Cultural Identity Crisis

Art Cinema in Post-colonial Iran

By: Naomi Noir

Bootleg Hollywood blockbusters with the 'racy' bits cut out, Bollywood knockoffs with bare-rifted superstars belly-dancing substitute sex scenes, and Persian imitations of the Bollywood knockoffs with less physical contact, more violence, and head-scarves; these are the movies of the Iranian masses. These are not the films that have received distribution, distinction, and devotion from Cannes to Sundance and back again. Abbas Kiarostami who was one of the forerunners of the Iranian New Wave movement of the late 1960's which instigated an art cinema of poetic undertones and political overtones that put Iranian cinema on the map [1], has won the Akira Kurosawa Prize for lifetime achievement in directing, along with over 90 other international awards. Yet he has been banned for the past 15 years from showing films in his own country by the censorship of the Iranian government. Post-colonial Iran, it seems, is going through an identity crisis mirrored in the dichotomy of movies made there. Iran is reaching out to the Western world to define who they are and proclaim their potential.

An advocate of Iranian Art Cinema and a vocal critic of the current regime of president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Film Professor of Iranian Studies at Columbia University, Hamid Dabashi, recounts the past 200 year's of Iranian history in his book *Iran: a People Interrupted*[2]. Dabashi argues that though never officially colonized, the people of Iran and their culture have been oppressed over and over again during the last two centuries and thus their current cinema should be compared to that of a post-colonial nation. Played like a poker-chip in 'The Great Game' between Russia and Great Britain (1813-1907), Iran lost roughly half of the Persian Empire to Imperial Russia. Great Britain continued to have unofficial influence as the country created its first legislative body in 1906. With the rise of oil production in Iran, a U.S. backed Great Britain again interfered by overtly over-throwing the democratically elected official, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh, in what was known as 'Operation Ajax'. As a result the new and approved leader, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was supported in his efforts to modernize the country's technologies and infrastructure. However, he also oversaw the obliteration of any opposition creating a totalitarian state. As a result, this led to the Iranian Revolution (or Islamic Revolution) of 1979 in which relations between Iran and it's former unofficial rulers fell apart completely. Iran was shortly thereafter devastated by another would-be occupying force led by Sadam Hussain in the Iran-Iraqi war (1982-1988).

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[1] Dabashi, Hamid. *Iran: a People Interrupted.* p. 91
[2] Dabashi, Hamid. *Iran: a People Interrupted.*

Presently surrounded on both sides by nations at war, and censored by their own government, the current post-colonial Iranian films share many similarities with its 'colonial' period cinema. Unlike the Revolutionary Cinema of colonized Latin America, New Iranian Cinema is not a 'call to action', but a cry to wake-up, a request for self-reflection, and a means to rediscovering a torn nation's identity. The intellectual art films of the New Iranian Cinema serve as a tool not only to create awareness abroad of the plights of Iran, but to celebrate their unique culture as well. Dabashi writes that "Iran needs to be understood as the site of an ongoing contest between two contrasting visions of modernity, one colonial, the other anticolonial" [3]. In other words, just because there are people in Iran who are traditional doesn't mean that they must loose those traditions in order to be modernized. Dabashi purposes that the Iranian people need not choose between resisting foreign imperialism, and Iranian government repression, but both.

While Hollywood cinema promotes cultural colonization, 'Third World Cinema' acts as a catalyst for the "decolonialization of culture." [4] This struggle to regain a cultural identity can be seen over and over in Iranian Art films as they reexamine the importance or unimportance of education in a country with the threat of death hanging in the air, and the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death. In his essay *The Tricontinental Filmmaker*, Glauber Rocha writes that these Third World films are "films of discomfort" in which "refusals are significant" [5]

One such example can be seen in the film *The Day I Became a Woman*[6], directed by Marzieh Meshkini, which explores what it means to be a modern Islamic woman (or one in a traditional role who wishes to modernize herself against cultural resistance). The film in divided into three acts, each portraying an Iranian woman in three different stages in of life. The first act chronicles the ninth birthday of a girl who is now considered a woman and must say goodbye to her youth and companionship of her best friend who, unfortunately for her, is a boy. In one poignant scene the children share a piece of candy between the bars of a house windo**w.** Their licking and sucking noises are amplified to the point of sounding like kissing. What is innocent to them, is seen as sexual to the adult viewer. We rob them of their purity, and as a result become co-collaborator's in their societal separation.

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[3] Dabashi, Hamid. *Iran: a People Interrupted.* p. 4
[4] Solana, Fernando; Getino, Octavio. 'Towards a Third Cinema'*, Movies & Mothods.* p.47
[5] Rocha, Glauber. 'The Tricontinental Filmmaker', *Brazilian Cinema.* Johnson & Stam. p. 77
[6] Meshkini, Marzieh. *The Day I Became a Woman.* (2000)

The second act of the film shows the struggle of a married woman who decides to join a bicycle race and is pursued by her husband and multiple men from her family on horseback who demand that she quit the race and return home. The race becomes a symbol of freedom from the oppression of marriage as an Iranian woman. There is a stark visual contrast between the nature of the dessert, ocean, and horses, and the man-made bicycles and power-lines along the path. Symbolic of the societal restrictions put on Iranian women is the contrast between the women exerting themselves in black clothing and head scarves and the half-naked men riding the horses. The bicycles in this act can be seen as representative of movement forward in the woman's life, moving out of her marriage to the status of a free woman. However, the film does express it's concern over the sate of Iran's Women's Rights Movement by documenting a disturbing lack of comradeship between the women. The final shot of this sequence is from the point of view of a woman riding by as the protagonist is finally knocked off her bike by the men. She looks back, yet she does not go back to help her but continues to ride on.

