

## AN EXPERIMENTAL IRANIAN CINEMA IN NEW AGE

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**Abstract:** From the beginning, Iranian cinema has a special perspective to experimental style in products. Iranian cinema history full of ups and downs, so it's acquired much experience in different genres of cinema. In the late 70s, In the case of The Islamic Revolution, a new attitude was formed in Iranian cinema. The purpose of this paper is to show examples of Iranian filmmakers and films that were able to use the new definition in the stylistic elements and narrative cinematic in the world. This new approach cause to led to Iranian cinema in the world gained a special reputation. Some filmmakers such as Sohrab shahid-sales, Abbas Kiarostami, Majid Majidi, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and etc, could succeed to a large extent on the design of experimental cinema in iran.

**Keywords:** Experimental-cinema-iran-style-realist.

### INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, Iranian cinema gained international attention with films such as *Bashu*, the *Little Stranger* (Bahram Beyza'i, 1986) and *Where is the Friend's House?* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987) putting Iranian cinema back on the map for the first time since the 'first generation' New Wave of the late 1960s. While it is advisable to resist the temptation of labelling film movements on the back of a handful of films, which can only represent a small fraction of a country's cinematic output, it also cannot be denied that Iranian cinema has gathered prolonged recognition and admiration well beyond this initial breakthrough.

This acclaim from international film festivals is symptomatic of New Iranian Cinema's global success, as may be observed from several factors. On top of this, the unique position of a figure such as Abbas Kiarostami in particular, voted most important director of the decade by U.S. critics in *Film Comment* and revered as an auteur of international repute, fully cements Iranian cinema's status renaissance in the late 1980s as more than a passing fad. Its status continued to grow and has now elevated to being seen one of the most distinctive national cinemas. Naturally, this is too broad a statement to make about the entirety of Iranian cinema, and hence it must be specified that this essay will focus almost exclusively on the New Iranian Cinema (hereafter referred to as NIC), that is the Iranian 'art cinema' of the last 25 years. The international spread of this type of Iranian cinema picked up momentum in the late 1980s, and carried it well into the 1990s and beyond. One of the primary impetuses was Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House?* taking five prizes

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at the 1989 Locarno Film Festival. Three years later, Kiarostami not only saw his film *And Life Goes On* (1992) judged Best Film in the *Un Certain Regard* strand at Cannes, but was also honoured with the Roberto Rossellini Prize for his career overall. From then on, Kiarostami would continue to be a regular at film festivals worldwide, soon to be joined by other standard-bearers of the NIC. Jafar Panahi, who worked as his assistant director on *Through The Olive Trees* (1994), has directed Kiarostami-penned scripts such as *The White Balloon* and *Crimson Gold*. He developed his own style, however, displaying a passionate concern for social injustice (a trait which sadly resulted in the current regime jailing him), and has won awards at Cannes, Venice and Berlin.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf, whose career has been punctuated by abrupt changes in style and ideology, is another of the well-known auteurs to emerge out of the NIC. He too has won a host of awards, and was perhaps influenced in his change of direction towards more self-reflexive films by Kiarostami, for whom he played a small part in *Close-Up* (1990). In 1996, he set up the Makhmalbaf Film House, simultaneously a film school and collaborative production company, in his own home with family members and friends as students. Under his guidance, his daughter Samira Makhmalbaf displayed directorial talent precociously, making *The Apple* (1998) when only 18 years old, and touring with it on the film festival circuit. Her follow-up film, *Blackboards* (2000) would win the Jury Prize at Cannes. By this time, Iranian cinema had already become celebrated the world over, and the work of these four directors played a key role in paving the way for the attention it garnered, from festivals to art-house regulars and even mainstream audiences. A global market was suddenly surprised to find Iran, with its reductive reputation as a fundamentalist Islamic state, producing such poetic humanist films. Many questions can therefore be raised about the recent success of Iranian cinema, and the characteristics which have made it so distinctive. Are there aesthetic or thematic similarities in these films, and what are some of the influences and motivations behind them? Is there such a thing as a signature style, idiosyncratic to the NIC, discernibly running through these films, and in what ways might it be responsible for their positive reception from festivals, scholars and critics? In order for this study to engage with these questions, it will need to narrow its focus, notwithstanding the great diversity of Iranian cinema. By restricting itself to the films of Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi, this project necessarily omits many Iranian directors equally worthy of study (the likes of Beyza'i, Bani-Etemad or Naderi for example), but these four filmmakers represent a sample of the most prominent and internationally recognised proponents of the NIC. While their films have differences and contrasting elements, the essay will attempt to identify recurring themes and features and assess the factors which have shaped these.

