

# 10 | Sustaining a wave for thirty years: the cinema of Dariush Mehrjui

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With 20 films in a 32-year career, Dariush Mehrjui is one of the most enduring artistic figures in the Iranian cultural scene today. He is also widely respected as the director most responsible for heralding a new wave of filmmaking in Iran, whose reverberations are still enriching the Iranian cinema after three decades. It was his masterpiece *Gav* (*The Cow*) (1969), along with Masu'd Kimiai's commercially more successful if aesthetically less luminous *Qaisar* (*Caesar*) (1968), that started an Iranian film renaissance and paved the way for filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami, Bahram Bayzai, Amir Naderi, Parviz Kimiavi, and Sohrab Shahid Saless to make their film debuts.

After the 1979 revolution, the new-wave auteurs, along with a promising second generation represented by the likes of Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, survived the rigours of the Islamic restrictions and aimed at winning international recognition. Joined by a highly talented third-generation in the 1990s (Majid Majidi, Jafar Panahi), the Iranian cinema seems to have successfully sustained its new-wave vitality and flourished into one of the most engrossing national cinemas of the decade.

Born in Tehran in 1940, Dariush Mehrjui grew up in a middle-class family and dreamed of becoming a composer. In his late teens, however, his interest shifted from music to movies and, subsequently, he left Iran to study film at UCLA. Disenchanted by what he perceived as the heavy influence of Hollywood cinema in the pedagogical orientation of UCLA's film programme, he switched his major to philosophy.

Mehrjui's return to Iran rekindled his interest in filmmaking. In 1967, he made an inauspicious film debut with *Almas 33* (*Diamond 33*), an inept James Bond-style actioner, which failed commercially and critically. Mehrjui has since dismissed the film. While partly blaming his own naivety as an aspiring filmmaker, he maintains that it was the only type of film that could be made under the box-office driven circumstances prevailing at the time.

Although still a box-office disappointment, Mehrjui's next film *Gav (The Cow)* (1968), a bleak tale of the death of the only cow in an impoverished village, proved to be the most significant turning point in the history of Iranian cinema. Mehrjui's uncompromising depiction of desolation and despair in a remote Iranian village, where the mysterious dying of a pregnant cow drives its owner insane and affects the collective life of the village, was so grim and poignant that it drew the attention of the censors. The film, however, was smuggled out to the Venice Film Festival where a tremendous reception forced the Shah's government to release it domestically, but not before adding a disclaimer to the film stating that it was set before the Shah's modernization campaign.

Mehrjui followed *The Cow* with *Aghaye Halu (Mr Simpleton)* (1971), a bitter comedy about provincial values, in which a kind but simple-minded government clerk falls for a cunning prostitute without realizing who she is, and pays a heavy price for his ignorance. Mehrjui's vision grew even darker with his next two films *Postchi (The Postman)* (1971) and *Daere-ye Mina (The Cycle)* (1975). The first, based on a story by the German writer George Buchner, followed the gradual breakdown of a lowly, impotent mailman exploited by his landlord and humiliated by



*Postchi (The Postman)* 1971

his unfaithful wife, and the latter, banned for three years because of a strong protest by the Physicians' Union, dealt with corruption in a large urban hospital. Based on a short story by Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi, who also wrote *The Cow*, *The Cycle* was a moving indictment of a political apparatus that destroys or corrupts everything in its path to enrich itself.

Looking back at Mehrjui's pre-revolutionary oeuvre, what seems to be the unifying theme of his films, with the exception of an idiotic debut, is a concern for the plight of the dispossessed. Whether they were about a peasant community (*The Cow*), or the downtrodden dwellers of a metropolis caught in cultural crossfires (*The Cycle*), or the savagely deceived and betrayed characters (*Mr Simpleton* and *The Postman*), the films all point out, albeit indirectly to circumvent the censorship codes, to a cruel social system that offers nothing but injustice to its most deprived citizens.

