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Jamsheed Akrami

The Blighted Spring: Iranian Cinema and Politics in the 1970s

The Iranian cinema in the 1970s gave birth to one of the most remarkable Third World film movements. Officially known as the Progressive Filmmakers Group, and by way of nostalgic analogy remembered as the Iranian New Wave, the movement produced a body of highly original films that successfully combined an unexpected degree of artistic flair with film craftsmanship and a strong sense of social awareness and political commitment.

Despite its originality and uniqueness, the Iranian film renaissance, however, remained unnoticed and did not receive the international recognition it truly deserved. What is more saddening is the fact that any future recognition would only serve as a requiem for a fallen cinema. The Iranian New Wave is now dead. It was one of the early victims of the Islamic revolution that drastically changed the cultural fabric in 1979.

Ten years before the revolution, cinema in Iran was in full bloom. Tehran had gained the distinction of being the film capital of the Middle East. Domestic production was averaging about 66 films a year, and the national appetite for foreign films--mostly American, Italian, French, British, and Indian--was seemingly insatiable. Two thriving international film festivals--one, the best of its kind, for children's films, and the other, one of the five top-ranked festivals in the world--would celebrate the Tehran foliage with a spectacular film feast every autumn. In addition to the strong presence of international films and a commercially healthy, if artistically inferior, local cinema, there were other factors that helped make film the most popular national pastime in Iran: the high rate of illiteracy (about 75 per cent) which made film and television more accessible than print media to the masses; the propagandistic nature of the state-controlled media; and the scarcity of other means of cultural entertainment compared to the relative accessibility of cinema.

Realizing how popular the medium was, an increasing number of Iranian artists and intellectuals decided to use film for conveying their messages to the people. The pictorial language of film enabled them to communicate effectively with audiences in various economic and educational walks of society. The emergence of the Iranian New Wave was, in fact, a response to new cultural demands brought about by a growing sense of film awareness among the Iranian middle class--particularly the educated urbanites most influenced by the rapidly growing trend of modernization.

Ironically, this was all happening in a political environment marked by suppression. With the Shah of Iran trying to consolidate further his power as an autocratic ruler, the political climate was turning increasingly repressive. Harsh measures were being taken to suppress the already government-controlled media, and film--one of the few media in which private investment was allowed--was no exception. The film censors, while allowing large doses of sex and violence to an unprecedented extent (in an Islamic country, at least), adopted an uncompromising stand against films dealing with political subjects.

This policy worked effectively with foreign imports; motion pictures feared to be capable of agitating the public were either completely banned or heavily censored. But, ironically, with regard to Iranian films, the policy backfired: a politically sleepy local cinema, dominated by cheap commercial products, began to take the first steps toward making socially aware films.

The new movement, however, did not change the face of the existing cinema overnight. It actually experienced an early blow due to scarcity of financial resources to support it. The government would only back the films "reflecting the great social and economic achievements" of the Shah's regime. On the other hand, the profit-seeking private financiers of the cheap melodramas (perjoratively labeled as *Film Farsi*) were obviously in business to make money and would not take chances with the yet-unproven and uncharted new trend.

Unable to win the support of the private sector, the Progressive Film-makers Group had no choice but to turn to the government for funding. The symbiotic relationship that followed accounts for the production of a number of quality films that were funded entirely or partially by the government. The relationship was indeed ironic; the "New Wave" directors were questioning the underlying values of the establishment, and yet they had to turn to the same establishment to help them produce their critical films. On the other hand, the government, while suspicious of the film-makers and their "subversive" messages, found itself benefitting from being associated with them. The Progressive Filmmakers' works were making an impact in international film festivals, and this was very much in line with the cultural campaign of the Shah's government, which was looking for artistic and cultural gains in order to counterbalance its debased political image on the international scene.

The government, however, always kept a close watch on the Progressive Filmmakers and did its best to discourage or suppress any direct subversive move in their films. The film-makers, on the other hand, would do anything to outsmart the government and convey somehow their messages despite the channels of the state censorship. This meant, in most cases, resorting to allegories, using symbolic distances, and applying metaphorical devices. They had to indulge in indirect communication in order to get around censorship codes.

