

2014

Watching More than "THE COW" In Tehran

Bridget Joyce

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-22>

Recommended Citation

Joyce, Bridget, "Watching More than "THE COW" In Tehran" (2014). *Volume 22 - 2014*. Paper 26.
<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-22/26>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Lehigh Review at Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Volume 22 - 2014 by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.

WATCHING MORE THAN “THE COW” IN TEHRAN

Bridget Joyce

The essay, “Watching More than The Cow in Tehran,” explores how, over time, Iranians have used cinema to define a national cultural identity. The title of this essay is an allusion to Fatema Keshavarz’s book Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran, which explores misconceptions of Iranian society in the Western world perpetuated by the past Orientalist and present New Orientalist narratives. Although Iranian filmmakers were often constrained by their government, first in a monarchy and later in a theocracy, their creativity and ability to convey the emotions of a nation were not stifled. By examining the progression of the Iranian film industry, with special attention to its political and historical context, one can discern not only the ideological intentions of ruling regimes, but also the progression of how Iranian identity is interpreted domestically and the image ordinary Iranians would like to convey to the outside world.

In the past century the culture of Iran has, like all nations around the globe, transformed. Ideologies, perspectives and voices are far different now than they were a century ago. The path of the nation's film industry through its rise, fall and incredible resurgence is evidence of such change. It was through the production of film as an art and the debate surrounding its content that Iranians came to create and embrace their cultural identity. In one interview, Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf drew attention to how this particular art in its Iranian form is unique; shaped both by contemporary context and historical foundations. Political constraints may have guided the direction of the film industry, but cultural uniqueness gave Iranian film the necessary kick to succeed on the world stage. Unlike cultures historically preoccupied with images, "Iran," he says, "is a land of poets. Our images come from our poetry. We could even say that the tree of Iranian cinema found its roots in Persian poetry."¹ Film was, and continues to be, used as a medium to convey to the audiences domestically and also abroad the vitality of Iranian culture and its status as a society that can overcome perceived political barriers.

Historically, Iranian cinema has been less stifled by its censorship than may be perceived. Iranian cinema was more often used as a tool of the governing regime to promote a particular ideological framework. According to Azadeh Farahmand, "Censorship in Iran has existed in one form or another as early as the 1920s, having survived both monarchy and theocracy."² Before one can begin to understand how censorship has shaped Iranian cinema, it is important to identify the different methods and goals of censorship each regime sought. The initial aim of censorship in the 1920s was on film exhibition and relied on theatre owners yielding to pressure from religious

groups concerned about exposure to the West's loose sense of morals. This informal method of censorship continued until the 1950s when committees were organized at the local level that were responsible for reviewing and supervising both imported and locally produced films before they could be shown to the public. Their stated goal was to avoid specific themes declared detrimental or morally wrong to the Islam and Shi'ism, such as in the inappropriate seduction of women and girls.³

By 1968 the federal government established the Ministry of Culture and the Arts, which it tasked with establishing more universal censorship requirements. The breadth of forbidden themes expanded with the creation of the Ministry as it began to not allow any subject critical to the monarchy. Throughout the 1970s, in an effort to establish a sense of government

pride and national prosperity, the Ministry outlawed any films that depicted poverty or anguish.⁴

The revolution did, of course, bring some change to the government's attitude towards cinematic material. For instance, films that depicted poverty, anguish or rebellion were allowed back into the mainstream and even sometimes celebrated. Yet, the refrain of censorship remained strikingly similar in maintaining repression of themes such as political criticism and social dissent. This link between the policies of the two regimes indicates that both realized the power and potential of cinema in Iranian society.

In the early 1980s censorship practices advanced to control films prior to production. Before even screenplays obtained permission to start production, it was necessary that the synopsis of the film be approved by the Council of Screenplay

**FILM WAS, AND CONTINUES TO BE,
USED AS A MEDIUM TO CONVEY
TO THE AUDIENCES
DOMESTICALLY AND ALSO ABROAD
THE VITALITY OF IRANIAN CULTURE
AND ITS STATUS AS A SOCIETY
THAT CAN OVERCOME
PERCEIVED POLITICAL BARRIERS.**

Vetting. By 1984, the regime's policies had shifted again and rather than relying on the initiative and persistence of filmmakers to produce films, they began a campaign to cultivate domestic and local production while making importation of films less desirable.⁵ The regime had come to the understanding that if film production was organic, and devoid of Western or monarchical influence, then over time it would come to meet the necessary standards because it was a purer product of Iranian society. It was theorized that because of a partial ban since the 1980s on Western movies the new films would not be corrupted by the West's immoral tastes.⁶