After the revolution, however, Mehrjui gradually lost his interest in what he now refers to as the 'cinema of the dispossessed.' This was a particularly curious change of direction on his part since the political climate had decidedly changed in favor of depicting the disadvantaged classes. The new policymakers and filmmakers had mostly risen from the lower echelons and gained a measure of power in the new revolutionary regime, which is why the majority of post-revolutionary films are populated, in a disproportionate manner, by dispossessed characters. Mehrjui's films, in the two decades following the 1979 revolution, have featured predominantly middle-class characters. In one of his rare depictions of the economically-deprived, *Banoo (The Lady)* (1992), he portrayed them as a supporting cast of largely opportunistic and dishonest characters. That approach, along with the film's sharp allegorical edge, may explain why it sat on the censors' shelves for seven years before it was released recently.

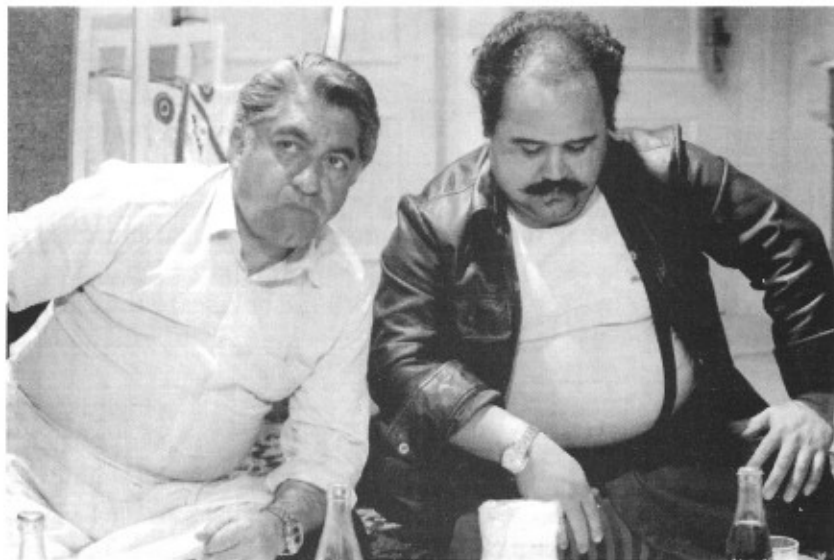
Mehrjui's first post-revolutionary film, *Madraseh-e Ke Miraftim (The School We Went To)*, about an autocratic school principal abusing his power, was a response to the growing wave of suppression in the country. The film's anti-totalitarian rhetoric did not escape the eyes of the new censors, who kept the film from screening for 10 years, and then released it with major alterations.

With the Iranian cinema bogged down in an ideological quagmire after the revolution, Mehrjui went to Paris to make *Voyage au Pays de Rimbaud (A Journey to the Land of Rimbaud)* (1984), a philosophical interpretation of the life and times of the renowned French poet, with particular emphasis on visual motifs capturing the essence of Rimbaud's poetic vision.

Upon returning to Iran, Mehrjui wrote and directed *Ejareneshinha (The Tenants)* (1987), a witty comedy laced with symbolic undercurrents, about the infightings among the tenants of a building whose owner has just died abroad. The film was a huge box-office hit at home, and re-established Mehrjui as a major presence in the post-revolutionary cinema.

After his sole attempt in making a film with a child character in *Shirak*, about a heroic teen-age boy guarding his family's fields against the wild boars, Mehrjui made the controversial *Hamoon* (1990), in which he effectively employed his developing style of using surrealistic touches to embellish otherwise realistic scenes depicting thought-provoking subjects. The titular protagonist, an increasingly perplexed middle-aged intellectual caught in the stifling web of marital and professional setbacks within the context of a society in rapid transition, provided one of the first opportunities for the equally distraught Iranian middle class to identify with a character in the post-revolutionary cinema.

Mehrjui's next film *Banoo (The Lady)* (1992), inspired by Luis Bunuel's *Viridiana*, followed a compassionate woman who, after suffering an emotional setback, allows the deprived in her neighbourhood to move into her mansion. But the subsequent pillaging of the mansion by the unappreciative guests did not portray a flattering picture of a social class the Islamic Republic considered its backbone of support, and the film was immediately banned.



