

Conference

Image under Construction. Revolution of Forms in Iranian Cinema before and after 1979.

2. bis 5. November 2016

eikones Forum und Stadtkino Basel

Conducted by: Seminar for Media Studies of the University of Basel (Chair for Media Aesthetics, Prof. Dr. Ute Holl) in Cooperation with Stadtkino Basel and eikones

Concept: Ute Holl, Matthias Wittmann, Hemen Heidari

Lecturer: Jamsheed Akrami, Majid Eslami, Mazyar Eslami, Ehsan Khoshbakht, Morad Montazami, Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, Maryam Mohajer, Sharam Mokri, Shiva Rahbaran, Sara Saljoughi, Alena Strohmaier, Niloufar Taghizadeh

Abstracts

Jamsheed Akrami

A Defaced Cinema

Film censorship in Iran

Like all other mass media in Iran, cinema has always been plagued by censorship. Under the secular dictatorship of the Shah, criticizing the constitution, the royal family, the government and the armed forces was banned. Under the Islamic Republic, not only the theocratic ruling class remains beyond criticism, but a highly restrictive set of religiously dictated codes, arguably unprecedented in film history, has made the censorship increasingly stifling for the Iranian filmmakers.

This presentation will briefly trace the history of censorship in Iranian cinema from its early days to the present.

Dr. Jamsheed Akrami is a scholar of Iranian cinema. A former editor of Iranian film magazines, he has published extensively, presented numerous lectures, curated film series, and produced a number of films, including the feature-length documentaries *The Lost Cinema*, on political filmmaking under the Shah, and *Friendly Persuasion*, on Iranian cinema after the 1979 revolution. The films were screened in international film festivals and enjoyed theatrical runs and television screenings in US and Canada. *A Cinema of Discontent* completes Jamsheed Akrami's trilogy on Iranian cinema.

Mr. Akrami is a film professor at William Paterson University, where he teaches *Film as a Medium*, *Film as Crosscultural Communication*, and *Film and Civic Engagement*. He was also a visiting professor of film at Columbia University for several years.

Filmography:

Friendly Persuasion (2000), *Kiarostami 101* (short, 2001), *A Walk with Kiarostami* (short, 2003), *The Lost Cinema* (2007), *A Cinema of Discontent* (2013)

Majid Eslami

The Lake against the Forest

Fish & Cat (Shahram Mokri)

Lake and forest; a duality pointed a complicated conflict. One (the forest) is a world of black and white things, prototypical feelings, bad guys and good guys (genre cinema, Hollywood), and the other (the lake) an unclassified milieu, of ambiguous feelings and characters (art and/or independent cinema). Nature and narrative create a battlefield representing a deep generation gap on the screen.

It is the camera that attempts to make peace between these two approaches, splitting its empathy between these two groups. As a practical matter, and as a matter of human history, this approach establishes the conditions by which one group slaughters the other.

The film is a mix of very interesting materials (generational conflicts, parallel relations, metaphysical and mystical issues) with stillness and silence and wandering (a familiar virtue of Antonioni, Sokurov, Van Sant). A mix of “Blair Witch Project” and “Nine Lives”, Hitchcock and Renoir, Linklater and Angelopoulos. And at the end, Fish & Cat is not like any other film. It is unique. We can leave ourselves to this carousel that rotates endlessly, going nowhere.

Majid Eslami (born 1963) is an Iranian journalist, film critic, and literary critic. Graduated of film directing from Art University of Tehran. Started working as a journalist in 1990 at Film Monthly Magazine, writing reviews and articles for ten years. Working as chief editor from 2001-2008 at Haft, an art monthly magazine (ceased publication in 2008 by the government). Working as editor at Ney Book Publication from 1998-2006, as manager at Manzumeh Kherad Book Publication from 2007-2010, as journalist since 2011 at 24 Film Magazine.

Books:

- Film Criticism Concepts (including selected articles) 2001

Translations:

- Films of Akira Kurosawa (Donald Richie), collaborated with Hamid Montazeri
 - In the Labyrinth (Alain Robbe-Grillet), a novel.
 - A Sketch of the Past (Virginia Woolf), an autobiography.
 - Orpheus (Jean Cocteau), a screenplay.
 - The Third Man (Graham Green), a screenplay.
 - The Lost Highway (David Lynch), a screenplay.
 - The Amateur and Surviving Desire (Hal Hartley), two screenplays.
 - Ivan's Childhood (Andrei Tarkovsky), a screenplay.
-

Mazyar Eslami

Poetics of disintegration

The cinema of Asghar Farhadi is produced of a separation constituted by reformation era in Iran, in 1997, an era which transcend the duality/disintegration of cinema “before” and “after” revolution. Farhadi is a unique figure who could pass another duality of Iranian cinema: popular and commercial cinema as well as intellectual and artistic cinema. The ideas of separation, disintegration and unbinding are the fundamental and significant motifs in his early movies, i.e. *Dancing in dust*, *Beautiful City*, and *the Wednesday Firework*.