## ORIGIN OF EXPERIMENTAL IRANIAN CINEMA

For the benefit of the subsequent sections, it will be useful to place Iranian cinema in its historical and socio-political context. Up until the late 1950s and early 1960s, Iranian cinema consisted of formulaic melodramas and musicals. Under the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Tehran “boasted a major film festival and a commercial industry releasing up to seventy films a year, but films making social critiques were heavily censored or banned altogether. The first ‘New Wave’, which occurred in the 1960s with films such as *The Cow* (Dariush Mehrjui, 1969) and *The House is Black* (Feroz Farrokhzad, 1963), brought a kind of realism to Iranian cinema which had hitherto been missing. Furthermore, these films took modernist literature, present in Iranian cultural consciousness since the 1940s, as one of its main influences; in fact, Farrokhzad was herself a key figure in the modernist poetry movement. Other directors came through, such as Sohrab Shahid Saless, whose *A Simple Event* (1974) is a known influence on Kiarostami (1). Indeed, the impact of these first New Wave films left an indelible mark on Iranian Cinema.

Kiarostami was already active in the 1970s, having made his first feature, *The Traveler* (1974), at the film division of the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents (*Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri Kudakan va Noja-vanan*, also known as *Kanun* for short). *Kanun* became the focal point of a new generation of young filmmakers, including Kiarostami, who would make shorts, features and documentaries there over the next two decades. The political landscape in Iran would vastly change during that time, with anti-Shah protests, primarily by supporters of the then-exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, becoming more fervent. Many traditionalists accused cinema of being “an agent of cultural colonization of Iran by the West” (2), and in August 1978, a cinema in Abadan was set on fire by anti-Shah militants, causing almost 400 deaths. In 1979 the revolution drove the Shah into exile and the Ayatollah Khomeini took power, with the goal of transforming Iran into a fundamentalist Islamic state. Cinema now became “associated with the previous regime’s cultural dominance” (3) and was met with much suspicion by the new authorities. This negative attitude led to 195 of the 525 existing cinemas being burnt down or destroyed (4), and film production itself slowed down drastically. The first few years after the revolution were therefore a very uncertain time for Iranian cinema; yet, unexpectedly, out of these literal and metaphorical ashes would rise the beginnings of the NIC. Rose Issa describes the changes which gradually revitalised the film industry: “...following the enormous and rapid social upheaval brought by the devastating Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the conservative religious regime needed the film-makers to document current events. It is no accident that most of the currently known film directors started out making documentaries. Later, the need to entertain a public hungry for cinema, forced the only state production and distribution foundation, Farabi, to let go of its monopoly and to encourage directors to raise their own funds.” (5)

