Gold in the Jungle: The Role of the French in Popularizing the “New Iranian Cinema” of the 1990s

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Gold in the Jungle:

The Role of the French in Popularizing the “New Iranian Cinema” of the 1990s

Nima Samimi

A Thesis in the Field of Middle Eastern Studies
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University
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This study investigates the role of the French in popularizing the “new Iranian cinema” of the 1990s and looks critically at the nature of the post-colonial relationship between Iran and France. Did France play the key role in exposing the world to Iranian cinema? Were their motivations opportunistic, profiting the French at the expense of Iran’s film industry? Was it also crucial to the success of the “New Iranian Cinema”?

Established discourses on “postal cinema” (Iranian cinema after the 1979 revolution), globalization, national cinema theory, post-colonialism and modern mediaworks provide us with a nuanced view of the relationship between Iranian filmmakers, French production houses, the Iranian government, international film festivals and Hollywood. The success of the new Iranian cinema was in some ways a reaction to the racism and Islamophobia that was heightened after the Islamic revolution, an alternate means of diplomacy between Iran and its former “Western allies, whereby the smallness and intimacy of Iranian art films revealed the humanity of Iranian people as an alternative to their almost universal “Western portrayal as barbaric Islamic fundamentalists.

The investigation concludes that the complex negotiations of progress and post-colonialism resulted in an upward trend for Iranian cinema, ending its 1990s boom cycle only to transform into a diverse, transnational medium – both in spite of French involvement and because of it.
For AG, DT and RGS.

Without your love and encouragement, I would never have had this opportunity.
Acknowledgements

This paper is the culmination of almost nine years of work – a sprawling educational odyssey that took me across West Asia without leaving Massachusetts. I was able to persist in the face of many challenges, thanks to a multitude of people who greeted my efforts with warmth, patience and generosity.

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Chapter I
Origins and Context of Iranian Cinema

Iranian cinema enjoyed a decade of unprecedented international popularity, beginning with the appearance of Abbas Kiarostami’s *A Taste of Cherry* in the 1989 Cannes Film Festival. That year, in spite of the Iranian government’s attempt to block the film’s entry into the festival,¹ *A Taste of Cherry* went on to win the prestigious Palme d’Or prize. International screen appearances of Iranian films shot from 35 in 1988, to 377 in 1990, to an all-time high of 849 in 1999.²

Introduction

Iran’s film industry has experienced numerous changes from the introduction of the first film camera in 1900, to the first fiction film in 1930, to the first “talkie” in 1933, to the birth of the first internationally celebrated films in 1969, known as Iranian “new wave” cinema.³ After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the film industry took a decidedly different direction. It was a surprise to international film critics and foreign governments

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alike that only ten years after Khomeini took power, Iranian cinema had elevated itself to become one of the most celebrated cinemas of the world, in spite of the strenuous censorship present in the Islamic Republic.

This “new Iranian cinema” owed its success to many sources; the scores of filmmakers who paved the way in previous decades, the innovation of young contemporary directors, the ascension of moderate cleric (and future Iranian president) Mohammad Khatami to the position of minister of culture (he would build a symbiotic relationship with the burgeoning film industry) – but also to the warm reception it received in the West, starting in the late 1980s. Western film critics would praise the new Iranian Cinema. Western festivals (figure 1) would host Iranian films in record numbers and Western production companies would offer financing in times of economic hardship.

Ignited by the impressive reception of *A Taste of Cherry* at Cannes, the French film industry took a particular interest in the new Iranian cinema. By the middle of the decade, production companies like MK2 (“Marin Kamish Deux”) pioneered these kinds of relationships with Iranian directors and would play a key role in introducing Iranian films to European and American audiences. They also made substantial profits from films they purchased for tens of thousands of dollars and distributed for hundreds of thousands of dollars. In the words of Kamran Rastegar, “they felt like they had discovered gold in the jungle.”

By playing the key role in popularizing Iranian cinema internationally, France and Iran engaged in a post-colonial dance that was at once political, cultural, artistic, and economic and had two important results: first, an ever-evolving transformation and flourishing of Iranian cinema (inside and outside of Iran) and second, a cycle of post-colonial entanglement – with the West in general and France more specifically. This flourishing transpired in fits and starts, where major gains were often curtailed by shifts in Iranian governmental policy and the limitations of Western post-colonial hospitality. The cycle of post-colonial entanglement took the form of gestures of good will (positive film reviews, attention from prestigious festivals, funding from production houses) followed by the consequences of relying on the West for success (the pressure to cater to Western tastes, the loss of revenues to Western investors, the loss of credibility at home when dealing with foreign producers/distributers.) In this thesis, I will investigate these

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4 Kamran Rastegar, phone conversation with author, September, 2015.
themes. I will also discuss the extent to which the government of the Islamic republic paved the way for Iranian filmmakers to flourish in this period.

Before we delve into how the French played the key role in popularizing the new Iranian cinema, and then go on to interpret the significance of the fact that they did this, we must first ask “why it would matter for Iranian cinema to be well received in the West in the first place? What is the significance of the Western enthusiasm for Iranian film in this period?” I am, indeed, writing in the United States, where foreign cinema is generally unpopular (not to mention unprofitable), a product of our national disinterest for most things that do not relate directly to the economy, politics, and culture of the United States.

Hollywood films have, for the better part of the last century, dominated the globe in popularity, profitability, cultural hegemony (broadcasting different versions of the message that “the USA is the best nation on earth”), and political influence. Hollywood has arrived at a juncture in which it often profits more from international sales than from domestic, which has led to a radical shift in the nature, subject, quality and type of film it produces. Adult dramas once dominated the studio system (as well as the Academy Awards) and have been almost completely replaced by franchise and action movies with existing fan bases (super hero films, films based on old cartoons or television series, etc.) This shift is due, in large part, to the international profitability of these franchise films, which sport broad, brash, easy to follow characterizations and story lines that audiences everywhere have come to recognize as mainstream “entertainment”.

The studios manage to broadcast these films this far and wide, not solely based on their international appeal but also as a result of strong political support from Washington. According to Allen Scott:
Federal bureaucracies have continually pressed foreign governments to open their doors more widely to American films, with beneficial effects not only in terms of export earnings, but also of the direct and indirect developmental impacts on Hollywood itself. Over the years, Hollywood has received abundant help from the US State Department, the Commerce Department, and other agencies of federal government in promoting its products abroad.5

The national discourse on film in the United States makes it clear that our film industry has value, precisely for its ability to dominate, both at home and abroad. What, then, are the reasons that non-Hollywood films have value in the United States? The non-Hollywood films that are screened in the United States fall into one of two categories: independent films or foreign language films. These movies represent a wide variety of projects – an “independent film” made in the U.S. may work with a budget of $15,000 or $8 million, and a “foreign film” may be funded through state grants or via that nation’s private national film industry. Since they are less profitable, they receive less attention and are ultimately regarded as “artsy” intellectual experiments or low budget novelties. Since so few foreign films are screened in the U.S., and it is even more unusual that a nation’s cinema becomes notable in the U.S., it is therefore significant that the new Iranian cinema, the cinema of a political enemy, received as much attention as it did from trade magazines, independent cinemas and the many Iranian film festivals that popped up across the country. In the next chapter, I will discuss why the new Iranian cinema was even better received in France, why the French amplified the exposure of Iranian cinema across the West and the similarities between France and the U.S. as consumers of cinema – as well as the similarities between France and Iran as producers of cinema.

Given that Iranian film was not profitable (in any real sense) and did not conform to Western notions of what is valuable, what does it mean that its popularity expanded in the West so drastically in the decade following 1989? Why does it matter? How did it happen and who was responsible? Who profited, how and why? And what were the lasting effects?

A Brief History of Iranian Cinema

The first film camera appeared in Iran in 1900 at the court of Mozafferoddin Shah, but it would be 30 years before the first fiction film, Ovanes Ohanian’s *Abi and Rabi* debuted. The post-World War II period saw the first substantial growth of an Iranian film industry in the form of occasional art films and (more prominently) the rise of the “film farsi” genre, a Bollywood-esque style of filmmaking that relied on familiar tropes and accessible humor and was widely enjoyed by Iranians (figure 2). Official government censorship of film began in the 1920s, and while political criticism would continue to be curtailed in cinema throughout the next century (and to the present day), by the 1950s more leeway was allowed in depicting sexuality. This in turn would influence Ayatollah Khomeini’s condemnation of cinema in the late 1970s. 1969 saw the true birth of Iranian art film (the “New Wave”) and between 1969 and 1974, Iranian cinema enjoyed its first modest international acclaim. But in the brief period between

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1975 and 1979, domestic interest in Iranian films decreased due to the heavy competition from Hollywood imports.  


Before the Islamic revolution, cinema had met with disapproval from the religious sector, but After 1979 Khomeini was confronted with two options: to forbid cinema (as the Taliban would do in Afghanistan 15 years later) or to Islamicize it. Ultimately he decided it had much more value to the republic as a political and ideological tool to capture the hearts and minds (and Islamic principles) of the masses. In his own words,

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“Cinema is one of the manifestations of culture and it must be put to the service of man and his education.”9 The decade after the revolution provided the incubation period necessary for Iranian cinema to develop into a viable industry. In the 1990s, the new Iranian cinema would capture the imagination Western art cinema audiences, though it generally struggled to find an audience domestically.