The significance of his cinema is to internalizing the crisis of disintegration and separation after reformation in 1997; an attempt to internalize the unfulfilled experience of separation and unbinding in contemporary history of Iran, especially after passing brilliance of reformation, into the separated and disintegrated narratives.

In his first film outside Iran, *le passé*, he could transcend his previous film, *A separation*. In *le passé* “separation”, which had been reached to its top point in *A Separation*, is disintegrated in a new cultural and geographical perspective, Paris. Relation between *le passé*/*A separation* is like a displacement between two views: Paris and Tehran.

Mazyar Eslami (born 1971) is an author, translator, film critic and teacher of film studies. Translator of some important film theory books, including works of Zizek, Deleuze, Barthes and Joan Copjec in Persian language. Writer of *Paris-Tehran*, a book on cinema of Abbas Kiarostami and *Poetics of Disintegration*, a book on Asghar Farhadi. Teaching different topics of film theory in Porsesh Institute for six years.

Ehsan Khoshbakht

Brick and Mirror and the rise of Fear and Trembling in Iranian arthouse cinema of the 1960s and 1970s

In 1965, after two years in production, one of Iranian cinema’s first true modern masterpieces, *Brick and Mirror*, was screened in a single cinema theatre hired by its director Ebrahim Golestan. The film met with viciously negative responses and soon was pulled down. However, in spite of a short life, and before its eventual revival in the 21th century, the film’s exploration of the themes of fear and responsibility in the aftermath of the 1953 Coup forever changed Iranian cinema.

The infectious atmosphere of apprehension, anxiety, and despair in *Brick and Mirror* was not only spread in some of the best Iranian films of the 1960s and 1970 but also found a new meaning with the onset of the 1979 Revolution.

The paper focuses on cinematic ways in which Golestan addresses the social and cultural tensions of the 1960s, from political paranoia to existential angst, and in the process, re-evaluates its significance in Iranian film history.

Ehsan Khoshbakht is an Iranian film critic, curator and a documentary filmmaker. He contributes to Sight & Sound, Keyframe and MUBI Notebook, as well as journals in Farsi. He has curated for various cinematheques and film festivals across Europe and the Middle East. An architect by training, he has published books on architecture and film, but also publications on movie posters, film directors and western genre. His second passion, jazz, has often been the subject of his writing and curating. He has also co-produced *Life May Be*

(2014), directed by Mark Cousins and Mania Akbari. His own latest film, *Filmfarsi*, will come out later in 2016.

Morad Montazami

Cinema and Oil in Iran: conflicting narratives

The oil nationalization process in Iran between the 1940's and the 1950's is synonymous with years of labour and class struggles, mainly against the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), and also major consequences on Iran's modern visual culture – all catalysed by artistic strategies following the 1953 coup against the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq. In this talk we will observe how some cardinal figures of cinema (Ebrahim Golestan, Parviz Kimiavi...) can reveal the “oil superego” which dominates unconsciously the Iranian modern visual culture, confronted to a series of comments on industrial cinema and “oil movies”. Scenes of glorious and brutal implantations of oil companies on Iran's millenary lands of Khuzestan, conflicting with the politics of authorship in cinema avant-garde and even with subversive mockery.

Morad Montazami is adjunct research-curator at Tate Modern, for the Middle East and North Africa, supported by the Iran Heritage Foundation. He is the author of several articles and essays. He has written papers on artists such as Farid Belkahlia, Bahman Mohassess, Davood Emdadian, Jordi Colomer, Jeremy Deller, Francis Alÿs, Zineb Sedira, Allan Sekula, and Walid Raad. He is the editor in chief of the journal *Zamân*, which covers Middle Eastern studies, visual culture and contemporary art. (www.zaman-paper.com)

Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa

View from Elsewhere

Hollywood movies were a big part of my life and the lives many people of my generation, who grew up in Iran before the revolution of 1979. They helped us construct a fantastic image of America and its culture, propagate the concepts of modernity, prosperity, and freedom, which for the most part was missing in our lives.