The stagnation gradually was overcome and the number of films being made almost quadrupled between 1979 and 1987 (6). This was due to the factors Rose Issa mentions, as well as others. For instance, the majority of foreign films were banned, meaning less market competition for domestic productions; the Fajr film festival, promoting Iranian cinema, was inaugurated in 1983; and social security for filmmakers was introduced. Directors who had been working in the pre-revolution era found success again, such as Amir Naderi with *The Runner* (1985) or Dariush Mehrjui with *The Tenants* (1986), while a new post-revolution generation also came to the fore, including Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who made humanistic films using the war as a theme to criticise Iran's government and society. Such social critiques were predictably met with disapproval by the state, which was as keen as the Pahlavi regime before it to "suppress themes of political criticism and social dissent" (7). Censorship remained present in both pre- and post-revolution eras, yet it proved to be, somewhat paradoxically, one of the defining factors shaping the NIC in the late 1980s and 1990s. Khomeini's attitude towards cinema was ambivalent; opposed to its 'misuse' under the Shah's regime, he nonetheless was pragmatic about its potential as propaganda tool and thus did not seek to remove it, instead aiming to 'purify' it according to the ascetic codes of Shi'a Islam. In 1982 government officials introduced a set of censorship regulations: women had to remain veiled on-screen, even in situations where they realistically would not be, such as in their own homes; nor could they be shown in close-ups because the audience's gaze too came under religious scrutiny. Censorship went through alternating periods of tightening and relaxing; an example of the latter came under reformist Mohammed Khatami, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance (the ministry responsible for supervising the film industry) from 1982 to 1992 and later President from 1997 to 2005, a well-known supporter of filmmakers. But ultimately the restrictions induced the creation of a new cinematic grammar and urged filmmakers to invent innovative ways to bypass them. The extent to which industrial, historical and socio-political factors have formed NIC's idiosyncrasies shall be addressed further on, but first these idiosyncrasies themselves must be distinguished.

### **RECURRING TRAITS OF NEW IRANIAN CINEMA FILMS**

Certain aesthetic features, as well as thematic concerns, are common to a large number of the films made by the four NIC directors introduced in the previous sections, even though each has their own distinct auteurist style. Notably, these films developed a realism with tropes comparable to the documentary format (with many either being actual documentaries or pseudo-documentaries like *Close-Up* and *The Apple*) or to Italian neo-realism. Yet, differentiating them from these traditions, is a self-conscious, self-reflexive tone characteristic of modernist art. For the purposes of categorisation these features have been divided into two loose

sub-sections, since it is in the blend of these traditional and modernist elements that NIC finds its signature style.

### REALIST/NEO-REALIST ELEMENTS IN IRANIAN CINEMA

Although their stylistic range is wide, NIC films are often made with non-professional actors, filmed on location rather than in studios, use direct sound, contain a number of long takes and frequently end with a final freeze-frame shot. They tend to have simple narratives, commonly open-ended, with seemingly little dramatisation or sensationalisation, often set in rural areas of Iran and focussing on lower class characters. This approach has drawn many comparisons between New Iranian Cinema and the Italian neo-realist films, or the 'poetic realist' films of Satyajit Ray. Indeed there is another trait which NIC films have in common with works such as *The Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948), *Germany Year Zero* (Rossellini, 1948) or *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955); namely the use of child protagonists in prominent roles. As Hamid Reza Sadr describes, in "the absence of a star system and famous actors in the years following the revolution, children became an important element" in Iranian cinema (8). It was predominantly boys who featured in the 1980s (*Where is the Friend's Home?* and *Homework* (Kiarostami, 1989)), while during the 1990s it was typically girls: Panahi's *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997), and Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998). For *Where is the Friend's Home?*, Kiarostami travelled to rural northern Iran to tell the story of Ahmed, a conscientious young boy on an after-school quest to return his classmate's schoolbook, which he took home by mistake. The themes of the film are deceptively simple; the moral dilemma posed to Ahmed becomes compelling because the friend will be expelled from school the next day, if his book is not presented to the teacher. Ahmed responds with an innate sense of duty, despite the indifference of the adults and figures of authority around him. The mazy village pathways and zigzag trails he follows (purposely created by Kiarostami for the film) lend the rural settings a de-familiarising aura. Something comparable can be seen across other NIC films, like Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1996) in which the rug-weaving of a nomadic tribe is depicted as a colourful spectacle, or in Samira Makhmalbaf's *Blackboards* (2000). In the latter, the surreal image of itinerant teachers carrying their blackboards on their backs is juxtaposed with the rural landscape of Kurdistan which "dissolves into disconnected spaces of desolation" (9) through fragmentary editing, eschewing the spatial bearings of standard continuity editing. It is in traits like these that we already perceive NIC's blend of the everyday and the extraordinary, a conscious desire to play with representations of village life, and thereby force re-negotiations of national coordinates.