This forced process of mystification did not necessarily complicate the films beyond comprehension for their intended audiences. The centuries-old tradition of poetry (itself a subject of repression throughout Iranian history) had sharpened Iranian aesthetic sensibility enough to look for and detect the "hidden meanings" behind symbolic works of art and literature.¹

Origins of Iranian Cinema

Moving images were shown in Iran for the first time in 1900, a few years after the invention of cinema in the West. Fascinated by the novelty of the new medium in his trip to Paris, Mozaffar-Din Shah, the fifth King of the Quajar dynasty, ordered the court photographer to purchase film equipment for the royal court. Cinema in Iran, therefore, began as a royal hobby, and it took five years until the Iranian public had its first glimpse of the new magic lantern. The man behind the endeavor was Ebrahim Khan Sahafbashi, an Iranian technocrat who set up the first movie house in Tehran in 1905, and started showing one-reelers on the Edison Kinetoscope he had bought in Europe. Although he had the support of the Quajar court, Sahafbashi's pioneering effort drew strong opposition from the Moslem fanatics who despised the idea of recreating the human face and human body on the screen. Shortly after it opened, the first movie theatre in Iran was ordered closed by the Mozaffar-Din Shah in an attempt to mollify the clergy amidst the rising waves of the constitutional revolution.² Sahafbashi was subsequently sent to exile and his property was confiscated. In addition to religious opposition, what prompted the royal court to take such a strong action against Sahafbashi was his pro-revolutionary sentiment.

A second attempt at the public showing of moving images was made two years later by Russi Khan--an Iranian citizen from an English father and a Russian mother. Unlike Sahafbashi, Russi Khan was a royalist, and it was mainly thanks to the backing he received from the court that he managed to withstand the clerics' opposition and set up a theatre for public screening of films. Besides French one-reelers, Russi Khan, a cinematographer, from time to time showed documentary-style films on public-interest issues that he himself had shot.

During the constitutional revolution, Russi Khan's theatre turned into a political battlefield for the warring factions. One day the revolutionaries would meet in the theatre to chant against the government, and another day it would turn into an arena for the Persian Cossack Brigade to demonstrate support for the government. The theatre was finally sacked by the revolutionaries who disliked its owner for being a protégé of Mohammad Ali Shah--the last Qajar king. Russi Khan himself fled the country for a life of exile in Paris.

Despite the early failures in setting up a movie house, cinema had been already established in Iran. In 1912 an Iranian Armenian, Ardeshir Khan, opened a rather large theatre and started to show films on a regular basis. By 1938 Tehran had eight movie houses.

The early movie theatres were not furnished and people had to sit on the floor in separate areas for male and female audiences. Even when the first furnished theatre opened, the seating remained segregated. During the screening of silent foreign films, a translator would read the titles loudly enough to be heard by both male and female sections in the theatre. This system of interpretation was soon replaced by the substitution of Farsi title cards for the originals.

The Farsi subtitling, and later, with the advent of sound, the practice of dubbing foreign films, coupled with the development of the local film industry, helped make movies an increasingly popular entertainment in Iran. The number of movie houses in Tehran, a good index of growing public interest in movie-going, reached thirty by 1950, and 124 in 1976.

The political turmoil caused by the constitutional revolution delayed the further development of film-making in Iran until 1925, when Khan Baba Motazedi, an Iranian engineering student who had received some training in Gaumont film studios in Paris, made a couple of documentaries, including one about the coronation of the Reza Shah--the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty and the father of the last, deposed, Shah. Khan Baba Motazedi is also credited with producing the first Iranian narrative film in 1931. The film, *Abie and Robie*, was an imitation of a Danish comedy series that had fared well with Iranian audiences.

The most significant pioneering effort in this period was launched by Abdol-Hossein Sepanta, an Iranian national in India, who made the first Farsi-language "talkie" in Bombay. The film, called *The Lore Girl*, opened in Tehran in 1935 to a very enthusiastic reception. It was a musical love story about a young government inspector and a beautiful girl from the Lore tribe who flee to India after the girl's parents are killed by fellow tribesmen. They get married in Bombay and several years later, upon learning that the rule of law and order is restored by the Reza Shah's regime, return to Iran. So, the first Iranian talkie was basically a propaganda piece. No wonder a few years later, the exhibitors changed the title of the film to *Yesterday and Today* upon re-release.