This unprecedented decade of success and vibrancy is a result of a confluence of factors. The emergence of moderate Iranian voices, such as the ascendance of Mohammad Khatami to the position of Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, helped pave the way for an increased support for film and film expression. With the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and the death of Khomeini in 1989, political skirmishes proliferated. Khomeini had been the unmistakable ideological center of the revolution and his absence left room for his contemporaries to attempt to re-interpret the identity of the Islamic republic. In this new political space, Khatami and the new Iranian filmmakers would find a symbiosis.

Khatami buoyed the success of Iranian film as Minister of Culture and progressive filmmakers came out in droves to support his 1997 dark horse presidential bid, which he won. According to Richard Tapper,

With Khatami’s election, a new phase in Iranian cinema began. Many Long-suppressed films were now screened, and issues that had been taboo in the 1980’s were now addressed in films such as Rakhshan Bani-Etemad’s *The May Lady* (1998) and Tahmineh Milani’s *Two Women* (1999).

New government agencies were also established to support the arts, morality codes were relaxed (for example, from 1989 to 1993 scripts were no longer subject to

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government approval\textsuperscript{10}) and starting in 1979, Hollywood films were banned from the country, creating a new space for Iranian filmmakers to fill. While this appears to have been an unforeseen outcome, there were also more deliberate efforts to buoy the new film industry. According to Esfandiary: “To boost the economy of the local film industry the municipal tax on tickets sold for foreign films was increased from 20 percent to 25 percent, while for local films it was decreased from 20 percent to 5 percent.”\textsuperscript{11} In the 1987 national budget, a particular clause was added that obliged state banks to offer long-term loans for film producers.\textsuperscript{12} This shifts our narrative slightly. Western critics have most commonly voiced their surprise that “Iran – a country that could not possibly have a worse image in the U.S., even in most so-called progressive circles – was producing a cinema of international caliber under the mullahs.”\textsuperscript{13} But upon more careful consideration it becomes clear that Iranian cinema flourished in this period largely because of the new revolutionary government, not in spite of it.

\textbf{Why Iranian Cinema Matters}

Cinema has played important roles in Iranian culture and politics and has been used both as propaganda, and to unify Iranians in their national, cultural, regional, and religious identities. Indeed, the symbiotic relationship between Muhammad Khatami and Iranian filmmakers during his presidential bid in 1997 shows that, in spite of the strict

\textsuperscript{10} Tapper, “Introduction,” 8.


\textsuperscript{12} Devictor, \textit{Classic Tools, Original Goals}, 70.

\textsuperscript{13} Richard Peña, “Iranian Cinema at the Festivals” \textit{Cineaste} 31, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 40.
regulations filmmakers are subjected to, it is impossible to completely prevent cinema in Iran from becoming a tool of political dissent.

Iranians continue to this day to watch movies from around the world via black market imports and the roofs of urban homes across the country are punctuated with satellite dishes, providing access to most of what is on offer globally. Cinema matters in Iran, and it matters to different people in different ways. Some Iranian films are popular in Iran but have little reach outside the country, comedies being a prime example of this (which I discuss in further detail below). Iranian art film, which includes most of the “new Iranian cinema,” tends to draw only small crowds domestically – but there are exceptions and occasionally one of these films does well both at home and abroad. Iranians of the diaspora often relate to Iranian cinema in ways different from those in Iran – but with just as much diversity of experience. For some expatriates and exiles, it provides an opportunity to reconnect with their cultural and national identities and is connected to sense of pride and belonging, while for others it more often represents a misrepresentation of Iran and Iranians and serves as a reminder of the various injustices propagated by the Islamic republic.

Starting in the late 1980s, Iranian cinema began to matter outside of Iran as well, and whether or not it was well received in Africa, Asia or Latin America (there is little research to tell us one way or the other but it is not terribly likely), it exploded onto the scene in Europe and the United States, homes of the world’s biggest and most prestigious

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film festivals, the nations who also dominate the global conversation on film criticism and (maybe most importantly) who are the gatekeepers of international cinematic prestige.

India produces two-and-a-half times as many movies as the United States every year, but only makes about one-tenth the profit of the U.S. film industry. This discrepancy is because Bollywood movies are primarily popular in India, whereas Hollywood films premier internationally, as discussed above. There is a clear prestige associated with having your films be well received in the West, and that recognition can be measured in increased access to production financing, distribution deals, and higher box office revenues. These things can buoy the career of a filmmaker or (as in the case of Iran) an entire film industry, such that the world takes note and international opportunities increase. A warm reception in the West may also be a double-edged sword. One may benefit from foreign financing, but the Western production houses might make the lion’s share of profits from your film, syphoning money from one’s own industry. Western accolades may bring a particular director into the spotlight, but that director is unlikely to escape future criticism that he panders to the exoticizing gaze of the West.

Diplomacy

Another reason for the success of Iranian film in the West is the odd diplomatic role it played in the foreign relations between Iran and some Western nations whose diplomacy had fallen into disrepair. Before 1979, Iran had once been one of two key

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Western allies in the region (Israel being the other), but in the aftermath of the revolution and the hostage crisis, ongoing racist American anti-Iran propaganda and the theatrically anti-Western rhetoric of the Islamic Republic drove a wedge between Iran and the United States. Much like the “ping-pong diplomacy” of the early 1970s, where the U.S. and China faced each other in the Olympics as a sign that decades long political tensions were beginning to ease, the international success of the New Iranian Cinema functioned as a diplomatic surrogate (in the absence of real state diplomacy, which would not appear until the Obama administration) and served different purposes to different parties. For Iranians, it provided an opportunity to present the world with a version of Iran that contrasted with the prevailing fears and prejudices. According to Hamid Naficy:

There were certain characteristics of [Iranian films’] transnational reception that further contributed to their high recognition and regard. Their simple, quiet stories, told without the gloss and glamour of stars, special effects, violence and chases – their smallness – offered a refreshing contrast to the blockbusters and high-octane movies that dominated the world markets. Their humanism and smallness were doubly attractive as they seemed to offer a total contrast to the dominant view abroad of the Islamic Republic, the originating country, as a hotbed of hostility, violence, intolerance, and terrorism.16

On the other hand, Western nations sought to rehabilitate their image as imperialists and oppressors, what David Robinson refers to as “finishing decolonization.”17 For a Westerner to appreciate Iranian film expressed a certain level of perceived cultural sensitivity, a show of appreciating Iranian culture in spite of the prevailing political differences. This statement of admiration provided Western nations with an opportunity to move past their histories as colonial powers and establish

16 Naficy, Social History, 176.

themselves as benevolent, international patrons of the arts, who appreciate with nuance the wonders of an ancient civilization, in spite of the “backwardness” of their present government and society. This contrasted, though, with the reality that colonial attitudes toward Iran continued in the West, both in terms of Western cultural attitudes towards Iran and in terms of their nations foreign policies.

It must also be true that, in addition to the allure of “finishing decolonization,” Western audiences must have also genuinely enjoyed Iranian film on its artistic merits. It would be difficult for audiences, and in turn, cinéastes and other film industry professionals to differentiate between their delight in the unique qualities of Iranian film and the allure of achieving “finishing decolonization” as a national project, and so these two tendencies live side by side, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict.

The Effects of Racism and Islamophobia on Iranian Cinema

It is impossible to investigate the colonial dimension of our topic without also considering the racial dimensions. As demonstrated by Naficy above, Iranian cinema appealed to Western audiences as an artful, intelligent alternative to the Hollywood blockbuster. But they also appealed to Western audiences as exotic. Iranian films would have seemed unusual and unfamiliar to Western audiences if they had focused only on middle-class, urban life (as the majority of films in the U.S. do), but the fact that a large number of these films dealt with the rural lives of peasants added another dimension of the exotic. According to Shahab Esfandiary: “Skeptics maintain that the majority of films that are celebrated and awarded prizes in Western festivals are those that represent either
a gloomy and dark image of social conditions under the Islamic Republic, or an exotic and primitive image of Iranians in rural settings.”18

The British/Indian film *Slumdog Millionaire* helps to explain the way that racism operates through the vehicle of the exotic gaze. This film garnered extensive international discussion and controversy in 2008, when it achieved an incredible level of success. The film portrays poverty and violence in the Mumbai slums, in contrast to the allure and wealth of a television show, “So You Want to Be a Millionaire?”, where the unlikely protagonist ends up competing on the show and winning the grand prize. Critics of the film have argued that it is “poverty porn,” though film theorist and historian David Bordwell says the film’s portrayal of the slums and its inhabitants is not remarkably different from that of Indian cinema, and that *Slumdog* draws from a rich and interesting history of international film.19

What is lost in the discussion is the context in which the film is shown around the world. Indians took offense to *Slumdog* for various reasons. The word “Slumdog” was evidently created by the film and describing a slum’s inhabitants as “dogs” angered many. The sub-standard pay of the local actors used in the film drew further criticism. The Western accusation of “poverty porn” describes a certain glamorization of the violence and poverty in the slums – but why is this offensive in particular, given that Western film industries frequently (maybe primarily) glamorize violence and


misrepresent poverty? This film won seven BAFTA’s, eight Oscars and four Golden Globe Awards. It was the most publicized, most internationally popular Indian film of its time (and potentially of all time).