The use of child protagonists also resonates on a national scale; they are often allegorical stand-ins for something wider, a technique "disguising [from the censors] its wider socio-political implications through the figure of childhood". Samira

Makhmalbaf's debut film, *The Apple*, provides such an example. The pseudo-documentary narrative is based on a real-life event, concerning two 11-year-old twins who were locked up inside their home by an over-protective father. This news-item immediately attracted Samira's interest because, to her and her father Mohsen, it was the "story of our nation" (10). Samira, however, refuses to judge or condemn in the film, instead casting an anthropological eye on the girls slowly making their first steps towards the outside world, an optimistic metaphor for Iran's slow course towards a more open society. The film ends with the twins' blind mother, herself just as secluded as her daughters, wandering into the street and tentatively reaching out for a symbolic apple. Some have seen this as a "feminist allegory about women seizing opportunities" (11), and the film as "a devastating condemnation of the mind-numbing oppression of women" (12). In this regard, *The Apple* may be likened to other NIC films highlighting the situation of women in modern Iran, such as *The Circle* (2000) and *Ten* (2002). Besides documenting the nuances of gender divisions, NIC has also been thematically preoccupied with the ethnic and class differences present in Iranian society. Iran is a multi-ethnic country with significant Kurdish and Turk minorities, and a large community of Afghan refugees displaced during the Soviet-Afghan War. All four directors have addressed this issue of the major cultural 'others' in their own way. The Makhmalbafs have gradually moved away from making films in Iran, directing attention towards the plight of the Afghan people. *Kandahar* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2001) and *At Five in the Afternoon* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 2003) were both shot on location in Afghanistan, with non-professional actors, and the tragic experiences of ordinary Afghans told within the parameters of realistic narratives. Kiarostami, too, dealt with these social issues, albeit in a more oblique way, particularly in the parable-like *Taste of Cherry*, where the suicidal Mr Badiei encounters three characters each representing one of the main ethnic minorities in Iran: a Kurdish soldier, an Afghan seminary student and a Turkish taxidermist, building a microcosm of Iranian society from the abstract environment of Badiei's journey. Panahi also handled this theme obliquely, before his more overtly socially-minded films, in his first feature *The White Balloon*. The film revolves around a seven-year-old girl's quest to buy a goldfish and was a minor hit in the US and Europe, where it was received as a charming story of innocent children protagonists. But, as Shohini Chaudhuri notes, "the film's sombre ending belies this reading" (13), with the sudden shift in point-of-view from the girl, to a solitary Afghan balloon-seller holding the eponymous white balloon, serving as an effective reminder of the outsider status such refugees hold in Iran.

Whereas Samira Makhmalbaf's directorial style can be described as anthropological, and Kiarostami's as philosophical, Panahi's is more journalistic. His films exposed Iranian society's malaises, like *Crimson Gold* (2003), yet another film inspired by real events, in which a schizophrenic Iran-Iraq war veteran delivers pizzas to bourgeois homes or gets snubbed by a condescending uptown jeweller

— episodes exemplifying his alienation. These more recent works by Panahi were not the first to directly deal with social and class divisions. Mohsen Makhmalbaf, himself regarded as somewhat of a ‘working class hero’ — hence the affinity the unemployed film-fanatic protagonist of *Close-Up* felt towards him — was already making films dealing with the socially excluded and disadvantaged in the 1980s, such as *The Cyclist* (1986) and *Marriage of the Blessed* (1987). This class-consciousness reflects an enduring thematic concern of the NIC, which has seldom focussed on the affluent middle classes of large cities like Tehran, either in setting or in character, except to present a contrast of social milieus. Such inclinations, as well as aesthetic features — free of eye-catching angles, ostentatious camera movement, or clever editing — differing from the standards of glamourised commercial cinema, have attracted comparisons with Italian neo-realism. As has NIC’s penchant for minimalistic de-dramatised narratives, based on naturalistic events or even real-life stories (*The Apple*, *Close-Up*, *A Moment of Innocence...*) which puts into practice Cesare Zavattini’s neo-realist motto: “[t]he time has come to tell the audience that they are the true protagonists of life” (14). Yet this is too simplistic a reading of NIC’s characteristic style, as it has often attained a level of self-consciousness transcending pure realist traditions, and has unique preoccupations differentiating it from neo-realism.