Movie actors and stars were dominating icons of our imagination, desires, and popular culture. Although the movie characters were American and came from a different culture but they sounded familiar to us, since their films were dubbed into Persian and they spoke our language, and at times with an Iranian sense of humour.

Years later, after I immigrated to the US, I began watching many of those old films again in their original language. They helped me reconstruct the memory of my youth, the culture of the time, and the old movie theatres of Tehran.

Using the old movies and in particular Jerry Lewis 's films, I examine my life journey from Tehran to Chicago in my film *Jerry & Me*. This self-analysis also includes evaluating the concept of the modern woman for me, that didn't quite fit within Iranian or American culture as well as the concept of the “outsider” that Lewis portrayed in his films.

Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa is a full professor and associate chair in the Cinema Art + Science department of Columbia College Chicago. She teaches a variety courses in cinema studies, documentary filmmaking, and experimental film production. Her areas of interest are “International Cinema”, “Middle Eastern cinema”, “Exilic cinema”, “Women, Gender, and

Race in cinema”, Documentary and Alternative forms. She has written extensively on Iranian cinema. Her book on Abbas Kiarostami co-written with Jonathan Rosenbaum was published by the University of Illinois Press in March 2003.

She has made several short documentary, fiction, and experimental films. Her films *Ruins Within*, *Saless*, *Far From Home* and *A Different Moon*, have also been shown in several film festivals. She is the winner of the 11th AFI/Sony first prize and a jury grand prize at the 20th Annual Festival of Illinois Film & Video Artists in 1995 for her film "A Tajik Woman." Her last film, *Jerry & Me*, a documentary about Jerry Lewis and her youth in Iran, has been shown in several national and international film festivals and won the first prize in non-fiction category from UFVA (University of Film and Video Association) and an honorable mention from Big Muddy film Festival in 2012. She has been the Artistic Consultant of the Festival of Films from Iran, at the Gene Siskel Film Center Chicago since 1989. Her current project, *The Wright Vision*, is a cinematic essay about a Frank Lloyd House in Florence Alabama. The film connects the story of the family who lived in it before it was turned into a public museum with her memories of her childhood houses in Iran

Maryam Mohajer
Why am I crying?

‘A look into various elements in Iranian films that play on our emotions in order to make us sad, shed a tear or cry our hearts out.

Crying is embedded within the Iranian culture. Our burial ceremonies are much louder than the ones in the west. People cry expressively, loudly and freely.

Tasou’a Ashoura, which is one of the most revered religious ceremonies in Iran, would not be the same if you exclude the loud, dramatic and expressive crying from it.

Many of our praying ceremonies go hand in hand with tears.

Iranian cinema comes from the same cultural background. I have heard people say, especially during the 80’s and 90’s: “I want to go watch a tear jerker of a movie so that afterwards I’d feel fresh and light.” Or “It was such a beautiful film; I cried my eyes out.”

I’m going to have a look into various elements in Iranian films, such as music, storyline, characterization, dialogue, historical and cultural references, which are planned to make us, as the audience, cry.

How does the method change from the work by one director to another as well as in different periods (e.g. pre/post-revolution and pre/post war?)

In regards to all the references to war and revolution, how do the signs and symbols, which remind us of a tragedy, change between before and after the revolution?

Maryam Mohajer was born in Tehran. In her lifetime so far she has experienced one revolution, a 7-year war and immigration. In Tehran, whilst doing her first BA in painting, she worked as a freelance translator for film magazines such as ‘Donyyeh Tasvir’ and ‘Tasvir’ (visual arts and films). Moving to London in 2000 gave her the chance to experiment with animation. She did her second BA in Animation and Illustration at Kingston University

before finishing her MA in animation at Royal College of art. Her short animated films have won a few awards from international festivals.

She was one of the two translators on the book *Iranian cinema uncensored* by Shiva Rahbaran. She now lives and works in London.

Shahram Mokri

The relation between digital camera and new filmmaker generation in Iran

The government lost its monopoly on filmmaking since digital camera has been applied in Iranian cinema. A new generation of independent filmmakers has made nongovernmental movies and has improved the concept of “Iranian cinema”. This lecture will explain the process of producing movies in Iran. I will explore the subject with categorizing generations [of filmmakers] and put vary of examples allocated to every generation. At the end of the lecture I will talk about new aspects of Iranian cinema in the International area.