The occupation of Iran by the Allied armies during World War II brought film-making activities in Iran to a virtual halt for more than a decade, and ended the beginning period of Iranian cinema.

The Commercial Period

Dr. Ismail Kooshan, an Iranian with a doctoral degree in economics from Istanbul University, is known as the father of commercial cinema in Iran. His achievement was the making of *The Storm of Life* (1940), the first sound feature film made in Iran. Dr. Kooshan was also responsible for setting up the first film studio in Iran, and making the Iranian film industry commercially viable. By 1952, there were thirty-five film studios in operation in the country, and the annual film production was on the rise.

Unfortunately, the same thing could not be said of the quality of the films, which were mostly banal melodramas with repetitious assortments of singing and dancing and brawling scenes inserted in a familiar plot about a young, courageous man making an all-out effort to save an innocent and beautiful girl victimized by a bunch of evil-hearted and corrupt individuals. The films were obviously trying to satisfy the expectations of the "lowest common denominator" audience. During the 1950s and 1960s, there were a number of individual attempts at making films of a more serious nature, but without an educated audience those efforts never amounted to anything but occasional flashes in the pan.

As a business, however, the commercial cinema was booming through this period. By the mid-1960s the annual film production was fluctuating at between fifty to sixty films per year, and new types of formula films containing new types of contrived plots were being developed. One particularly popular plot involved a hard-working poor man falling in love with a rich girl and refusing to compromise his hard-boiled "poor man" moral principles. The theme was exploited to its bare bones in Siamak Yassemi's *The Treasure of Qarun* (1965), a film that broke all the box office records and enjoyed one of the longest runs any film ever had in Iran.

New Directions

In 1969, the presentation of two Iranian films, Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* and Masoud Kimiai's *Qeisar*, marked the beginning of a new period in Iranian cinema. The two films appeared to be setting a trend toward a cinema of social realism. They dealt with Iranian realities in a cinematic language which put them in sharp contrast with the mindless banality of the commercial cinema and its escapist tendencies.

Qeisar and *The Cow*, while both helped bring about a remarkable turning point in Iranian cinema, were in many ways different films projecting different sensibilities. *Qeisar* was a huge commercial success and proved that a departure from formula films was not only possible but even profitable. The film, however, contained a new set of crowd-pleasing elements of its own that had been deliberately woven into a Western type "revenge" plot about a man avenging the rape of his sister and murder of his brother. On the other hand, *The Cow* was a thematically original and commercially uncompromising film which, in spite of a poor box-office performance, received an enthusiastic critical response and introduced Iranian films to international film festivals.

The fact that *Qeisar* was made by the private sector and *The Cow* was funded by the government may explain why *Qeisar* was so cautiously commercial, and *The Cow* had nothing in the way of commercial concessions. This meant that the people who made *The Cow* did not have to worry about return on investment, while in the private sector if a film failed, its makers might have no chance to make another. Making films for the government did not necessarily mean extra pressure on the film-makers, since every film had to go through the same channels of government censorship. In fact, the government role in full or partial funding of most "New Wave" films in the beginning of this period was crucial, and the quality films could not have survived without it.

The government's financing of--as they were referred to at the time--"artistic" films was part of the Shah's drive toward his so-called "great civilization" era. He viewed film and television as two very important media for portraying his regime's version of Iranian realities to the Iranian people--and if possible, to the rest of the world. While his policy was successful with television--thanks to the government's tight control of the broadcasting media--it hardly worked to this satisfaction with film. *The Cow* itself was a good example. The government approved the project thinking that it was a psychological drama about a man's obsessive love for his cow. In fact, that was the theme of the original short story upon which the film was based. But on screen the film turned out to be an unsettling account of poverty in an Iranian village centuries behind any great civilization. It showed how deeply the loss of the village's single cow affected all the villagers. The Shah's government was so infuriated by the film that it first kept it out of distribution, and then forced the film-makers to put a sort of disclaimer at the beginning of the film, saying that the events depicted in the film took place prior to the Shah's rule.