### *Modernist Elements*

Kiarostami, speaking about *Close-Up*, claimed that “even I, the film-maker, get confused as to which parts were fiction and which documentary” (15). This could be applied to many NIC films generally, since blurring the lines between documentary and fiction, life and art, reality and film, is at the heart of much Iranian cinema. *Close-Up*’s starting point was a news-story about a man (Hossein Sabzian) arrested for pretending to be Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Kiarostami convincing the actual protagonists to re-enact the events on film (the similarities with how *The Apple* came to be made are evident). Hamid Dabashi summarised this dis-orientating amalgam of fact and fiction: “one knows one is watching a fiction (Kiarostami’s *Close-Up*) that is based on fact (Sabzian’s real story) that is based on fiction (Sabzian pretending to be Makhmalbaf) that is based on fact (Makhmalbaf as a leading Iranian filmmaker) that is based on fiction (Makhmalbaf making fictional stories in film) that is based on fact (the reality Makhmalbaf transforms into fiction)” (16). Kiarostami manipulates his material with skill, playing with the audience’s expectations of documentary realism. For example, in the scene where Sabzian finally meets the real Makhmalbaf, the film crew is heard off-screen and the sound is cut under the false pretence of equipment failure — in fact this was a deliberate ploy to intensify the emotional power of the scene. Throughout this film and *The Apple*, its closest relation in the NIC canon, a constant tension between what is or isn’t staged persists, and forces us to question the veracity of ‘realism’ and of film itself as a medium.

The NIC directors are fully aware that their films, despite much of mainstream realist cinema's ambition to depict some kind of fixed reality, can only be subjective, and this infuses them with a rare sense of self-consciousness. The audience is often reminded that what they are watching is merely a film, through distancing devices where the filmic apparatus literally intrudes into the diegetic space of the film, as in the coda to *Taste of Cherry*; the film-shoot in *Through the Olive Trees* (where the 'director' also introduces himself straight to camera as an actor at the start, putting the film's reality in doubt from the opening seconds); or in Panahi's *The Mirror*. In the latter, a young girl trying to get home unexpectedly breaks the cinematic illusion midway through the film by stating she no longer wants to act, and action cuts to Panahi and his crew debating what to do next. This abrupt denouement shifts the film from one which seemed destined to tread on similar ground to *The White Balloon*, into an examination of what is 'filmed', what is 'reality' and the interstices in-between the two. Panahi has recently returned to these themes, with *This Is Not a Film* (2011), made while he was under house arrest and smuggled out in a USB stick. Having been banned from directing by the Iranian authorities, in this conceptual and daring blend of film-essay-documentary, he ponders the definition of what filmmaking is. This recurring NIC motif of self-referentially making films about the filmmaking process itself also appears in much of the work of Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf. The last two films comprising what is often labelled Kiarostami's 'Koker trilogy', *Life and Nothing More* and *Through the Olive Trees*, each refer back to the preceding film. In *Life and Nothing More*, a director, presumed to be a surrogate for Kiarostami, searches for the two boys who acted in *Where is the Friend's Home?* in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake; while *Through the Olive Trees* is centred on the shooting of a scene from *Life and Nothing More*. Thus each film figures a film within a film, in an intricately nested structure. Characters from the previous films suddenly appear, including, in *Through the Olive Trees*, the sought-after boys who were never found in *Life and Nothing More*. Interestingly, Kiarostami refuses to group them as a trilogy, and also remarked "I didn't have the least intention as such of making a film about the shooting of a film" (17). Importantly, these self-reflexive tendencies resemble neither Brechtian devices nor post-modern playfulness, but instead offer a celebration of life — regarded as the one constant guiding both cinema and reality — and thus, in the hands of Kiarostami, take a more poetic and philosophical dimension.