Shahram Mokri was born in 1977 in Marand, Iran, he is a graduate of Cinema from Tehran’s Soureh College. He started making short films in 2000 and he’s also edited 8 TV dramas, 2 TV series and more than 20 short and documentary films. His short films brought him national and international recognition and *Ashkan, The Charmed Ring And Other Stories* is his debut feature film which had its international premiere at Busan IFF in 2009. Shahram Mokri is now involved in post-production of his second feature film, *Fish and Cat*.

Filmography:

Electric Shock And Fly (short film, 2000), *Dragonfly Storm* (short film, 2002), *Limit of Circle* (short film, 2005), *This is the Question* (documentary, 2006), *Ando-C* (short film, 2007), *Ashkan, The Charmed Ring And Other Stories* (feature film, 2009), *Raw, Cooked and Burnt* (short film, 2010), *Fish & Cat* (feature film, 2013).

Shiva Rahbaran

New Iranian Cinema Is Dead. Long Live New Iranian Cinema: On the Future of Iranian Film

Watching films coming out of the Islamic Republic of Iran today, the question arises: what is the third generation of cineastes doing with the legacy of the Iranian New Wave? Should the recent death of Kiarostami, one of the towering figures of New Iranian Cinema, be understood as the end of this cinema, or as the beginning of a new era in Iranian film-making? In my talk I will contemplate on this question by positioning the development of the Iranian New Wave in relation to the 1979 revolution and by looking at its legacy for the young generation of filmmakers living and working in Iran today.

New Iranian Cinema is appreciated today as perhaps the most fascinating cultural phenomenon and the most extraordinary “export commodity” produced in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The fact that its reception in the world is often accompanied by Iran’s image as a revolutionised, reactionary and anti-western country adds to its allure. The

international audiences and the critics often ask themselves how such poetic and simply beautiful films could come from a country that has written jihad on its banners against cinema and all decadent, earthly art forms since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

For many it was this paradoxical attitude towards cinema that gave rise to a unique area of conflict – a unique stress field – in which New Iranian Cinema tried to thrive. Some film-makers even go as far as seeing this revolutionary paradox as the catalyst for this cinema. They believe that by cleansing Iranian cinema from shallow Hollywood movies and decadent pre-revolutionary Film Farsi, the revolution made fertile grounds for intellectual movies.

The doyens of New Iranian Wave, such as Mehrjoui, Beyzaie, Kiarosatmi and Farmanara, however, vehemently reject this idea and believe that if anything the Islamic revolution delayed the progress of New Iranian cinema and were it not for the resilience of the people and the film-makers this art would have been marginalised fiercely.

By contrasting the views of some of the most important directors of New Iranian Cinema and by looking at recent film productions in Iran in light of those views, I will try to give a diagnosis of the state of cinema in Iran today and hope to give some insight in its future development.

Shiva Rahbaran was born in Tehran. She was eight years old when the last Persian monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, left Iran giving way to the foundation of the Islamic Republic. Together with her family she left Iran for Germany in 1984, where she studied literature and political science at the Heinrich-Heine-University Dusseldorf. She continued her studies at Oxford University, where she obtained her doctoral degree (DPhil) in English literature. Having lived in Munich and Zurich for twelve years, she moved to London in 2013 where she is currently living with her family. Her latest project is a novel about the life of an Iranian family during the Islamic Revolution

Publications:

Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-makers since the Islamic Revolution (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016)

Iranian Writers Uncensored (Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012)

Nicholas Mosley's Life and Art: A biography in six interviews (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009)

The Paradox of Freedom (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007)

shiva-rahbaran.org

Sara Saljoughi

A New Form for a New People: The Problem of Collectivity in the Iranian New Wave.

This paper examines the problem of collectivity in Iranian experimental and art cinema prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Through a textual analysis of Feroz Farrokhzad's *Khaneh siah ast/The House is Black* (1962), I argue that the Iranian New Wave articulated the desire to rethink the form of the collective outside the existing models provided by the Pahlavi

regime and its major opponents. This re-thinking of collectivity emerged, I argue, as both a new form and a model for new social relations.

Sara Saljoughi is Assistant Professor of English and Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto. She completed her PhD in the department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Her areas of research interest are world cinema, film theory (especially questions of aesthetics and politics), critical theory, and postcolonial studies, and psychoanalysis. Her writing appears and is forthcoming in *Camera Obscura*, *Iranian Studies*, *Film Criticism*, *Film International*, and *Jadaliyya*, among others. She is currently at work on a manuscript about experimental and art cinema in Iran prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. She is co-editor, with Christina Gerhardt, of the edited collection *1968 and Global Cinema* (under contract with Wayne State University Press).