What the government did not seem to understand was the nature of the film medium and its vast potential for communication in an ambiguous and indirect fashion. This proved to be a particularly significant asset for film in Iran since the other channels of mass communications--the press and broadcast media--were being closely monitored by the state.

The early achievements of Mehrgui and Kimiai were soon followed by a modest but steady flow of quality films by a group of ambitious first-time directors who started to utilize film as a medium of artistic and creative expression. They brought their backgrounds to their films. Some were writers, some came from theater, some had been trained abroad, and some were university professors. But no matter what their background, they all seemed to share the same goal: mainly, a departure from the conventional mold of commercial cinema into a new free-spirited personal cinema with a social conscience. The films were personal in the sense that they were reflecting one artist's vision of the world--very much in the same manner as the works of European *auteur* film-makers did. At the same time, they were probing problems of social significance--much like the films of the Italian neo-realists after World War II.

It was the latter tendency that caught the attention of the government's censors and brought the films under tighter restrictions. The film-makers responded by a calculated retreat into the freer realm of symbolism. They started to create symbolic universes filled with metaphorical elements, depicting social issues in an allegorical manner. While the Iranian New Wave was similar in a number of characteristics to other international film trends, its particular type of symbolism made it unique. For the films did not use symbolism to express abstract ideas with psychological or metaphysical dimensions. The symbolism rather served to present the concrete day-to-day realities of Iranian life which could not be presented in a direct way.

The government's reaction was a gradual withdrawal of financial support for the films. This caused a financial crisis whose early signs started to appear by the mid-1970s--at a time when the New Wave films had started to gain ground both artistically and commercially at home, and to make an impact in European film festivals. The private sector increased its backing of the quality films and, to some extent, made up for the loss of the government's funds. There was a sense of optimism that the financial woes would somehow disappear and the new film trend would further flourish. As late as 1978 the quality film-makers were still at work, and one could hardly predict that a year later a violent revolution would spell the early demise of the Iranian New Wave.

The Revolutionary Period

Like the constitutional revolution, the 1979 Islamic revolution was not too kind to cinema in Iran. The movie houses once again fell victim to revolutionary fervor and became main targets of mob vandalism. In fact, it was arson in a crowded movie house in the southern city of Abadan, causing the tragic deaths of more than 300 people, which set the stage for the final

show-down between a coalition of the opposition groups and the Shah's armed forces. The religious opposition charged that SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, was behind the arson--a charge that stirred public emotion to the point of hysteria. Once again, the zealous Islamic fundamentalists condemned cinema as a symbol of decadent and immoral Western influence. According to one *Variety* account, more than 185 movie houses were burned down throughout the country--nearly half the total number of theatres in Iran. The *New York Times* reported that in Tehran alone, with 118 theatres, only seven remained intact in 1978. The owners of a number of theatres set up brick walls to protect their buildings against the rioters.

When the movie houses reopened after the revolution, there seemed to be a sharp shift in their programming and exhibition choices. Before the revolution, Iranian screens were mostly showing foreign and domestic films containing excessive sex and graphic violence. The New Wave films had yet to become a commercial force, and quality foreign films would mostly be shown in festivals and film clubs, unless they had enough sex or violence to make them commercially viable as well.

After the revolution the showing of exploitation films was banned and the movie houses turned into a showplace for "revolutionary" films such as *Z*, *The Battle of Algiers*, *Viva Zapata*--some of them long banned under the Shah. The re-runs of religious epics like *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben Hur*, *Mohammad: Messenger of God* (shown in Iran for the first time) became fashionable as well. But the choice of revolutionary and religious films was a limited one, and the film exhibitors had to go back to a wider variety of films. The Islamic government, however, was strongly opposed to the showing of the type of films that were popular before the revolution and imposed sanctions against film imports from American and Western European countries. The film exhibitors had no choice but to start digging up old films whose copies were still, legally or otherwise, available in Tehran. Then government reacted by declaring all those films banned until re-submitted for a new screening permit. Along with tightening the screws on film exhibition, the Islamic ideologues began to develop an incredibly restrictive code of film censorship, in order to "Islamicize" cinema in Iran. The head of the Council for the Supervision of Film, a mullah by the name of Hojatol-islam Goal Mohammadi, hinted at a thrust of these codes in a 1983 *Film Monthly* interview:

The film should be useful. It should not insult the official religions of the country. It should not be propaganda for corrupt imperialist powers, such as American or Russia, or perverse ideologies. It should not be against Islam, and should not insult or ridicule the traditions that people hold sacred. And above all, it cannot be solely for entertainment.