Makhmalbaf's approach differs from Kiarostami's insofar as it is more personal; he frequently appears as himself in his films, but what the two share in common is an active interrogation of the authoritarian filmmaker and cinema's absolutist claim to truth. In the last 25 years, Makhmalbaf's personal transformation has been evident. Starting out as a fervent Islamist in his youth, he has gone on to alter his worldview and this evolution is visible over his film career. Already in *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989), we see his early experiments in self-referentiality, and in *A*

Time For Love (1990) his ideas on the relativity of truth first emerge. But his most ambitious films were to come. In the pseudo-documentary *Salaam Cinema* (1995), Makhmalbaf, playing himself, presides over a series of auditions. The camera and what it makes the desperate people in front of it do, become an instrument to analyse both the significance of cinema in contemporary Iran and the dynamics of power relations. His next film, *A Moment of Innocence*, a personal attempt to exorcise the demons of his own past as a youthful revolutionary, again stars himself but this time he is joined by the actual policeman he'd stabbed twenty years before. Each of them mentors an actor set to play their respective youthful counterparts, in a re-enactment of their fateful encounter. Yet the cinematic re-creation of this real event ends with a symbolic final freeze-frame, where the representatives of the young policeman and the young Makhmalbaf exchange a flowerpot and a piece of bread, rather than a gun and a knife, which Hamid Dabashi described as "virtual realism" and an "erosion of the dead certainties that separate the real from the make-believe" (18). Instances like these, or the way Kiarostami builds a zigzag path on a hill in *Where is the Friend's Home?*, or how Samira Makhmalbaf introduces symbolic props (a mirror, a flower-pot, an apple) into the improvised scenes of *The Apple*, indicate a willingness to tamper with the on-screen representation of reality. The use of shots pregnant with symbolism adds poetic meaning to the 'reality' depicted, particularly with Kiarostami, who often speaks of his films being half-complete, with the viewer having to ascribe their own meaning to them. It is thus that NIC films transcend traditional realism, mixing the ordinary with the extraordinary, the real with the fantastical and the natural with the artificial, and as Rose Issa puts it, "explore and expose the complex paradoxes inherent in a society that, although based on traditional values and archaic religious laws, cannot escape modernism." (19)

### ARTISTIC LEGACY OF IRAN

One area in which the NIC's position on the cusp of tradition and modernism materialises itself most clearly, is in its relation with Iranian and Persian art, particularly poetry and literature. Criticism has often been levelled at Western critics and scholars for taking a 'Eurocentric' approach to analysing NIC, exoticising or culturally essentialising it, while only using European cinema as reference points. But works by the likes of Hamid Dabashi or Alberto Elena have stressed the importance of remembering the context of Iran's rich cultural legacy of poetry, philosophy and art, extending back several millennia, which pervades intrinsically through Iranian artistic heritage. As well as having a long traditional of oral storytelling (naqqali) and public theatre (ro-hozi), classical Persian culture boasts many celebrated poets, such as Omar Khayyam, Ferdowsi or Rumi (20), whose epic poems are an acknowledged influence on the philosophy of Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Indeed Makhmalbaf has often linked his own viewpoint concerning the relativity of truth and rejection of absolutes, noticeable in many of his films, to

a passage from the poetry of Rumi: “Truth is a mirror that falls from the hand of God and shatters into pieces. Everyone picks up a piece and believes that this piece contains the whole truth, even though the truth is left sown about in each fragment” (21); while his 1997 film *The Silence* was explicitly influenced by Khayyam’s poetry and philosophy. The enduring motif of journeys in NIC films, often with spiritual or metaphysical undertones, also has its counterparts in Persian poetry, most notably in Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*, where a mystical quest serves to convey the moral that the destination is often less important than the journey itself.