What this means is that the most significant exposure the Western world (and probably the majority of the non-Western world) has had to Indian Cinema comes in the form of this movie, a film that glamorizes Indian poverty, depicts a very specific kind of violence done to Indians by the state (the Mumbai police) and presents us with a singularly unlikely story, which is ultimately the story of the “American dream.” It is the idea that in a land of opportunity, even the poorest among us can become rich, with enough grit and hard work. In *Slumdog*, this “opportunity” comes in the form of a British TV show that was adapted for Indian audiences; the “opportunity” is imported from the West and is inseparable from the Western, liberal, democratic narrative of “freedom” being tied to the allure of upward financial mobility.

Would *Slumdog* have enraged as many critics if it were one of a dozen popular films depicting India that year? Would the meaning of the film have changed in that context? I believe it would have. The success of *Slumdog* in the West without any context for Indian cinema (or in many places, for India in general) meant that Westerners received these messages about India: poverty in India is different from poverty in the West; the brutality of the Indian state involves a level of savagery that distinguishes Indians from Westerners; the one thing Indians have going for them is the “democracy” we are exporting to the world, present in the idea that the American dream can become the Indian dream. The trappings of Western possibility (presented through the vehicle of
the game show) are the only salvation to the poor, non-white, and “backwards” people of the world.

Changing our focus back to Iranian cinema, the same dilemma applies. In many ways, the representation of Iranians in Iranian film are valid tellings of the stories of poor, rural Iranians, of children, women and men. But the context in which they are presented to the world may be what is most problematic. At the onset of the 1990s, U.S. audiences were presented with the Sally Field movie *Not without My Daughter* (figure 3), in which the white, American wife of an Iranian visits Iran and is then duped by him and held hostage by his family, who will not let her return to the U.S. with her daughter. Is the film a valid telling of an American’s experience in Iran? Indeed, it is based on the true story of Betty Mahmoody, who did suffer those injustices. In spite of the fact that the film did poorly at the box office, and that the controversy surrounding it left it with a reputation as a racist film, it was nonetheless an important depiction of Iran and Iranians in U.S. culture, as it loomed large as an example of Iranian barbarism and backwardness. It also helped to build upon the captivity narratives that had been stoked during the hostage crisis, wherein the United States portrayed itself as both victim and prisoner of a hostile foreign power (as it had done in colonial time with the native people of the U.S.).

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20 Naficy, *Social History*, 276, 284-286
In the United States, the film industry is twice as profitable as the music industry\(^\text{21}\) (but not as profitable as the video game industry,\(^\text{22}\) though video games borrow greatly from cinema in story, structure and even personnel\(^\text{23}\)). As a side, it is interesting to


\(^{23}\)“Why Hollywood actors are being drawn to star in video games,” The Washington Post, last modified April 28, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-
note that the video game industry has participated directly in demonizing Iran and Iranians through dozens of tactical war games, which reenact (and often re-write) military events such as the hostage crisis, where the player is tasked to “Storm the besieged American embassy, free the hostages from the radical ‘students’, and make it out of Tehran – a city swarming with anti-American militants.”

So again, I raise the issue of context. It is possible to defend the directors of the new Iranian Cinema and their choices regarding Iranian representation, and at the same time, to acknowledge the racism implicit contextually in the Western success of the new Iranian cinema? In the context of Western anti-Iranian racism, and the limited exposure of Western audiences to Iranian film, the release of these films at Western film festivals (and later to small Western markets) presented an image of Iran that audiences could only view through an exotic lens.

The point is driven home (again through an Indian lens and again pertaining to *Slumdog*) by comedian Aziz Ansari in his 2010 bit “Are White People Psyched All the Time?:

I was doing this interview once, and this guy goes, “So, you must be pretty psyched about all this ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ stuff.” And I was, like, “Ummm . . . Yeah! I am! I have no idea why, though—I had nothing to do with that movie. It’s just some people that kinda look like me are in this movie that everyone loves, and winning Oscars and stuff.” And then I was, like, whoa, whoa, whoa. Are white people just psyched all the time? It’s, like, “‘Back to the Future’—that’s us! ‘The Godfather’—that’s us! ‘The Godfather Part II’—that’s us! ‘Departed’—that’s us! ‘Sunset Boulevard’—that’s us! ‘Citizen Kane’—that’s us! ‘Jaws’—that’s us! Every fuckin’ movie but ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ and ‘Boyz n the Hood’ is us!”

24 Naficy, *Social History*, 291.

In this bit, Ansari offers a casual analysis of a more sophisticated argument. His interviewer assumes he is excited about the success of *Slumdog*, not just because Aziz and the film are both Indian, but because *Slumdog* stands out as a singularly successful Indian film, in an American landscape where Indian films almost never “win Oscars.” When Ansari points out that there is no more reason to connect him with this film than there is to connect a white American with the hundreds of films that screen annually in the U.S. depicting white Americans, he is speaking to the issue of context. Does anyone ever assume white Americans are excited about the latest Hollywood romantic comedy, for the similarities it bears to their lives? If Bollywood was as popular in the U.S. as it is in India, would the interviewer raise the specter of *Slumdog*? Since it not, is it fair to assume that all Indians in the U.S. would feel that *Slumdog* represents them? Again, there is the question of whether or not this film contains racist depictions of Indians, but there is also the question of whether or not Western racism shapes *Slumdog* into more exaggerated stereotypes based on the context in which it is viewed.

The Problem with “Iranian National Cinema”

Iranian cinema became a darling of the international festivals, partly because it was received as the national cinema of Iran. That is to say, audiences were presented with these films in a particular context, one that suggested that these films represented Iran and that they were accurate representations. In general, Western audiences have had (and continue to have) almost no real contact with Iran or Iranian culture. The contact they do have is limited to news reports (which portray Iran as a hostile Islamic enemy), U.S.
entertainment sources (the aforementioned movies about Iranian evils, video games glorifying military action against Iran, “professional wrestling”\(^2\), etc.), the occasional limited contact with Iranians and Iranian culture (personal relationships, visiting Iranian restaurants) and finally, imported Iranian films. To the overwhelmingly “liberal” art-house cinema audience, there is almost no other way to view Iranian film other than as a true representation of “real Iranian” culture, social practice, religious life, political life and national identity. But it is not just casual audiences who have perceived Iranian cinema as the “national cinema” of Iran; it has been the perspective of professional critics and scholars of film, as you will see in the discussion of Kiarostami below.

In his terrific study of the concept of national cinema, Andrew Higson argues that the idea of national cinema is so complex that it is a mistake to reduce it to a study of the films produced in and by a particular nation state. He breaks down the idea of national cinema into a series of smaller investigations and in this section I will use these subsets to have a closer look at the question of the new Iranian cinema and to what extent it was the national cinema of Iran. Higson’s line of thought is demonstrated nicely in this series of questions, each delving deeper to the core of the issue than the last:

what are the conditions under which a particular mode of film practice, or a specific range of textual practices, or a particular set of industrial practices comes to be named a national cinema? Indeed, what is involved in calling forth the idea of a national anything, cultural or otherwise? In other words, what is involved in positing the idea of nationhood or national identity?\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Hossein Khosrow Ali Vaziri, a former bodyguard of the Shah of Iran, became famous as the “Iron Sheik,” where he played up the racist depiction of Iranians to stoke the anger/delight of WWF wrestling crowds. “Wrestling racism: when does crude caricature become Islamophobia?,” The Guardian Online, last modified April 10, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/sport/shortcuts/2016/apr/10/wrestling-racism-butlins-crude-caricature-islamophobia.

Here Higson takes us from the question “what are the components of national cinema (be they artistic, technical, industrial, political)” to “are there any national artforms (or shared national products) at all” to “why do we have nationhood or national identity?” As we peel away the layers of the onion, we see that this is a complicated issue – but in many ways, still a useful idea.

I would like to start with Higson’s final question, “what is involved in positing the idea of nationhood or national identity?”. There are two ways to go about investigating “the idea” of national identity. The first is to intentionally overlook, misunderstand, or misinterpret the diversity of what goes on in a nation, and then carefully craft a singular narrative of what defines that particular nation, based on the dominant ideas and cultures, which are always those of the political, economic, and cultural elites. The second is to delve into a complicated (and often unsatisfying) investigation into that very diversity and explore why it exists, what makes it tick, and what it means. Both of these approaches live side by side in a way, in that the former is an accurate portrayal of the way a nation projects its “national identity” and the latter contains the limitless details of that nation’s true identity. One is an easy-to-digest mythology that is unendingly broadcast to whoever will listen, the other is an unquantifiable conversation that poses as many questions as it offers answers. They exist in the same time and space but are diametrically opposed. They are also both necessary because the former shows us where the conversation on “nationhood” currently resides and the latter provides us with the reality of what it actually is.