The government encourages film-makers to expose the crimes and corruption of the Shah's regime, and, for instance, to show how it turned Iranian women into "prostitutes" by forcing them to dress in a Western manner. But at the same time they are cautioned not to use this as a justification to show unveiled faces of women on the screen. Film-makers should show the improperly dressed women either in shadow or in long shots, or it may suffice to just mention the problem in the dialogue!

In 1979, only a few months after the revolution, the trade paper *Variety* posed a question that was in the minds of all those concerned with the future of Iranian cinema in a fundamentalist Islamic society. The question was "whether a budding film industry with several talented filmmakers already noted will survive the rigors of an ancient feudal and religious law that demands, in substance, the closing of cinema in the first place."

Well, in the years after the revolution, the fate of Iranian cinema is hardly a matter of speculation anymore. Most of the "Progressive Film-makers," finding themselves under a regime far more repressive than the one they had always opposed, left their homeland for an uncertain life in exile. The rate of annual film production sharply dropped to an average of only eleven feature films in 1979-85, compared to sixty feature films annually in the six years preceding the revolution.

The more significant change, however, is the deterioration in the quality of the films. The absence of most quality film-makers and the tight restrictions imposed by the government on the practice of the remaining film-makers account for this deterioration. Under the Islamic government, a film has to go through four channels of control before it can reach its audience:

(1) Script Approval. The film-maker first sends in a twenty-page synopsis of the script in which he has to provide a summary of the plot and specify what the message of the film is and what he is trying to accomplish by making the film. Only if this synopsis is found "useful and appropriate" is the film-maker asked to send a complete script for a second stage of script review.

(2) Production Permit. When the script is finally approved, the film-maker has to apply for a production permit. One of the requirements at this stage is to submit a list containing the names of the cast and crew members. The commission in charge then determines who is "fit" to work on the film and who is not.

(3) Film Review Board. When the film is finished, the film-maker must submit a copy to the Film Review Board, which either passes the film or rejects it, and which can recommend changes to be made in the film.

(4) Screening Permit. When the film is finally approved by the Film Review Board, it is sent to another government commission in charge of issuing screening permits. This commission decides in what theatres and on what dates the film should be shown.

It seems that the Islamic government has taken the utmost caution to make sure that no message of political protest with subversive overtones would ever creep into the films. That a political cinema managed to exist and grow despite the Shah's censorship perhaps taught the new dictatorial regime a lesson in extreme cautiousness with regard to visual communication through mass media.

In fact, a look at the subject matter in the films made in one recent year reveals that the Khomeini regime has not only effectively silenced any voice of protest in Iranian films, but has indeed gone beyond that into producing its own propaganda films. Seventeen out of a total of 26 films produced in 1984 are films either dealing with the corruption of the last regime or the glorious efforts of Khomeini's army against the present "enemies of Islam"--the Iraqi army.

Short Reviews of Selected Films

The Cow (1969)

Directed by Daryush Mehrjui.

Nothing can better demonstrate the hopeless extent of poverty in an Iranian village than the sudden loss of the village's only cow. This highly original film shows how the death of a pregnant cow disrupts the quiet flow of life in the village and affects the lives of everybody involved. The cow's owner is driven to such insanity that, in a psychological metamorphosis, he starts to take upon himself the identity of the lost cow.

The Cow heralded a New Wave in Iranian cinema in the late 1960s. In 1970, it was sneaked out to the Venice Film Festival where it won tremendous critical acclaim and finally put Iran on the international film map.

Ezatollah Entezami's moving portrayal of a man who fails to cope with the loss of his best possession won him the Best Actor Award in the Chicago Film Festival in 1972.

Religions in Iran (1973)

Directed by Manouchehr Tayyab.