One former Minister of State for Cinematic Affairs, Fakhroddin Anvar, spoke directly of the methods authorities used

to accomplish their goals of cultivating Iranian cinema in post-revolution Iran. He noted that the government's programs focused on filmmakers rather than film. Again, this shift in paradigm supported their revelations in how to ensure the right films were produced. They were able to do so while still avoiding the repressive act of banning films. The government launched a new training program with the intention of creating a new system of leadership in the film industry. Remnants of filmmakers from the Shah's era, they felt, would be better off outside of Iran. Essentially, the government had undertaken a mission of state training of filmmakers. According to cinema critic Akbar Nabavi, the government outlined a three-pronged approach it would use to create high-grade cinema: direct, protect and

check. Thus, authorities could play the role of guides towards acceptable films rather than have direct control.⁷

The most significant development in the post-revolution censorship timeline came in April 1989 when the government took a step back and allowed films that had previously been banned to be screened. Observers most commonly attribute this movement towards liberalization to one of two possible explanations. The first is that the regime had become confident that less supervision was necessary because it had succeeded in ingraining Islamic values in this art form. Another explanation provided was that criticism of the hegemony of authorities forced them into taking a softer stance in hopes of boosting the morale of filmmakers.⁸ These liberalization measures did not last very long. By 1993 it was once again mandatory that scripts be pre-approved before production of a film could take place. Yet, the preoccupation with forbidden themes seemed to have evaporated. It was clear that throughout the 1980s restrictions on film were becoming more lax.⁹

This summation of the censorship policy timeline is helpful in understanding the political context in which films were produced in Iran. However, the social atmosphere and attitude towards the industry was important both before and after the revolution. An iconic image of the revolution is the burning of cinemas by revolutionaries. Ostensibly the cinemas were set ablaze because they represented Western infiltration into Iranian society. Mohammad-Ali Najafi posited that the 1979 demonstrations attacked cinemas as a symbol rather than as a national institution. The symbol which cinemas represented led many observers to fear an end to the cinema after reforms gave the country greater religious and moral overtones.¹⁰

The industry's redemption may, in fact, be attributable to a single mention

THEREFORE, IT WAS APPEALING FOR FILMMAKERS TO PRODUCE FILMS THAT HAD INTERNATIONAL APPEAL AS MUCH AS IT DID DOMESTIC. FILMMAKERS SOON CAME TO REALIZE THAT WESTERN AUDIENCES ENJOYED THE STYLE THAT HAD BECOME CHARACTERISTICALLY IRANIAN.

of a particular film in one of Ayatollah Khomeini's famous speeches directly after the revolution's success. Acknowledging the destruction of cinemas throughout Iran during the revolutionary process, he argued that not all films were necessarily bad or immoral. Specifically, Khomeini identified *The Cow* (1969) as the model of a good film. *The Cow* had been banned during the time of the Shah because it depicted the anguish of poverty as well as fear forced modernization. Yet, in the new government, this model film contained key characteristics to its success: it was a divergence from commercial films and it represented women in a morally ideal way.¹¹

Level and goals of censorship highlight what the regime felt was important or the direction in which it wished to shape cultural identity. Yet, the main driver of cultural identity is the people of Iran. By analyzing the films that were actually produced during this period, one is able to see the effect these constraints had, for better or worse. Despite Khomeini's mention of *The Cow*, directly after the burning of the cinemas, the future of the Iranian film industry in the early 1980s was not ensured. In addition to mired public opinion on the morality of the film industry, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War posed a major threat to the industry's redevelopment.

While in ordinary circumstances an industry like film could lose favor in government programs during wartime, the new Iranian government realized how crucial this industry could be in mobilizing the Iranian people. Yet, uncertainty about the industry's future left the private-sector in limbo, too nervous about the future to invest large amounts of money, and the industry was essentially paused. In order to revive this industry and ultimately have the capacity to create the narrative they hoped could help win the war, public-sector funding was necessary for revival. Because

AS THE STYLES OF FILM HAVE SHIFTED IN THE CONTINUOUS PROCESS OF CINEMATIC INTERPRETATION OF IRANIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY, THE GOVERNMENT HAS ALTERED ITS STANCE ON THE UTILITY OF CINEMA.

of the high percentage of films financed by the public-sector, an official national cinema was created. These films "emphasized action and violence over sensitivity and psychological depth."¹² Films that focused primarily on fighting and military operations, such as Amir Naderi's *Second Search* (1981), were never distributed in Iran because they went against the regime's agenda.¹³ Other films, such as J. Shoorjeh's later piece, *The Epic of Majnoun*, celebrated the courage of heroes who fought for Islam. In these films, when the hero died for his cause, viewers actually felt envy towards them.¹⁴

As time passed the message and style of films began to change. By the late 1980s, films made in Iran were being selected for international film festivals. The first selection was for the film *Frosty Roads* (1987). The film's selection into the

Berlin Film Festival gave other Iranian filmmakers confidence that their work may be appreciated outside of Iran as well. One byproduct of international recognition in cinema is that international actors begin to invest in film production. Therefore, it was appealing for filmmakers to produce films that had international appeal as much as it did domestic.