With respect to the idea of Iranian national cinema, Higson makes this useful comment: “the concept of a national cinema has almost invariably been mobilized as a
strategy of cultural (and economic) resistance; a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood’s international domination.”

There are a number of reasons a country might want to think of the cinema that a nation produces as national cinema. In the case of Iran, the West has essentialized the new Iranian cinema as national cinema for the reasons stated above. But Iranians may have also viewed this cinematic moment as national cinema in order to differentiate it from both Hollywood and the other cinemas of the world. While, on the one hand, the idea of national cinema can reduce a nation’s cinema into the idea that it represents the whole nation, on the other hand, it can be a way of saying a cinematic tradition is distinct and has value, not in spite of the fact that it is different from Hollywood but because of it.

According to Higson, there are two ways to “establish the imaginary coherence of national cinema.” He uses the word “imaginary” as a way of reminding us that if we are able to conceive of national cinema in a neat and tidy way, that we have settled for a construct that is helpfully tangible but at the same time limited by its clarity – we have taken something complicated and made it simple, to make it easier to understand.

The first way is to compare and contrast it to the cinemas of other nations. The second is to explore a nation’s cinema in relation to other already existing economies and cultures of that nation state. In other words, to study “the ways in which cinema inserts itself alongside other cultural practices and the ways in which it draws on the existing cultural histories and cultural traditions of the producing nation, reformulating them in cinematic terms, appropriating them to build up its own generic conventions.”

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28 Higson, Concept of National Cinema, 37.

29 Higson, Concept of National Cinema, 43.
delve into this in more detail in the next section on Iranian comedies and the ways in which they drew from pre-filmic Persian culture and literary/theatrical traditions. The first method reveals itself in Hamid Naficy’s quote above, about the Iranian film’s “simple, quiet stories, told without the gloss and glamour of stars” – he is saying the new Iranian cinema delighted Western audiences because they were not Hollywood films. Indeed, Jean Michel Frodon confirms this approach in his article on legendary Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami (something I investigate in detail below) when he says that

[The] process of [recognizing Kiarostami’s films] started with the distribution throughout Europe of his 1987 movie Where is My Friend’s Home?, which hit the screens of Parisian movie theaters in 1990. It was advertised as a “movie for children,” though French audiences were not familiar with Iranian movies, nor were they eager to discover anything other than the established Disney or Spielberg productions. Parents prefer to know up front what they are exposing their children to. Encouraged by positive film reviews, a handful of open-minded movie buffs let themselves be seduced, and quickly spread the word to their friends and relatives.30

From both inside and outside of Iran, this method of establishing the existence and the value of Iranian national cinema was embraced and applauded.

The second method of “looking inward,” when applied to Iran, reveals a more nuanced effect. In her study on the new millennium comedies of Iranian cinema, Nacim Pak-Shiraz explains how modern Iranian comedies draw much influence from the previously discussed film farsi genre, which in turn borrowed heavily from the traditional Iranian comic theater of taqlid, a product of Qajar dynasty (1785-1925) era court practices.

These included not only Mozaffaradin Shah’s (r. 1896–1907) “preference for comedy and burlesque” but also “the general tendency in the royal courts to retain a coterie of official hybridized comedies, mimics, and jesters who, with the Shah’s consent and for his pleasure, made fun of all social strata, including royalty.31


Here we see the way that Iranian cinema drew on earlier traditions and “reformulated them in cinematic terms” – but with regards to comedies, and not to the festival films of the new Iranian cinema, which were almost exclusively dramas. The new Iranian cinema was inevitably influenced by earlier artistic traditions but also represented a look outward to Europe and the international arena. Indeed, Hamid Naficy describes the new Iranian cinema as “postal,” in the sense of it representing themes and ideas that came about post-revolutionarily, after cinema’s re-institutionalization, after the Iraq war, and after Ayatollah Khomeini’s death. He says that

[the art-house and experimental cinemas are also “postal” in the way some films reject the exclusionary high culture, authoritarian certainties, and politicized aesthetics of modernism for the more nuanced, open, ambiguous, self-reflexive, self-inscriptional, intertextual, pluralist, playful, and humanist ethics and aesthetics of postmodernism. Finally, the art-house films are post-national and post cinema, in that they exist both outside the origination nation and outside traditional movie houses: they live in transnational, international and global mediascapes – film festival, commercial movie houses, art-house venues, galleries, museums, television, video distribution, and cyberspace.]

In the section below on Kiarostami, I will explore the ways that he borrowed from the auteurs of the French New wave, which adds to this picture of the directors of the new art cinema as self-conscious creators of international art cinema, and not disciplined purveyors of local entertainment with a domestic audience in mind.

Hollywood has been much criticized, often legitimately, for the cultural and economic hegemony that it very intentionally perpetrates on every moviegoing nation. In our discussion of national cinema, where does Hollywood fit in? Is Hollywood the national cinema of the United States? Are U.S. indie films the national cinema of the U.S.? Do all films created and funded in the U.S. comprise our national cinema? What

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32 Naficy, Social History, 176.
does it mean that in most countries of the world, Hollywood comprises the majority of the film industry’s earnings and thus is a major cultural and economic force in the host nation? Higson sheds a curious light on this topic and offers a contrasting view on both the hegemonic nature of Hollywood, and the way we think of Hollywood’s effect on national cinema both at home and abroad.

It would require several pages of analysis just to scratch the surface of “whether or not Hollywood is the national cinema of the U.S.” and, while interesting, is not central enough to our topic for me to broach. For the sake of argument let us agree that the national cinema of the United States is, as I have postulated, located in the complex arrangements (financial, political, international, multicultural, personal, racial, gendered, class, etc.) that comprise the nation itself and its relationship to the world. If we appreciate that this complex arrangement makes up U.S. national cinema, and that Hollywood must be one element of this construct, we can then investigate its impact around the world. Higson says that Hollywood feeds into the cultural traditions of other national cinemas, since so much of any given nation’s film culture is essentially “Hollywood”. His explanation for why Hollywood has been so successful abroad is fascinating and multifaceted. First, he quotes Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in saying that the strength of American cinema was never just economic…[and] the basic reason for Hollywood’s dominance was artistic and cultural. The American cinema set out in the first place to be popular in America where it served an extremely diverse and largely immigrant public. What made it popular at home also helped make it popular abroad. The ideology of American cinema has tended to be far more democratic than that of the cinema of other countries. This in part reflects the actual openness of American society, but it is above all a rhetorical strategy to convince the audiences of the virtues and pleasures of being American. Translated into the export arena, this meant a projection of America as intensely – if distantly – appealing. When matched against American films of the same period, their British counterparts come across all too often as
restrictive and stifling, subservient to middle class artistic models and to middle- and upper-class values.  

Here we get an image of hegemonic Hollywood as both an exportation of the diversity and openness that was in part pioneered in the United States, as well as the propaganda of American exceptionalism, which is also prescriptive (particularly outside of the West) as the gold standard of enlightened democracy. But Higson adds that

[...] the rhetoric of democracy and populism is built into the formal organization of the American film, with its classically strong and dynamic narrative drive towards individual achievement – although this also points to the limitations of the rhetoric, since problems and their resolutions are invariably articulated only in relation to the individual within a substantially unchanged capitalist patriarchy.

On the one hand, Hollywood has the economic ability (often supported by the political machinery, as we saw above) to penetrate foreign markets, and this is supported by the intelligence of American films to appeal to a diverse population, which in turn speaks to the diversity of the global audience. On the other hand, it is a delivery device for American propaganda, an ideology that focuses on the struggle of the protagonist against her oppression, but only ever allows her to overcome personal hardship and does not even consider the possibility of effecting real systemic change. Thelma and Louise strike a blow at the sexism, misogyny, and male domination that may have defined their lives, but their suicide pact does not name or address those institutions of oppression in the way that, say, the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s did. Bruce Willis might kill the foreign bad guys at the end of Die Hard, but it obfuscates any conversation about the nature of crime in America, international hatreds based on histories of war and

33 Higson, Concept of National Cinema, 39.

34 Higson, Concept of National Cinema, 40.
nationalism, racism in America (his supporting “buddy cop” is a black man), or sexist internal narratives where he, the strong man, saves the weak women he loves. Though these films may have provided some useful perspectives on diversity, personal achievement, and the democratic process, they are rife with the Darwinian mantras of American dream propaganda.

It is also interesting to note that in England, the British film industry, according to Higson, has been financially tied to Hollywood from the beginning: “such that the American studios have had their own distribution companies operating in Britain, while the major British companies have built up close relationships with American producers and distributors, who often also have substantial financial interests in British companies.”35 In addition to this, Higson writes: “Hollywood tends to consume British stars for its own films, thereby increasing the stake which British audiences have in those films.”36 Given all of this, how do we separate out the national cinema of England from that of Hollywood if consumption is part of national cinema, and Hollywood is the bulk of what is consumed? And with regards to British cinema itself, what are its principal influences if British filmmakers evolve in an artistic space that is dominated by Hollywood? It would seem that British national cinema is at once deeply British and deeply American.