This visually powerful documentary by Manouchehr Tayyab compares (and at times contrasts) the religious rituals of four of the state-sanctioned religions in Iran under the Shah--Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism.

What makes this film aesthetically distinct is a constantly moving camera that always seems to be reaching out for something. In effect, the camera itself turns into a pilgrim in a shrine. At the same time, Tayyab carefully uses distancing techniques to keep his audience from getting

emotionally involved. He effectively intercuts shots of empty, sacred places with the same places packed with people in order to maintain an objective sense of separation of figure from ground.

The Cycle (1976)

Written and directed by Daryush Mehrjui.

Mehrjui's fifth film builds up a powerful political metaphor around the underground business of taking blood from the poor and the sick for sale to the hospitals.

The film follows the gradual slide into corruption of an innocent young man who brings his sick father to the big city for treatment, and who ends up becoming a blood "dealer" in one of Tehran's illicit blood trafficking rings.

The Shah's government, which saw too many symbolic references to itself in the film, kept it from distribution for more than two years.

The Cycle was the first Iranian film to enjoy a limited commercial distribution in the U.S.A.

Dead End (1977)

Written and directed by Parviz Sayyad.

"The world must look like a prison from an Iranian girl's point of view," Parviz Sayyad, the director of *Dead End*, once noted. "Hers is a very private life." In *Dead End*, Sayyad attempts to create an example of that private world and explore the most intimate thoughts and feelings of one of its inhabitants.

Sayyad drew the basic idea of the film--a young woman being pursued by a would-be suitor--from a short story by Chekhov, and turned it into a bitter indictment of a political regime that brutally betrays its people. The film is an oblique treatment of the SAVAK, the Shah's notorious secret police, a political institution that was set up to satisfy the security needs of the people, but instead turned into a ministry of fear, anxiety, and harassment for them; hence the theme of the betrayal of the hopes that underlines the symbolic parallel between the SAVAK and the Iranian people on the one hand, and the girl and her suitor, on the other. The girl, therefore, becomes a metaphor for the country, and her house under surveillance symbolizes a society under surveillance. In this context, the dead-end alley which is the central setting of the film serves as an apt visual metaphor for the "prison-like" world of the typical Iranian girl. The alley leads nowhere and her life leads nowhere. Even love fails to provide an escape.

The film is most effective when we see the heroine alone or with her mother. The fusion of a quiet style and a controlled and cold interaction

between the unhappy single mother and her insecure daughter creates a depressingly sad ambience which is reflective of the social environment in which they live. The girl, in particular, seems to be caught in a typical clash of modernity and tradition in a Third World society. She is under two conflicting influences; she wears the *chadore* (a head-to-toe outer garment worn by traditional Moslem women) in her neighborhood and does not let her suitor in when her mother is not home, but at the same time she wears Western dress to discotheques and smokes in private.

Structurally, the film is like one long, slow disclosure, throughout which Sayyad manages to keep up the suspense created by the ambiguous relationship between the girl and her often reticent but curiously persistent follower. Sayyad also effectively employs bipolar structures with connotatively opposite meanings to create structural tension. The prime example is a hauntingly recurring image of the window on the cul-de-sac wall. The window promises freedom, while the cul-de-sac suggests an obstacle to freedom.

Mary Apick's sensitive portrayal of the incurably romantic protagonist won her the Best Actress Award in the 1977 Moscow Film Festival.

Dead End provides some fascinating glimpses of pre-revolutionary Tehran for those eyes that have only seen the city through more recent television coverage.

Bamboo Fence (1977)

Written and Directed by Arsalan Saasani

From the very beginning scenes of *Bamboo Fence*, a remarkable debut by Arsalan Saasani, a sense of loss leading to isolation is established; a little boy of about seven or eight years of age is flying a kite which suddenly gets caught in a tree. Moments later, when he is fishing, a dog comes up to him beggingly. He gives her the fish he has just caught--he loses again, but this time willingly. Then a long zoom back emphatically underlines the isolation of the boy in the vastness of an isolated island,

Bamboo Fence shies away from telling a story. The film rather tends to assert a moral: repression breeds repression. Saasani manages to enhance his "children's story" to the level of a psycho-social commentary. And he does it in a purely visual way. The film makes no use of dialogue. Facial expressions speak louder than any words. The relationship between the members of the nuclear family are uncharacteristically repressed. The little boy at the center of the film does a mesmerizing job of acting--he truly lives the part.