20th century art has also been a fertile influence, with modernist movements in poetry and literature ushering in a new era for Iranian art. In the 1960s, Sohrab Sepehri and Forough Farrokhzad, among other contemporary poets, offered a ground-breaking new poetic outlook, and “became the principal locus of intellectual revolt against the dominant powers” (22). Kiarostami is particularly indebted to these modernist poets as an influence, and it is worth noting that *Where is the Friend’s Home?* takes its name from a poem by Sepehri, whose work Dabashi describes as the poetic analogue of what Kiarostami has accomplished visually, while *The Wind Will Carry Us* (a title taken from a poem by Khayyam) quotes extensively from Farrokhzad’s poetry. Numerous scholars have also identified the link between poetry and the symbolism used in NIC, especially in Kiarostami’s films (23). There is also much to suggest the fascination with the interconnectedness of life and art stems from the themes of Iran’s artistic tradition “which foregrounds deconstruction and multiple-narration” (24). To take just one, somewhat basic, example, even the famed Persian folk tales of the *Arabian Nights* were framed by the story within a story of Princess Scheherazade (25). But throughout classical Persian poetry and story-telling, the motif of framed narratives and stories-within-stories recurs, to the point where the different strands are inextricably entangled and life and art are firmly intertwined. As has already been stated, many NIC films express thematic concerns echoing these traditions, and the similarities, be they inspired directly or unconsciously, are noteworthy testament to NIC’s specific position as descendent of many previous Iranian/Persian artistic movements.

### *Cinematic Influences*

Cinematic movements may be included among this category, and as previously mentioned, the first New Wave in Iran, coming in the 1960s and 1970s, was an essential model for the next generation represented by the NIC filmmakers. The preservation of these films as an influence can be attributed to the insular climate in post-revolution Iran shutting itself off from globalisation, as well as the rise of video, and thus did “the modernist-cinematic 60s/70s survive to enjoy a vital afterlife” (26). In 1963 Forough Farrokhzad’s *The House is Black* was made; hailed as the “greatest of all Iranian films” according to Rosenbaum (27), and as “the best Iranian film [to have] affected the contemporary Iranian cinema” (28) by Mohsen

Makhmalbaf, this 22 minute long documentary about a leper community continues to show an affinity with NIC films made 30 years later. Its gaze at the suffering of the lepers is unsentimental and primarily humanistic, emphasising the small joys of life and poetically depicting a reality on film. These are features which can be seen again in the films of Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami, most obviously in the way the latter depicts earthquake survivors in the Koker trilogy or in his documentary about AIDS victims in Uganda, *ABC Africa* (2001).

In the 1970s, the films of Sohrab Shahid Saless “introduced a whole new way of looking at reality... an almost passive documentation of reality [which] became the hallmark of a new form of realism” (29) and “left an indelible mark on the narrative technique of Iranian cinema” (30). Saless has most directly influenced Kiarostami, but as the senior of the four directors, the influence of Kiarostami himself on this generation should not be underestimated. Links can be drawn between some of his films and *The Apple* or some of Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s more self-reflexive work, whilst his collaborations with Panahi have undoubtedly helped to shape his former assistant-director. Another Iranian precedent to NIC themes was Kamran Shirdel’s *The Night it Rained* (1967), a “Rashomon-like documentary manufacturing conflicting positions on a real-life event” (31) in which we can already recognise many elements later to become key modernist aspects of NIC. These strong domestic influences notwithstanding, attempts to position NIC within a wider context of world cinema cannot be avoided. Kiarostami has “recalled how his real interest [in cinema] began only... with the arrival of neo-realist Italian films in Iran” (32) in the 1950s and 1960s, as Iran opened itself up to these masterpieces of world cinema for the first time. The NIC has also been likened to the films of the French New Wave and other modernist currents of 1960s cinema, for the way it self-consciously interrogates the effects of the medium on the construction of everyday reality, but also more specifically for the recurring use of final freeze-frames, a motif made famous by Truffaut’s *Les 400 Coups* (1959). Comparisons to other masters with a subtle humanistic vision, such as Kurosawa, Ozu or Ray, have also been common. It is hard to gauge exactly to what extent these filmmakers had an impact on the cinematic grammar of the NIC directors today, with Makhmalbaf for instance claiming he never watched a film until he was in his twenties due to a strict religious upbringing, but in any case they are now reflecting back these influences to the rest of the world with their own unmistakable Iranian accent. The international film community, with festivals and trans-national co-productions, also has had a huge role to play in the NIC, acting as a catalyst for its development and appraisal.