If we extend this exercise to Iran though, we draw very different conclusions. The relationship between England and the U.S. is in some ways similar and in some was

35 Higson, Concept of National Cinema, 41.

36 Higson, Concept of National Cinema, 40.
different than that of the U.S. and Iran (if we include the century before 1979). But where England has absorbed Hollywood and is permanently entangled with it, Iran has formally rejected Hollywood, in spite of the industry’s ubiquitous presence in Iranian life. Hollywood eclipsed Iranian film between 1976 and 1979 and all but killed off the Iranian film industry. It was banned (“Western, decadent”), after the revolution but has been imported via the black market and consumed voraciously since.

If we accept Nowell-Smith’s idea that American film contributed a perspective of “openness” in England, then this contrasts sharply with the impact it has had in Iran. Hollywood is, on the one hand, enjoyed by much of the Iranian public but denounced by the theocracy and those sympathetic to it. When Hollywood portrays Iranians at all, it shows them as barbarian extremists, living in an eternal and backwards past. There is little economic overlap in terms of either production or distribution, and while there are several Iranians who either produce or act in films made in the West, few of them work in Hollywood and they are small in number in general. Those who do make films outside of Iran are still subject to the often-divisive judgments and proclamations of official governing bodies.37

37 For example, Iranian actress Golshifteh Farahani claims that famed director Asghar Farhadi (both of whom currently live and work in France) would not speak to her at the 2018 Cannes film festival, in spite of the fact that they were two of the only three Iranians nominated in the festival. Farahani believes that this is because she has been banned from returning to Iran, as a result of her posing nude for a French magazine in 2011. She believes that Farhadi dismisses her, in spite of the fact that they are both in conflict with the Islamic republic, because she has been branded “nonexistent” by the Iranian state. In an interview at Cannes she remarks, “il prononce même pas mon nom parce que je suis hors la loi. [he won’t even say my name because I am outside of the law].” Movie Star Iranian, “انتقاد تند گلشیفته فراهانی در مورد اصغر فرهادی,” published May 16, 2018 on YouTube, video, https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=NhjieO93sco).
In essence Higson argues that national cinema can never be one thing, can never have one definition, and above all cannot be summed up as “the cinema of X nation.” The idea of national cinema is a jumping off point that leads us into a larger discussion and that discussion requires us to investigate the diversity that makes up a nation’s identity – which is in many ways the opposite of the concept of national cinema as being “representative of that particular nation.” Applied to the Iranian context, national cinema is a construct, a useful exercise we might use to pose various questions regarding the nature of the production, consumption and reverberations of Iranian film, both inside and outside of Iran. It is not, however, a descriptor of a particular collection or branch or genre of Iranian films that “represent Iran” more officially or accurately than any others.

Higson’s view on national cinema holds true for all ideas related to nationhood. What is, for example, the national dish of Iran? Persian cooks often claim that, in the kitchen, an Iranian is judged by their preparation of *Khoresht Fesenjan*, a stew made with pomegranates, walnuts, and chicken. But is it prepared the same in the North as it is in the South? Are the same ingredients available in both places? Is the tradition the same in Iranian Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Muslim families alike? And what about those who argue that *Abgoosht* (a lamb and chickpea stew) is a more apt national dish? As is the case of cinema, the discussion is more interesting (and more appetizing) than a resolution that proclaims, once and for all, what food reigns supreme as “the national dish of Iran.”

The Absence of Comedy

Also of interest is the fact that there are many film genres in Iran, but only certain styles of filmmaking appear in Western festivals. Nacim Pak-Shiraz’s fascinating study
of “New Millennium Comedies of Iranian Cinema” asks (among other things), why are serious Iranian art films celebrated internationally but Iranian comedies ignored? The most obscure Western film can be found with a simple Google search, but there is not a trace of a mention of the comedies in her study anywhere on the Internet – not only are they ignored by Western filmgoers, it is as if they do not exist. In many ways, these films delve deeper into the nuance of life in Iran than film dramas, including a whole genre of films that are devoted to depictions of the diaspora. Here, lengthy commentary can be found on the relationship of Iran to the West, through the vehicle of Iranians returning after stints (or sometimes whole lifetimes) abroad.

These characters are portrayed in a number of ways; sometimes foolish victims of Western decadence, who return to Iran shadows of their former proud, substantial, Iranian selves. Other times they are portrayed as kind and tolerant interlopers, who remain firmly connected to their Iranian roots but bring with them the “openness” and modernity of Western cultures. She shows that this story appears in early Iranian literature and theater and thus, “the theme of the Iranian who returns home has a longer history than does Iranian cinema.”

What does it say about the reception of Iranian film in the West that these films are entirely ignored? It is often assumed that humor is the hardest thing to translate between languages – is it for this reason? At some level it may be. After all, in order to understand humor, we must understand context. In the example of the 2008 film *The Son of Tehruni,* the lead character, according to Pak-Shiraz:

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38 Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Imagining the Diaspora*, 173.

39 The original Persian title of this film is not available via the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB), the Academic Search Primer, Google search, JSTOR or Naficy’s lengthy list of Persian
has returned with strange mannerisms. His appearance and behavior place him as an outsider both within society and at home. He has long, unruly hair, which, as his father puts it, makes him look like Tarzan (he does not mean this in a good way) and his language is interspersed with English, making him indecipherable to people around him. He wears “western” brands that appear ridiculous and instead of walking or driving he skates around the streets.  

These are nuances that might escape a foreign audience and, in turn, render such a film inaccessible. Indeed, in this particular case, the things that make the protagonist the object of ridicule and humor are the very things we take for granted as regular parts of Western culture. But at the same time, is not it likely that the average Western foreign filmgoer is watching Iranian films specifically because they offer a view into an unfamiliar world, subtitled with an unfamiliar language? So why are audiences delighted with, say, A Taste of Cherry and not even exposed to The Son of Tehrini?

Viewed through the lens of post-colonialism, we might argue that the prurient Western interest in the oriental and the exotic steer the interest of the cinéastes and film festivals away from comedies, which concern themselves with the minutia and dynamics of Iranian life. Serious art films, with their depiction of tradition and the beauty of the rural poor are likely to fit nicely into the fantasies and preconceptions of the post-colonial audience, with their “odd” customs and gorgeous natural locals. But audiences might be less prepared to delve into the finer points of Iranian society and ask, “what is the role of the state in regulating private life?” or “what are the different ways Iranians view their relatives who have left and come back?” or “why are Iranian musicians shown less respect in Iran than their overseas counterparts?”

film titles in Social History, vol. 4. The only mention of the film I can find of this title is in Nacim Pak-Shiraz’s paper and she does not list the original title.

40 Nacim Pak-Shiraz, Imagining the Diaspora, 177.
From another perspective, humor is the universal language. Indeed, American comedies premier across the world and are understood and appreciated (though some comedy is translated unrecognizably through voiceover and other elements are “lost in translation”). Consider again the early Iranian theater (taqlid) and the comic scenes it depicted: “usually consisting of short comic stories sung by two to three actors, typically ending with a chase and a beating scene.” These tropes (and the classical taqlid characters) appear updated in modern Iranian film. Are these not the same kinds of scenes we would associate with “slapstick” American comedies, where the hapless protagonist winds up in a series of physical catastrophes that may not be funny to everybody but do, at least, represent a certain universal language of physical comedy?

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41 Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Imagining the Diaspora*, 175.
Chapter II

The Role of the French

France has a long colonial history in the Muslim world, dating back to Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and continuing in many ways to the present day.

Origins of Franco-Iranian Relations

French interest in the region was motivated by a combination of early Islamophobia and colonial appetite during one of the major periods of European expansion into Africa. According to David Robinson:

The French feared Islam, recalling its long history of opposition to Christendom as well as its “incursions” into southwestern and southeastern Europe. But they had no illusions about rolling back the Muslim identity of most of their subjects. They would have to establish institutions of control. If they were successful in institution building, and in establishing a certain hegemony as a “Muslim power,” they might reduce investment in the apparatus of repression.\footnote{Robinson, Paths of Accommodation, 76.}

When he says France identified itself as a “Muslim power” (puissance musulmane), he means that they sought to be an empire that was singularly skilled in manipulating and subjugating Muslim peoples. The French worked hard to understand the Muslim societies and cultures of Northern Africa, in order to generate a wealth of information useful in securing allies and isolating enemies.

Unlike the United Kingdom, Russia, and the United States, France never had a direct imperial presence in Iran – though it has maintained a strong cultural presence over the last two hundred years. According to Pourarian and Nikpour, French contact with Iran

\footnote{Robinson, Paths of Accommodation, 76.}
dates back to a French monk who visited Iran in 1610 in an effort to build a relationship between Shah Abbas of the Safavid dynasty and Henry IV. Visits from French military leaders, dignitaries, and noblemen continued over the next 400 years and resulted in the French being the main foreign cultural influence in Iran during that period. Many French schools opened in Iran (starting in the Qajar period) and in the 20th century a French cultural embassy was opened in Tehran that had centers for teaching language and, interestingly, broadcasting film. Institutions of higher education began to follow the French model, sciences drew from French learning and were taught in French and French became universally known as the international language and was the de facto second language of the Iranian upper class (though it was also taught as a second language in the public school system). Pourarian and Nikpour add: “In the Reza Shah Reign, about two-thirds of Iran's expatriates to Europe traveled to France” (thought this may have been true before and after this era).