Alena Strohmaier

Potentials and obstacles of the Iranian Diaspora media space

“Let me tell you this: unlike what many people may think, censorship is not only in the Third World countries.” Sohrab Shahid Saless¹

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the resulting migration waves awake an Iranian Diaspora like no other seen before. Diaspora is not an entity pre-programmed by common ancestry or history, but a space that always requires current reference points to be maintained. Any form of community formation necessarily implies media, be it language, music, clothing, flags, etc., which define togetherness and are recognized as constitutive features. I propose that Diaspora depends on its respective media situation, that it defines itself through its media, and is only generated because of media. To that extent, the diasporic binding through modern media such as radio, television, video and film represents only a further stage of a long development process. In this sense, Diaspora is not static, but performative and dissolves into a variety of positions, cultural techniques and media forms.

Filmmaking in the Iranian Diaspora is only really worth mentioning as of 1979. These films register the collective experience of revolution, war and migration, which on the one hand take on the cultural (and cinematic) heritage of Iran (the homeland), and on the other hand create their own exceptional stylistic forms based on their relation with a post-revolutionary Iran. It has been suggested that the attempt to fix the identity of a place as well as *to* a place has never succeed completely in the films of the Iranian Diaspora. We are thus left with acts of negotiations and the opening of new (media)spaces, as will be shown based on selected examples.

Following postcolonial, cultural studies and space-theoretical concepts, the epistemological interest of this work is linked to a flexible, media-theoretical notion of Diaspora, so to discuss the discourses of films of the Iranian Diaspora in a critical analysis with questions about (collective) memory and censorship on specific forms of presentation based on examples in the films themselves.

¹ Shahid Saless, Sohrab. 1993. "Sohrab Shahid Saless and a Private Agony." *Film International* [Tehran] 1, no. 4:60-65.

Alena Strohmaier is a PhD Candidate at the Philipps-University Marburg where she is enrolled as a Research Fellow in the BMBF research network *Re-Configurations. History, Remembrance and Transformation Processes in the Middle East and North Africa*. She is currently a member of the *NECS (European Network for Film and Media Studies)* Steering Committee and editing the *NECSUS (Journal for European Media Studies)* book review section. She is also managing editor of *META-Journal (Middle East Topics and Arguments)*. Her recent publications include an edited volume: „The State of Post-Cinema. Tracing the Moving Image in the Age of Digital Dissemination“, together with Malte Hagener and Vinzenz Hediger (Palgrave Macmillian, 2016).

Niloufar Taghizadeh

We, Children of the Revolution (work in progress)

Niloufar records everything and shares her loneliness with the camera. She tries to investigate her many questions about the country and its people. Especially, she tries to understand people from her own generation, resulting in several intimate interviews.

The documentary delivers a very personal and insightful glimpse into the life of Niloufar and her Iranian counterparts. Niloufar's own exceptional recordings since her teenage years (between 1995 and 2016) form the basis of the movie. They show her friends in her home, and the life in Iran. We experience the development of Niloufar and her friends over the years. The treasure of personal archive footage is complemented with animation elements, historical TV archive, and current recordings.

„We, Children of the Revolution“ follows Niloufar and her generation very closely. Together with her we dive into her story and get to know her childhood friends. Today, most of them are spread around the world; for example, they live in Paris or the US. Some also stayed in Iran and are trying to cope with their life at home.



In each of the three chapters of “We, Children of the Revolution” (WT) Niloufar will take us on a journey through the different stages of her upbringing. We hear about her wishes, goals and problems before as well as after the revolution. The tragically narrative as well as the private footage gathered over the course of the last 20 years lets us dive into a very individual, personal development of young girls. En passant, we also experience the development of a country. We hear about their youth and also meet Niloufar and the other girls again today. As we look at these personal perceptions we understand at the same time the bigger picture of a society that has learned to suppress their personal dreams within social norms.

The film is planned to consist of personal archive footage as well as newly shot documentary material, voice- over and animated scenes. It is based on true stories over the course of 2 decades, which might partially be slightly fictionalized. We intend to make a passionate as well as intense film about very personal stories. The mix of the different footage will reflect

the country of Iran itself. The tone of the film is light, although telling of harsh situations, unfulfilled dreams and loneliness, but even in the worst moments the protagonists will find a reason to laugh.

Niloufar Taghizadeh is an Iranian director and author, she came to Germany in 1996. In 2006 she went back to Iran, worked as the only woman for the ZDF-Studio in Teheran as producer and director and was responsible for ideas, production and recording in Iran. She takes part in many different German-Iranian film projects.