*Ejareneshinha (The Tenants)* 1987

Mehrjui followed with a trilogy about three young women whose characters evolve from a state of innocent passivity to one marked by bitter awakening. *Sara* (1993), a localized adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, featured an intensely loyal and self-sacrificial woman unappreciated by her oblivious husband; in *Pari* (1995), loosely based on J D Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, Niki Karimi offers another brilliant performance as a woman torn between conflicting influences; and *Leila* (1997) introduced Leila Hatami in an impressive debut as an infertile woman deeply in love with her husband who accepts the degradation of having him take a second wife to save their marriage.

*Leila* is Mehrjui's most controversial and arguably most aesthetically polished film after the revolution. The protagonist's seeming inability to resist the social forces aimed at blighting her dignity and ruining her marriage was interpreted as undue weakness and provoked an outcry from Iranian feminists who accused Mehrjui of misrepresenting educated Iranian women. While working with a highly melodramatic material capable of stirring emotions, Mehrjui does his best to keep the audience from total emotional involvement with the film. To do so, he devises an assortment of distancing techniques from using a variety of colored fade-outs to dissolving in the middle of the shots, to having his characters face the camera and talk directly to the audience.

Mehrjui's next opus, *Derakht-e Golabi* (*The Pear Tree*) (1998), an



*Hatoon* 1990

old-fashioned art-house film that won the silver Hugo in Chicago Film Festival, was about a writer looking at his past, while suffering a writer's block. The film weaves together three inter-related narrative strings within its non-linear structure: the present-time ordeal of the writer whose creative inability runs parallel to a fruitless pear tree in his garden, the majestically-shot, golden-hued sequences tracing his childhood infatuation with a perky teenage girl, and the black and white flashbacks depicting scenes from a turbulent period in the recent Iranian history that affected the political maturation of the young writer. Mehrjui's unsympathetic treatment of the latter part, and his seeming allusions to the futility of the politics, drew criticism from political activists.

Earlier this Spring, Mehrjui finished the short *The Cousin is Missing*, as part of a six-episode film about the Kish Island in Iran, and started working on his new project *The Mix*, a comedy about the film business set against the backdrop of a film festival.

Mehrjui once said, 'The greatest privilege we have as human beings is the ability to say no.'<sup>1</sup> His oppressed characters, from the timid postman to the submissive Leila, all eventually exercise this privilege and respond to their oppressive social environment. When they finally rebel, they seem to be driven more by their betrayed emotions than their bruised egos. As a filmmaker, Mehrjui has rarely hesitated about using his own 'privilege' in refusing to bow to the political and ideological impositions. His numerous confrontations with the censors under two different regimes is a testimony to how steadfastly he has fought to maintain a sense of integrity as a filmmaker functioning under unrelenting pressures.

Mehrjui's career spans over three decades, each representing a distinguished creative period. In the first, his pre-revolutionary period, he became the embodiment of a fresh mold of filmmaking in Iran, and his four highly polemical films (*The Cow*, *Mr Simpleton*, *The Postman* and *The Cycle*) shocked a previously sleepy domestic cinema with a radical dose of political awakening. The second period saw him negotiate the treacherous confusion of a transitional era well reflected in films such as *The Tenants* and *Hamoon*. Mehrjui's third period is marked by an exceedingly timely quartet of films about women's conditions in Iran. With the possible exception of Bahram Bayzai, no other Iranian filmmaker, including women directors, has so masterfully portrayed a vivid tapestry of the intricacies of gender relations in a social environment forever oscillating between the forces of modernity and tradition.



*Lella* 1997

Ironically, Mehrjui's *The Pear Tree* appears to be a commentary on all three periods and the films they generated. Indeed, the frustrated writer might be serving as an alter ego who steps back to assess the peaks and valleys of a life consumed by the politics of uncertain times, and blighted by all that an unconsummated love signifies.

Note

1. From an interview with the writer in inaugural issue of *Iranian Film Quarterly*, Fall 1972