Similarly, in France, “some cultural institutions were also engaged in studying, teaching and researching Persian culture and language.” Around that time a French archaeology team that was permanently stationed in Iran merged with the French Institute of Iran studies and created a new institute called the “French Institute in Iran (IFRI), a cultural institute under the auspices of the French foreign ministry to carry out

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45 Pourarian and Nikpour, *Ontology of Iranian-French Cultural Relations*, 27.

humanitarian, social, and archeological research in Iran.”  

Moreover, in the early days of the modern Pahlavi government, in 1927 substantially more Iranian students were sent to study abroad in France than any other country – 245 students (42% of the total) as opposed to the next most visited nation (which was Germany at 57 students and 10%). By 1969 that number had doubled to 537 (and was still at a similar 46% of the total students studying abroad).

There is also ample evidence of the influence of the French language on Iran and the Persian language over time. According to Guitty Deyhime:

Although France did not have the perennial political and military influence of Russia or Britain on Persia, it served, particularly in the 19th and early part of the 20th century, as the most important model of modern secular culture for Persia as well as many other countries of the region. French was not only the language of the corps diplomatique and haute couture but was also used as a second language in European royal courts and aristocratic circles particularly when refinements of cuisine, manners, and etiquette were discussed.

Indeed, the Persian language contains several hundred loan words, which have become part of everyday language – most notably the use of the word merci for “thank you” and, interestingly, amperialism from the French “imperialism”.

Unlike the British, Russians, and Americans, the French never occupied Iran or made direct threats to its sovereignty. But as I have demonstrated, there was a concerted effort on the part of the French to consolidate their influence on Iran and Iranians in an effort to reap some of the benefits of a colonial relationship without being actual colonizers. These benefits were sometimes political (Iranian ideals of democracy were


modeled after French political ideology before 1989), sometimes economic (as in the present-day case of the Peugeot car company\textsuperscript{50}), and sometimes had to do with access (as in the case of the French archeologists who were welcomed into Iran as a satellite of the French embassy).

Abbas Kiarostami: French Cinéastes and Iranian Cinema

French cinéastes, who have historically been critical of Hollywood, warmly received the Iranian films that started to trickle in to French festivals and cinemas in the late 1980s. If we are to investigate the role that the French played in popularizing Iranian cinema in that period, we must take a closer look at why these critics enjoyed Iranian film, what they made of it and how they communicated about it. I will begin this investigation with a case study of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami.

Kiarostami is worthy of particular consideration because, according to Azadeh Farahmand, “the recognition that Kiarostami has received outside Iran since the late 1980s through festival circuits, articles, anthologies and TV programmes far exceeds that of the other [Iranian directors]….”\textsuperscript{51} As the most visible and most internationally celebrated Iranian director of his time, he serves as an important illustration of what Iranian directors produce, why they produce it, who their audience is and what the consequences of this turn out to be.


Iranian cinema is highly regulated by the state. This regulation comes in several forms; scripts are subject to official review; strict limits are put on dress, language, the portrayal of sexuality, religion, and political messaging; even a film where characters recite classical poems that are frowned upon by the Islamic Republic will sink a project. As a result, there is an ongoing debate over whether or not messages and metaphors critical of the republic are hidden in Iranian films. Though some cinéastes claim to see such messages hidden in the works of Kiarostami, scholars are clear that these are willed into existence by these writers. Above all, Kiarostami’s work is rooted in the personal, and in the idea that human beings are more alike than we are different. In a 2006 interview with Shahab Esfandiary he says, magnanimously, “We have different languages, cultures and religions. But we are profoundly the same. We share in common the serious fundamental matters in life that we all deal with. So if you contemplate about yourself and be truthful and honest with yourself, what you will say will not be just about yourself. Even a person from Guatemala, with a different culture, or a person from Sweden will understand and engage with your film.”

This passage illustrates Kiarostami’s personal motivations for filmmaking, as well as a clear interest in international appeal. Kiarostami’s early career was in Tehran’s Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents and had a profound influence on the direction he took his filmmaking – children featured centrally in most of his early works. Farhamand asserts that in Kiarostami’s films, “village themes and

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53 Esfandiari, Iranian Cinema and Globalization, 125.
location shooting in rural landscapes not only take viewers away from urban politics, but also reinforce the exotic look of Iranian films – and increase their marketability abroad. Esfandiary’s interview with Kiarostami gives a picture of a man who, on the one hand is deeply rooted in his Iranian nationality (“Nowhere in the world do I feel the peace and comfort I do feel here”), but at the same time has been able to vastly expand his reach, popularity, and influence as a filmmaker on the international stage.

Kiarostami shows some contradiction in the tension he experiences between maintaining artistic purity as an Iranian director and succeeding on the broadest, largest possible scale. He concludes the interview by stating that “I originally belong here [in Iran] and even if I was granted freedom to make whatever film I like, I will still make films quite similar to the ones I have already made.” Earlier in the interview, though, Kiarostami admits that “if I were to have a chance to make a multi-million-dollar big production film, I sure won’t reject it!” Indeed, four years after this interview in 2010, Kiarostami made *Certified Copy* a film that starred a British actor, a French superstar, was filmed in Tuscany, and sported a 6-million-dollar budget.

It is also worth mentioning that Kiarostami’s subjects are almost always poor or working class, though he clearly recognizes that this group of people is not the most likely audience for his films. He says, “the beauty of the world is in our differences. The reason why people spend money on tourism is because they want to see different things,”

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54 Farahmand, *Perspectives*, 100.

55 Esfandiary, *Iranian Cinema and Globalization*, 127

different cultures, different costumes, different spaces and different geographies.” The “people who spend money on tourism” are not the subjects of his films; his characters cannot afford such extravagancies. But by using rural and working people, their locations and the themes of their lives, Kiarostami crafts allegories and metaphors for life in Iran and, indeed the more ubiquitous nature of life itself. French film critic Jean Michel Frodon clearly appreciates this predilection of Kiarostami in this 2001 article, where he practically canonizes the director:

Kiarostami’s voice is most striking. Farsi is often soft and musical, but no one can put things to words with quite the mastery he can. The rhythm of his language, his long silhouette and well-drawn features, an honest but reserved smile—the discrete nature of the eye behind the camera capture the director’s aristocratic presence. They explain why he is considered a great director almost as if by birthright.

Frodon goes on to demonstrate two things: that his love for Kiarostami is directed through an exotic, French, post-colonial lens and that his understanding of the politics and history of Iranian cinema is rooted in more fantasy than fact. He claims that the revolution was always in support of film but misses the nuance of what Khomeini was supporting (is fostering propaganda film the same as supporting film?). He is one of the aforementioned authors who sees political critique in Kiarostami’s work where it does not exist, claiming that directors like Kiarostami “display quiet disapproval of the authorities’ tendencies to make them follow the official line of thought.” He also has reversed the reality of the market for Iranian film, portraying it as popular domestically and unpopular abroad. In fact it was not especially popular anywhere, with the exception

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of the high-art arenas of film festivals and independent cinemas, where its positive reception has been heralded in contrast to the other similarly unpopular cinemas of the world. Kiarostami himself points out that in most nations, it is “popular cinema” that maintains the infrastructure, that in turn, supports local, independent cinema.60

As I discussed above, before 1979 the film farsi genre was a legitimate, popular film medium – and it was swiftly extinguished by the clerics when they took power. As Lahiji puts it: “Cinema in Iran missed the opportunity to add its massive potential weight to bring women out onto the social scene as women, and…to participate in social and economic processes as real persons.” In film farsi, song and dance and semi-naked female stars (“unchaste dolls”) appealed to the fantasies of sexually deprived young men, profited from “neglecting, even damaging the social status of women…”61 Unchaste Dolls came to dominate the silver screen as the sole cinematic representation of Iranian women.62

Compare this to Frodon’s treatment of the film farsi genre: “movies catering to a broader audience are deprived of their commercial value by the government’s high-minded moral rigor. Potential markets in neighboring Muslim and Asian countries, where audiences have developed a keen liking for movies depicting scantily clad and voluptuous female stars, thus remain inaccessible for Iranian offerings.”63 From Lahiji we

60 Mir-Hosseini, Negotiating the Politics of Gender, 194.


62 Tapper, New Iranian Cinema (Introduction), 16.

63 Frodon, Universal Iranian, 221.
get a perspective on how film farsi objectified and dehumanized Iranian woman and from Frodon, a sense of regret that these titillating (and profitable) styles are off-limits to the great auteurs of Iran.

None of these things are particularly surprising – that an Iranian director, famed for his independent narrative voice is enamored with big budget productions or that a French film critic romanticizes the sexist thread in the history of Iranian film. But it illustrates something about the nature of this sort of alliance between Iranian directors and the West – in many ways they are on the same page. Recently, American independent movie director Rian Johnson was selected to direct the newest addition to the Star Wars saga. His previous film, Looper, had a budget of 30 million dollars (at this point he was already a well-respected independent director and the film sported an all-star cast), followed by the whopping 200-million-dollar budget for Star Wars. In the end, how many artists would turn down an opportunity to share their vision, their ideas, and inspiration with a massive audience? Indeed, according to Tapper: “Farahmand looks skeptically at the international success of Iranian cinema, stressing its economic and political – rather than its artistic – basis.”64 She notes that Iranian cinema has faced and continues to face an economic crisis that can be characterized by a discrepancy between supply and demand – where the state wants to fund a cinema that the public does not want to see, and so it becomes financially untenable.