Finally, the third act of the film follows a recently widowed old woman in a wheel-chair as she spends the money her husband left her on everything she was not allowed to have when he was alive. She pays a gang of boys to buy every modern convenience, including the refrigerator that she always dreamed of, and place it all along with her on a series of rafts that float out into the vast blue Ocean toward a distant cruise boat. The ocean seems to represent the vastness of her new-found freedom, and the endlessness of possibilities of a woman free from the rule of a husband.

Being a woman isn't the only obstacle explored in Iranian film. In *Blackboards*[7], a film made by Samira Makhmalbaf (daughter of successful director Mohsen Makhmalbaf), two traveling Kurdish teachers with Blackboards strapped to their back seek out students in rural Iran. The film takes place during the Iran-Iraq war and one teacher finds a group of elderly men on their way to Kurdistan after their village was bombed. The other comes across a group of young boys who are paid to carry goods across the border through the perilous mountains. The film follows the teachers as they try to teach students who are more concerned with survival than studies.

The harsh reality is that education doesn't have any real value to these people. To one boy who breaks his leg, education will not relive his pain, only the blackboard used as a piece of

[7] Makhmalbaf, Samira. *Blackboards* (2000)

wood made into a splint will. Also, the woman who is married of to the teacher is not interested in learning how to read "I love you," because what difference do those words mean to her when her husband wont show his love by crossing over the border with her. Instead he divorces her, abandons her. She takes blackboard as her dowry and walks away carrying those three powerful words on her back, utterly meaningless to her. The only boy who is interested in learning how to write gets shot the moment he writes his name; a name no longer valid.

Death is an inevitable part of life. The people of the United States were reminded of this on September 11th, 2001. The people of Iran and their neighbors in Iraq, and Afghanistan, are reminded of it every day a farmer steps on a land mine in his own field as recounted by an amputee in Mohsen Mahkmalbaf's *Kandahar*[8], or a mother gives birth to a lifeless child because her husband beat her as divulged by a grieving woman in Bahman Farmanara's *Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine*[9]. It should, therefore, be no surprise that the subject of death plays a large role in Iranian Cinema.

Deaths such as these are not shied away from in Iranian Art Cinema. One director who repeatedly explores themes of life and death, and specifically life after death, is Abbas Kiarostami. Watching a film by Abbas Kiarostami forces the mind of the spectator out of its numbed condition of passive viewer, perpetuated by Hollywoodian cliché and predictability, into a state of co-awareness with the character. To achieve this mental transformation, Kiarostami utilizes many techniques to encourage his audience to look more deeply, and thus, as the Iranian saying goes, use 'two borrowed eyes' to look beyond the image merely being projected onto the screen. His films *Through the Olive Trees*[10], which takes place in the earthquake devastated region of Northern Iran, and *Taste of Cherry*[11], in which a man drives around in his car searching for someone willing to bury him after he commits suicide that night, both successfully use these methods to question the nature of art, life and death.

One such technique is the use of the character as a reflection of everyday people in everyday situations. *Through the Olive Trees* is on the surface about the trials and tribulations of making a film in a rural village in Iran, but the theme is love and its ability to cross all boundaries (in this case those of class), as well as life after death (in the sought after creation of a

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[8] Makhmalbaf, Mohsen. *Kandahar* (2001)
[9] Farmanara, Bahman. *Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine* (2000)
[10] Kiarostami, Abbas. *Through the Olive Trees* (1994)
[11] Kiarostami, Abbas. *Taste of Cherry* (1997)

family by Hussein after the death of so many). In *Taste of Cherry*, the protagonist, Mr. Badii is looking for someone to burry him, this may be the narrative of the film, but it is not what the film is about. Here, the two borrowed eyes can see that it is really the nature of life that is explored through the discussion of the nature of death as his passengers try to discourage him from ending his own.

In both of these films the car is significant because it represents both isolation from the outside world, or Badii's "personal armor" [12]as Saeed-Vafa puts it, as well as a means of moving forward in life by interacting with the outside world. The circular movements of the car in *Taste of Cherry* imply being trapped in the circle of life as well as its ultimate completion. Like his life, Badii's car moves ever forward, there is no going back. It also represents a sense of control: when Badii is driving he can decide who comes into his car, his world, and what information he discloses to them. In *Through he Olive Trees*, the car allows for safe and secluded passage through the rubble of earthquake damaged villages and the people who live there.

Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, eloquently expresses the relationship between these two worlds when he writes: "though this film unfolds inside the most private space imaginable- the dark recesses of an individual consciousness bidding farewell to life- it perceives life itself almost exclusively in terms of public and social space, which is the space not only of a car on the road but of an audience in the cinema."[13]

The audience therefore assumes a role of creating and recreating art with their borrowed eyes that they use to find a deeper meaning within the films. Kiarostami once said that he believes in an "unfinished cinema that is completed by the creative spirit of the viewer, [so that] all of a sudden, we have a hundred films"[14] He achieves this by, firstly, blurring the line between fact and fiction so that the audience can identify with the character's struggles as representative of those in their lives. His use of real people as actors, often playing themselves further blurs the line. In *Through the Olive Trees* the protagonist, Hussein, plays himself only in the scene from the film that is being made within the movie, yet he is asked to exaggerate the number of casualties that his family endured, and Tehereh is not really his wife.

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[12] Saeed-Vafa, Mehrnaz. *Abbas Kiarostami*, University of Illinois Press, 2003. p. 72
[13] Saeed-Vafa, Mehrnaz. *Abbas Kiarostami*, University of Illinois Press, 2003. p. 31
[14] Saeed-Vafa, Mehrnaz. *Abbas Kiarostami*, University of Illinois Press, 2003. p. 29

Another tool Kiarostami uses to involve the audience is to put the camera in the literal position of a character being spoken to, thus placing the spectator in the mental situation of that character. In *Taste of Cherry*, as in all other of his films, Kiarostami does not use a script, but instead occupies the seat of both the passengers and the driver himself, eliciting responses from his actors while filming them. The filmmaker thus becomes the actor, the actor: the everyday person, the camera: their eyes. The audience is thus able to identify on a deeper level with the characters, and when 100 different people identify with a character or a story then there will undoubtedly be 100 different interpretations. Rosenbaum writes that if Kiarostami had wanted us the empathize only with Badii's "suicidal impulses", he might have told us more about him, but, according to him, this "would have interfered with his desire for us to empathize as well with Badii's three passengers, who know as little about this stranger as we do; it is their dilemma as well as his that the film is concerned with."

In *Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine*, death is represented as an inevitable product of society. Here, Farmanara, who plays himself as the protagonist of the film, has accepted this certainty, and has thus resorted to trying to control the *process* of his death by planning his own funeral under the guise of a documentary film. This film is thus not only about physical death, but social commentary on Iran and on filmmaking within the country. Farmanara speaks about the film emerging as a reaction to censorship in Iran: "the film emerged out of a very frustrating and depressive period when I was simply not allowed to work." [15] The critique of Iranian society can be seen in the scene with the mother and the dead baby. The woman lost her baby because she was beat by her husband who was driven crazy by unemployment. It was therefore the society that killed her baby. Likewise, when Farjami complains to his lawyer about losing his plot next to his wife, to which the lawyer responds "with our population problem soon we'll have ten level graves."

This critique of modern Iranian identity can be seen in the film *Salaam Cinema* (Hello Cinema) [16] by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, made in 1995 to celebrating 100 years of cinema. Shot originally as documentary footage for the "making-of" for the film, the movie chronicles the audition process for the film as thousands of non-actors desperate for a break show up to an audition that was originally only requested 100. The people are let in in groups of men or

[15] Dabashi, Hamid. *Close Up: Iranian Cinema. Past, Present and Future*, Verso, 2001. p. 144
[16] Makhmalbaf, Mohsen. *Salaam Cinema* (1995).

women. Each group is asked why they want to act, and then given 10 seconds to laugh and ten seconds to cry. Two sisters unable to cry argue so much about his techniques that Makhmalbaf gives them a chance to sit in his chair and do a better job, but the girls are just as mean if not meaner, demanding tears just as he did. Makhmalbaf turns the table on them again making them take their original places and cry on command. Finally the girls cry because they think they are not going to get the part. Makhmalbaf then tells them that he will make the movie about them using the footage that he has just taken for the audition and the sisters are thrilled. He tells the girls to write "Salaam Cinema" on a blackboard and hold it up. The movies ends and the message is clear: Iranians want to fit in with the rest of the world, often and the expense of relationships with each other, and forfeiting of tradition and/or cultural identity.

Iranian Art Cinema exposes many problems, and poses many questions, but does not provide any answers. In fact, the open ending, where the resolution of plot is unclear or altogether absent, has become a hallmark of the New Iranian Cinema. Kiarostami is quoted as saying that his intention is to leave his endings ambiguous: "audiences invent their own close-ups… because of their own attentiveness to what it happening. They furnish the meaning of the event"[17] Through these inquiries into art, life, and death, Kiarostami creates a bottom up dialogue that does not cheat his audience, but instead encourages them to use their mind and 'two borrowed eyes' to come to their own conclusions. An open ending, offered to the world represents the uncertainty of Iran's future, and confusion of their cultural identity, a question mark hanging over the country as if to say "dare we hope?"

[17] Saeed-Vafa, Mehrnaz. *Abbas Kiarostami*, University of Illinois Press, 2003. p. 108

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