### ***Some Responses to New Iranian Cinema and Concluding Remarks***

To conclude this study of the NIC, it is worth looking briefly at some of the responses towards it from critics, scholars and audiences, both domestically and internationally. Iranian culture has historically attributed high value to the arts, and

cinema, after the rise of the modernists in poetry and literature, has rivalled those two media in terms of social importance. This is evidenced especially in *Close-Up*, where Sabzian's desire to be someone else is linked with the social mobility cinema offers, and in *Salaam Cinema*, where crowds flock in the hope of obtaining parts in the film. Makhmalbaf's path from lower class revolutionary to leading filmmaker gives a further real-life example. Yet responses to NIC in Iran itself seem to be mixed, with Kiarostami in particular getting far more lukewarm reactions domestically than he does internationally. This tension has led some Iranian critics to accuse him of 'making films for foreigners', and other filmmakers of emulating 'Kiarostami-style films' in attempts to achieve similar international success (33). Dabashi offers one possible explanation for the mistrust towards Kiarostami, suggesting that his humanist philosophy is what clashes with the overbearing attitude of Shi'a Islam, which assigns more importance to the afterlife and regards life on Earth as an austere test. Kiarostami's life-affirming celebration of existence in the here-and-now is "what unites both his religious and his secular critics", against "what they consider to be Kiarostami's daring to replace the 'spiritual'... with the material" (34). Another possible explanation for this suspicion to his and other NIC films, is that fears exist over typical NIC films' bias towards rural settings and materially-poor characters, as being exactly the depiction of Iran that foreign audiences expected and were comfortable in seeing, maintaining a sense of Iranians as primitive 'others'. In any case, the fact that NIC has increasingly come to be defined by its international reception has perhaps understandably led to Iranians feeling a lesser sense of possession or relation to it. Furthermore, this global success, inadvertently legitimises the Islamic Republic's regime by providing a more positive publicity than that which it more usually gets. This problematic relationship between NIC and the Iranian establishment, not always as oppositional as it may seem — exemplified by how *Taste of Cherry*, banned in Iran at the time, was only allowed to be entered for the Cannes film festival by the Iranian foreign minister after its potential benefits for the nation's image were appreciated — is yet another reason for domestic suspicion.

On top of this, and with NIC productions now relying more and more on foreign investors, critics both in Iran and abroad have attacked these films for being too 'apolitical' and not making explicit criticism of the Iranian regime and its human rights abuses. However, some of these critiques have often missed the allegorical nature of the NIC films. To take one example, Simon Louvish described *The White Balloon* as a sentimental piece of slush [which] has had wide distribution in the West at the expense of far better Iranian film. Such a condemning review is at once unfair — Western films are not judged on their political nature — and short-sighted, since the final scenes revolving around the Afghan balloon-seller and the closing freeze-frame, leave a telling, albeit oblique, portrait of the realities of the cultural minorities residing in Iran. And most importantly, the tight domestic

censorship regulations Iranian directors work under cannot be ignored, while Panahi has in fact gone to such lengths to reflect Iranian society in his films that he is now under house arrest and serving a 20-year ban on filmmaking. This evolution and maturation in style from Panahi and other NIC directors, shows how wrong it is to view them as careerists changed by their international praise, since they never settled into any definable 'mainstream'. Mohsen Makhmalbaf has never stopped re-inventing himself; Samira Makhmalbaf is making challenging, symbolic films; and Kiarostami has continued to explore ever-more experimental forms of film, even doing away with narrative altogether in *Ten, Five* (2004) or *Shirin* (2008). That NIC directors managed to accomplish such celebrated art under political upheaval and strict regulations, is testimony to their artistic integrity as individual filmmakers, but also to the rich and enduring cultural potency alive in Iran and Iranians, and which has always transcended specific regimes to intertwine life and art in the most enlightening ways.

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