An argument can be made that there is a circular link between Kiarostami and the French, dating back to the late 1950s, which saw the birth of French New Wave Cinema, which is (in “Western cinema, at least) considered one of the most influential film

64 Tapper, New Iranian Cinema (Introduction), 10.
movements in film history. Abbas Kiarostami claims to be unfamiliar with the French New Wave, but French cinéaste Jean Duchet asserts that “Kiarostami’s belief in cinema as an instrument of knowledge, his method of working, of giving priority to its means (whose presence the filmmaker systematically reveals), make him one of the most subtle descendants of the theories developed by the [French] new wave.” If this is the case, if Kiarostami was either knowingly or unknowingly drawing from the New Wave tradition, it raises the question of whether or not French critics warmed to his films at least in part because he was working in tandem with a home-grown film tradition that they themselves had championed for decades.

It is also interesting to note that there are similarities between the state interventions in the film sector in Iran and France. For example, for a period in the early 1980s, Iran implemented a state subsidy system, whereby low-interest loans could be awarded to a film that had box office success – but only retroactively. A similar financial intervention was created in France in 1959 to bolster its film industry. Similarly, the Iranian “House of Cinema” and the French “National de la Cinématographie (CNC) play similar roles as intermediate bodies that intervene between the state and those employed in the film professions. Lastly, Iran has sometimes cited French cultural protectionism as a parallel to the Islamic republic’s mandate prioritizing Iranian culture. The idea of the


67 It is also interesting to note (in furthering the connection between the film traditions of Iran and France) that France has produced the second most films from Iranian expat directors since the late 1950s, with the United States at 213 and France at 69. From Hamid Naficy, “Making Films with an Accent: Iranian Émigré Cinema,” Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media 43, no. 2 (2002): 42.
“French cultural exception” dates back to early 1990s and refers to the French desire to treat culture differently than other commercial products. For example in the French film industry, ticket sales were taxed to benefit the local industry and in the French music business, laws were passed that proclaimed that radio broadcasts must contain 40 percent French songs. Iranians have, however, taken this to another level, in which the Ministry of Culture regulates all aspects of what is appropriate and inappropriate for Iranian audiences.

Financing the New Iranian Cinema

After the revolution, numerous state institutions arose to provide support for Iranian filmmakers. According to Tapper: “The Farabi Foundation was created in 1983, while the Mostazafan Foundation and the Jehad (Later Ministry) of Reconstruction had important roles in film production and exhibition and in the use of media generally.” But by 1991, the government announced that that would be the final year of cheap film production in Iran and the average production cost of a film jumped from six million rials in 1990 to forty million on 1998. According to Farahmand: “With the bleak prospect of inflation, higher production costs, and less government support, Iranian filmmakers increasingly considered using international markets mediated through the film


69 Devictor, Classic Tools, Original Goals, 72.

70 Tapper, New Iranian Cinema (Introduction), 7.
festivals.”  

71 With nowhere else to turn, Iranian filmmakers sought funding through Western financiers, particularly in France.

The relationship that developed between Iranian filmmakers and French production companies worked for several reasons. The popularity of Iranian Films at French festivals opened up a new market that the production companies were keenly aware of. These producers – in particular the companies “MK2” (*Marin Kamish Deux*) and “CB2000” also saw a unique financial model early in their partnerships with Iranian film. The movies could be financed cheaply, and in such a way that the companies then owned the films, if not outright then in part (for example, the international distribution rights). A feature length Iranian film could be made for the cost of a 15-minute French film, and was generally much more profitable.  

72 This differential was exacerbated by inflation and the drop in value of the Iranian rial.  


74 (see table 1 for a complete list of MK2 productions from 1995-2004). In May of 2017, MK2 announced that they had acquired all the rights to 20 Abbas Kiarostami films (he died in 2016), which they intend to restore in 4K resolution and continue to profit from in the decades to come.

71 Farahmand, *Perspectives*, 93.

72 Farahmand, *Perspectives*, 94.

73 Farahmand, *Perspectives*, 94.

74 Naficy, *Social History*, 248.
Table 1. MK2-produced Iranian films, 1995-2004.\textsuperscript{75}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Released</th>
<th>Movie Name</th>
<th>Director</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>A Moment of Innocence (Nun va Goldun)</td>
<td>Mohsen Makhmalbaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Salam Cinema</td>
<td>Mohsen Makhmalbaf</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Gabbeh</td>
<td>Mohsen Makhmalbaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Taste of Cherry (Ta’m-e Gilas)</td>
<td>Abbas Kiarostami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>The Silence (Sokut)</td>
<td>Mohsen Makhmalbaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>A Time for Drunken Horses (Zamani Bara-ye Masti-ye Asbha)</td>
<td>Bahman Ghobadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>The Wind Will Carry Us (Bad Ma ra Khahad Bord)</td>
<td>Abbas Kiarostami</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>A.B.C. Africa</td>
<td>Abbas Kiarostami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>Abbas Kiarostami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>The Apple (Sib)</td>
<td>Samira Makhmalbaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Five Dedicated to Ozu</td>
<td>Abbas Kiarostami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>10 on Ten</td>
<td>Abbas Kiarostami</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarities can be found in the relationship between Iranian writers and French literary publishing houses, particularly with respect to the French pursuit of exoticism. According to Laetitia Nanquette:

The publishing industry has an important role in the perpetuation of stereotypes on Iran. I can recall many discussions with Iranian writers who related how publishers actively peruse exoticism. Albin Michel, for example, asked Nahal Tajadod to put Persian words in her story …. Chahla Chafiq told me that her collection of short stories had been refused by both Albin Michel and L’Aube, the latter invoking precisely the fact that the collection was not dealing with Iran. Chafiq explained the publisher’s refusal by the fact

\textsuperscript{75} Adapted from Naficy, Social History, 515.
that any writer with an Iranian name sending a manuscript out would be judged as representative of her country. The picture of Iran as sensational and exotic, and more so than other countries, informed the publisher's judgement.\textsuperscript{76}

The Case of Blumhouse Productions

There is an interesting modern-day North American parallel to the French financing of Iranian films – the Hollywood case of Jason Blum and his “Blumhouse” production company. Blum was a small-time producer for the Weinstein Company who happened upon a film made on an outrageously small $15,000 budget called \textit{Paranormal Activity}. Blum bought the film, which became a box office hit and went on to earn $200 million internationally (the largest return on investment in film history). So he started a production company with the express purpose of buying films that were cheaply made and profiting from the ones that succeed. An average of 40\% of his films are not released at all – but the other 60\% generate profits, ranging from modest to massive. Last year, he produced Jordan Peele’s \textit{Get Out}, which cost $4.5 million to make and grossed $150 million at the box office.\textsuperscript{77}

Both MK2 and Jason Blum look at films the way a venture capitalist in Silicon Valley looks at startup companies: they make a lot of little bets and let the market figure out who the winners are. Production companies, after all, exist to make a profit. And when Iranian directors turned to them for funding, there was a symbiosis where the directors were able to continue making films and the producers could make money. But

\textsuperscript{76} Laetitia Nanquett, \textit{Orientalism versus Occidentalism: Literary and Cultural Imaging between France and Iran since the Islamic Revolution} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 77-78.

another way to describe this scenario is that French production companies began to
generate the majority of the profits from Iranian films, and that money left the Iranian
economy into the coffers of the French.
Chapter III
Epilogue: Iranian Cinema in the Internet Age

In this thesis, I have investigated the renaissance of Iranian Cinema in the 1990s, and the particular role of the French in helping to make it internationally successful and in profiting from its success. In the decades since, though, the conditions for both the production and consumption of film have, to some extent, changed globally.

File Sharing and Streaming: Iranian Cinema in the New Millennium

A film does not necessarily require a hefty production budget. It can be made, say, on an iPhone, as in the case of Jafar Panahi’s *This Is Not a Film.* It also does not necessarily require a distributor to be seen, as evidenced by the case of BitTorrent.

BitTorrent is a communication protocol for peer-to-peer file sharing on the Internet – a way for people to share files of all sizes easily and quickly. It has been hotly debated and much criticized since its inception in 2001, since it is the principal method for the illegal sharing of media such as movies and music and has a transformational financial impact on both of those industries (in the United States in particular but also around the world).

