended on compromises to obtain state funding, or the inconsistent interest of European producers in Iranian film. The paradoxical nature of such circumstances

from the 1980s to the present day is a reality that all of Rahbaran's interviewees share.

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The roots of the Iranian New Wave are pre-revolutionary, yet many filmmakers here also acknowledge that the turn to social realism and homegrown subjects – a matter of little choice for those who decided to remain and work in Iran after 1979 – may have created the conditions that fostered its distinct and subtle storytelling. For some, the development of a national creative form is out of the question, as a consequence of state authoritarianism; for others, like the former head of the *Farabi Film Foundation* Mohammed Behesti and the pro-establishment filmmaker Majid Majidi, the Revolution's ban on Film Farsi (pre-revolutionary

popular melodramas) and on the depiction of female sexuality created both the market and the moral conditions for Iranian film to think differently.

By including the unconvincing official line, Rahbaran makes a gesture of academic balance, yet this seems to do little but provide target practice for the subsequent conversations with filmmakers. When countering the pro- regime argument, these interviewees sound bitter, and not unjustifiably, considering the number of anecdotes about intellectual and even physical restrictions, difficult creative conditions and the state's seemingly schizophrenic pride when, despite everything, Iranian films garner acclaim at global film festivals.

That the legacy of the Revolution is still hotly contested among contemporary Iranian filmmakers is plain. A significant portion of those interviewed share the conviction that Iranian culture and its daily, lived realities are the lifeblood of the contemporary Iranian filmmaker, yet there is a large professional and creative Iranian diaspora in Europe and the United States. Rahbaran questions them on this subject, and the broader question of how the artist relates to such a society, to insightful effect.

Some, such as the feminist activist and filmmaker Tahmineh Milani, have exclusively engaged with the place of women in Iranian society; *Milani's Two Women* and *The Hidden Half* have duly earned her a youthful following and landed her in trouble with the authorities. Others, such as the émigré director Amir Naderi have suffered for other reasons. Occasionally repetitious but often illuminating, *Iranian Filmmakers Uncensored* is most valuable for its verbatim accounts of interviews with contemporary Iranian filmmakers. Whether Iranian film will take up unexplored chapters of its recent history, like the Iran–Iraq war, or allow its directors to broaden their depiction of women, remains to be seen.