The Sealed Soil (1977)

Written and directed by Marva Nabili.

Marva Nabili's first feature film depicts the hopeless life of a young village woman under pressure to conform to the rigid social norms of a repressive communal life. At the age of eighteen, her marriage is considered long overdue in the eyes of other villagers. The pressure finally drives her to the point of breakdown.

Marva Nabili, one of only a few women film-makers in Iran prior to the 1979 revolution, employs a distinctly austere and disciplined style to realize the predicament of her doomed heroine. A non-judgemental camera/observer that rarely moves, minimal and sparse dialogue, the absence of close-ups, recurrent motifs, and a measured and unusually slow pace are the central elements of Nabili's style. In fact, she goes beyond formal stylization and subjects her characters to calculated forms of controlled behavior. The patterns of interaction we see between the villagers are hardly typical of an Iranian peasant society. The communication between the villagers is subdued, and they don't show much affection for one another. "Village life is actually extremely vocal and full of expression," Nabili said in an interview, explaining why she decided on this stylized approach. "I decided to suppress all those expressions, because I wanted to say that oppression always brings silence and immobility, and I was trying to show that through their silence. They were totally immobile, and for me that was what oppression had done to them. That was my political way of showing how an oppressive system can change peoples' lives."

Some may argue, however, that Nabili's highly stylized approach may alienate the very audience whose problems are dealt with in the film. By refusing to communicate with them in a more conventional cinematic language, the film becomes an inaccessible visual experience for an average audience. That is probably why the film was never shown in Iran. It was, however, a critical success abroad. It won the Best New Director Award at the 1977 San Remo (Italy) Film Festival, and was praised in other festivals in Berlin, Montreal, London and Los Angeles.

Tall Shadows of the Wind (1978)

Directed by Bahman Farmanara.

Bahman Farmanara's symbolic indictment of dictatorship is both daring and provocative. "I made the film as a reaction against the increasing presence of censorship and SAVAK," Farmanara indicated in an interview, and discussed his motives in making the film and the message he wanted to convey: "We make our own dictators, and we can tear them apart if we want to."

Farmanara builds up his indictment around a simple parable: The people of a remote Iranian village, while praying to their God to send them a

liberator, erect scarecrows for their protection. Ironically, however, the scarecrows soon start terrorizing them. The film seems to suggest that dictators are born out of an oppressed peoples' search for "liberators," and that the liberators often turn against the very people who created them. Although like most Iranian films *Tall Shadows of the Wind* is loaded with metaphors and symbols, it never fails to communicate enough cues to a perceptive audience about the meaning of the symbols and what they stand for. It is also extremely successful in its examination of the paralyzing effects of life in a politically repressed society, which is manifested in a permeating and overwhelming sense of fear. Farmanara incorporates this in his visual style--particularly in his creative use of color: in the beginning of the film, the colors are bright and vibrant, but as the villagers begin to grow fearful of the scarecrows, we see the gradual loss of colors to subdued pastel shadings and, except for a dream scene, the final scenes are dominated by black and white.

Since *Tall Shadows of the Wind* was made one year before the revolution, the central metaphor of the scarecrow was meant to represent the Shah's dictatorship. Yet viewing the film after the revolution reminds one of Khomeini's rise to power, and of Khomeini's dictatorial style more than the Shah's. Indeed, the religious censors read the scarecrow metaphor as directed against the clergy.

Footnotes

- ¹ For the older traditions in allegorized literature see Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1987) [Ed.].
- ² The constitutional revolution was a popular uprising that began in 1905 and sought a limit to the dictatorial rule of the Quajar kings. The revolution succeeded in 1907 and established an order in which the monarch would reign rather than rule. This constitution, however, was repeatedly violated by the Quajar kings and, particularly, by the two Shahs of the Pahlavi dynasty who followed them, until it was formally abolished and replaced by the Islamic Republic Constitution in 1979.