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78 In 2012, Jafar Panahi was placed under house arrest for ignoring state censor’s rejection of his most recent screenplay. While under house arrest, he went on to film himself acting out the screenplay in the various rooms of his house, titling the piece “This Is Not A Film.” The film was a critical success, screened at Cannes (smuggled out of Iran on a flash drive hidden in a birthday cake) and shortlisted for an academy award.
This is of particular interest to the question of Iranian film and globalization because now, instead of requiring distribution companies to provide access to Iranian film, the adventurous (and maybe unscrupulous) viewer has the option of downloading Iranian films (with a variety of subtitle options) for free. Iranian films are available on many of the largest BitTorrent tracking sites, but it is notable that there is one site dedicated entirely to Iranian film (and to a lesser extent e-books and music) called iraniantorrents.com (figure 3). On this site, users can upload and download Iranian films both old and new. According to data on the site, as of May 2018 it hosts 1230 unique torrents and about 35,000 active users. What questions does a site like this pose, regarding the distribution and consumption of Iranian film internationally? In the year 2000 in the United States, viewing an Iranian film required either a trip to a local reparatory theater (which is difficult for anyone not located in a major city) or the purchase of the film in hard format through a specialty video store or online. And in those cases, a filmgoer would have needed to be connected to some stream of information in order to know the film even existed – a newspaper article, friends who are also interested in international cinema, a specialized film review website.
In 2017, Lindsay Zoladz wrote an article in the popular sports and entertainment website “The Ringer” titled “Study the World!” 10 Great Iranian Films You Can Stream for Free Right Now. This is a website that receives 6 million unique viewers monthly and is focused on the four major U.S. sports and the Hollywood film industry. This example suggests that there are now many ways that a filmgoer who is totally unfamiliar with Iranian film might be exposed to it – and this article offers easy links to streaming services where the films might be viewed. Another example is the popular NPR film

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criticism radio program and podcast “Filmspotting”, which hosted a multiple-episodes long contemporary Iranian cinema marathon. Six Iranian films were discussed, and the actors and directors were referred to by name and with a familiarity (the hosts were not familiar with these actors but worked hard to make themselves students of these films and the actors), in the same manner that the show discusses well-known American titles. Listeners of this program tune in for reviews of a mixture of major Hollywood titles and the best independent films of the year (mostly English Language) and so this Iranian cinema marathon would primarily reach an audience that was not particularly familiar with Iranian film.

Naficy notes that there is a “quartet” of relevant mediaworks produced in the Iranian sphere, referring to content produced by the Iranian state (government film projects), by the United States (Hollywood films dealing with Iran), by Iranians at home (independent filmmakers working within the constraints of government oversight) and Iranians in the diaspora. With respect to the latter two, he points out a new Internet space for cinema that is broader than merely a tool for consumption and distribution of film:

The rise of the Internet as a primary venue for organizing social protests and for documenting, producing, disseminating, and exhibiting both professional and amateur media, a new form of “people’s mediawork” emerged, what I am calling the “Internet cinema,” which gave global voice and vision as well as empowerment to Iranian dissidents both at home and abroad.  


81 There is no data on their listenership, but the two hosts combined have 30,000 followers on Twitter (@filmspotting and @LarsenOnFilm).

82 Naficy, Social History, 271.
A recent example of this new space for a “people’s mediawork” is Ali Soozandeh’s 2017 film *Tehran Taboo*, a visually modern, rotoscoped film dealing with social, sexual and political taboos in modern Iran. This is a film that pushes every boundary of “decency” the Islamic republic’s leadership holds dear, offering a drastically alternate reality of Iranian life and personal desires. Remember that Salman Rushdie, author of the controversial 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* is still receiving annual notices that Iran has issued a fatwa for his death— at the time, the poetic license he took with Koranic passages was interpreted as the highest kind of crime against Islam. But *Tehran Taboo* goes far beyond anything Rushdie wrote and, from what I can tell, has received no public condemnation from the Islamic Republic.

In the aftermath of the new Iranian cinema of the 1990s, the means of production and distribution have changed – and along with it, so has the global context for Iranian film. Where after the revolution, Iranian filmmakers relied on government support to make films, and then on foreign investment when government support dried up, and also on foreign festivals to spread the word, there is now a much more fluid sense of what is possible, given the new opportunities of the information age. Some of the existing relationships persist, as in the case of MK2 purchasing Kiarostami’s entire catalogue in the wake of his death. At the same time, a person can now download much of that catalogue for free, via BitTorrent (and in some cases via streaming.) The old gatekeepers of production and distribution are being forced to share the space they control with new technologies and the people associated with them.

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What does all this mean about the future of the production/consumption of Iranian cinema, and the role that the French (and other wealthier nations) might play? Both file sharing and the “streaming revolution” have seriously impacted the profits of “Western film industries (Hollywood above all), and it seems likely that they have also had an impact on the already meager income streams of foreign cinemas, like that of Iran. But it also seems likely that that the benefits of the changing media landscape might outweigh the costs for smaller film industries, especially in comparison to the larger ones. The fact that cinema drew meager returns for Iranian filmmakers themselves did not reduce their desire to continue to make low budget, at times homemade, innovative pictures. These tendencies and abilities seem likely to lend themselves to an era where film equipment is cheaper and more readily available – and distribution platforms (including free ones, like YouTube) abound.

When *A Taste of Cherry* took Cannes by storm in 1989, Iranian cinema had primarily existed in Iran alone. But almost thirty years later, it has percolated into the awareness of the international filmgoing community. This goes beyond the traditional art-house cinema crowd – again, Farhadi’s *A Separation* won an Oscar and Ana Lily Amirpour’s *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* was an unusual success (a vampire/horror genre film) that appealed to foreign cinemagoers and vampire movie aficionados alike. The work that French cinéastes did to share Iranian films with the world created an awareness that now has a life of its own. Iranian filmmakers will, in lieu of the increases access to production and distribution of the information age, now have a heightened ability to speak directly to their audience.
Conclusion

The success of the new Iranian cinema paved the way for Iranian film to continue flourishing, in the ever-changing landscape of world cinema. The exile of Iranian directors (as in the case of Mohsen Makhmalbaf), or in other cases house arrest (as in the case of Jafar Panahi), has broadened the conception of Iranian film (both inside and outside of Iran). Directors inside Iran continue to make important and internationally popular titles, such as Asghar Farhadi’s 2011 *A Separation*, which won the Oscar for best foreign film. Iranian directors in exile have also continued to produce successful films, outside of Iran, often with non-Iranian funding and actors. Additionally, the conception of film and filmmaking changed globally in the new millennium, such that the difference between a serious film (with a substantial budget, production values, professional actors) and smaller films have become much more fluid. Internet videos, political films, documentaries, small budget movies and more serious productions are all accessible via the Internet and have diversified the conversation about Iranian cinema.

Though much attention is given to the restrictions and limitations placed on filmmakers in the Islamic republic, it is clear that the revolutionary government played a key role in its success. Sometimes directors were able to use state support to enhance their projects. In times of contracting state support, they succeeded with foreign aid – and often with a combination of the two. Other times Iranian filmmakers found inspiration and success in their reaction to the limitations posed by domestic limitations and the complexities of foreign entanglement. In either case, a trend towards growth and progress has persisted.
In an age of global Islamophobia, the new Iranian cinema was in part a reaction to racism – a way to communicate the humanity of the Iranian people (and as Kiarostami reminds us, how we are more alike than we are different). In this way, it is both a reaction to racism, a product of that racism, an antidote (“Iranian cinema as diplomacy”) and thus was also limited by racism, in the way directors are forced to consider Western tastes if they are to achieve financial success. But the new Iranian cinema was not ultimately defined by racism and in many ways continues to carve out new space for itself to push the boundaries of what is offensive (as in Golshifteh Farahani asserting her right to pose nude and Ali Soozandeh’s *Tehran Taboo*), what is Iranian (like Kiarostami’s certified copy which was not about Iran or Iranians) and even what is film (in the way that Iranians are using Internet films to make political statements, or Jafar Panahi’s film shot on an iPhone while under house arrest with only himself as an actor).

It is this impulse to reduce “Iranian-ness” (*Iraniat*) to something quantifiable that produces the narrow conception of Iranian national cinema. Upon further investigation, this proves to be a broader and much more useful idea, in essence an investigation into the complexity of the Iranian identity that generally involves more provocative questions than it does definitive answers. In the end, the national cinema of Iran is a conversation about who is producing Iranian cinema, how are they making it, where does it exist in time and space, who is watching it, and how are they using what they see.

As we have seen, Iran and France have maintained the post-colonial relationship, as evidenced by the purchase of Kiarostami’s life’s work by MK2 and the massive presence of the Peugeot car manufacturer. At this point, the reputation of Iranian film has been established globally and no longer relies primarily on French film critics or French
production houses for publicity or funding. The interest of the French in Iranian cinema is at once nurturing and opportunist. The two impulses live side by side, but have ultimately existed within the framework of progress, where Iranian cinema has thrived, struggled, adapted, and found new ways to exist and blossom. I believe this to be the necessary tension between post-colonial nations and their former targets; there must be an effort to engage on an equal playing field, that will necessarily include the inevitable impulse for the richer nation to profit off the poorer one – indeed, this impulse is embedded in the nature of capitalism and the global economy. Nevertheless, this “cycle of entanglement” shows an upward trend, where the richer nation’s tendency towards greed and opportunism cannot overcome the poorer nation’s ability to shift, adapt, grow, re-imagine and re-assert its own will and destiny.
Bibliography


*The Scariest Thing in Hollywood*, episode by Stacey Vanek Smith and Steve Henn, NPR’s Planet Money.