Filmmakers soon came to realize that Western audiences enjoyed the style that had become characteristically Iranian. This style could be defined as low-budget films with simple plots and on-location filming. These individuals sometimes cater to the international market, which is much more lucrative than the domestic market. In recent years, Iran has not had enough theaters to even turn the same level of profit as is possible abroad. It was around this time that the style of 'Iranian neo-realism' began

to take shape. Films focused on minimalist plots that illustrated struggles of everyday life to create a connection with oftentimes more privileged international audiences. They were low-budget but set in exotic landscapes and ideologically stimulating, which contrasted sharply with the high-tech, special effect world of Hollywood cinema.¹⁵

This 'Iranian neo-realism' movement that characterized these films was spearheaded by the use of an experimental, semi-documentary style of filming. In accordance with this style, realistic treatment of characters and their social environment was an avenue through which filmmakers examined themselves and presented their society to the rest of the world. Famous

Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf stated that documentary-style cinema "allowed us to show how we were, not how we were to be seen."¹⁶ This shift in film style is, again, reflective of the social context through which this interpretation of Iranian cultural identity was developed.

Looking back on the evolution of film style in Iran, Makhmalbaf said that he saw this movement towards documentaries as an unconscious response on the part of the Iranian people. The media, he argued, had "reduced the Iranian people to a people capable of prayer alone."¹⁷ The injurious discourse of generalizations and misperceptions of Iranians in the West is a central theme in Fatemeh Keshavarz's book

Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran. In her critique of Anzar Nafisi's novel, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Keshavarz directly addresses the inaccurate perception of Iranian cinema by those who contribute to the New Orientalist narrative. Nafisi uses the example of cinema in Iran as an art form that fails to show love, at least in the same way Jane Austen illustrates love in her works. Keshavarz is quick to point out that Iranian film has received large international acclaim and that the subject of love is very much expressed in films. She points to two of Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's love stories, *Nargess* and *Under the Skin of the City*, both of which were well-received amongst the Iranian public and international audiences.

Keshavarz's critique of the New Orientalist narrative is that it is merely a continuation of the same Orientalist discourse, only this time with a native face. This native face, she says, is deceiving in that it is affixed to an imagined sense of legitimacy and truth which, as with Nafisi's critique of Iranian cinema, is just a misperception. Many, such as Makhmalnaf, have argued that cinema has had the most success in softening the face of the country of Iran, its people, and its culture to those abroad.

One of the first Iranian films to garner international critical acclaim was Amir Naderi's *The Runner* (1985). In the documentary *Iran: a Cinematic Revolution*, the narrator asks whether this film is famous worldwide because of its plot, or because it is "Poetry contrast with the country's fanatical image?"¹⁸ As the styles of film have shifted in the continuous process of cinematic interpretation of Iranian cultural identity, the government has altered its stance on the utility of cinema. Noting the success of cinema in softening diplomatic tension, or at least public perception, the regime has come to appreciate the impact of film. In fact, Iranian Foreign Minister

IRANIAN CINEMA'S RISE TO INTERNATIONAL NOTORIETY IS, PERHAPS, ONE INDICATOR THAT A BRIGHTER FUTURE IS POSSIBLE BETWEEN IRAN AND THE WEST WHERE NARRATIVES OF ORIENTALISTS AND NEW ORIENTALISTS HAVE GIVEN WAY TO GREATER APPRECIATION OF PERSIAN POETRY AND CULTURE.

Ali Akbar Velayati appreciated the impact of film so much that he played a key role in negotiating Shohei Imamura's 1997 acceptance into the Cannes Film Festival.¹⁹

The evolution of Iran's film industry was constrained by the political and social context but propelled by the genius of Iranian film makers on the path to self-discovery. The cinema provided a venue for the people of Iran to construct their own cultural identity. Throughout the history of Iranian cinema, censorship has been a constant. However, it was not necessarily a total impediment. Retrospectively, analysis of political context via censorship intentions and methods reveal a good deal about the ideological frameworks of ruling regimes. Yet, it was the social context in Iran during each specific period that allowed cinema to shape an interpretation of cultural identity. Iranian cinema's rise to international notoriety is, perhaps, one indicator that a brighter future is possible between Iran and the West where narratives of Orientalists and New Orientalists have given way to greater appreciation of Persian poetry and culture.