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Iranian Cinema: Image, Identity, and Global Recognition

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Introduction

Iranian cinema is often introduced to global audiences as a paradox: formally spare yet emotionally dense, grounded in quotidian realities yet alive with metaphor, rooted in local histories yet embraced by international festivals. This book approaches that paradox as an opportunity for filmmakers. By combining film criticism with production histories, it maps how aesthetic choices emerged from concrete conditions—industrial shifts, evolving censorship, resource limitations, and the pressures and possibilities of global exhibition. The goal is not only to explain why Iranian films look and feel the way they do, but also to show how these strategies can inform creative practice anywhere.

The narrative arc begins with pre-revolutionary studio productions, where popular melodramas and genre films coexisted with an emergent New Wave experimenting with form and social critique. The 1979 Revolution transformed institutions, tastes, and permissible subjects, producing both constraints and new infrastructures for training, children’s cinema, and state-supported projects. During the 1980s, a cinema of reconstruction and wartime reflection set the stage for a striking art-house ascent in the 1990s and beyond, as Iranian filmmakers garnered major awards and critical attention at Cannes, Berlin, Venice, and other festivals. These chapters trace that evolution, showing how a national cinema reinvented itself in response to profound social change.

A central thread of this book is the dialogue between constraint and invention. Censorship—legal, cultural, and self-imposed—did not merely limit expression; it reshaped filmic language. The prominence of nonprofessional actors, the patient cadence of long takes, the eloquence of off-screen space, and the frequent use of children’s perspectives are not only stylistic signatures; they are solutions to narrative, ethical, and political challenges. In examining these strategies, we explore how filmmakers convert boundaries into form—how implication can be more powerful than depiction, and how ellipsis can carry critique.

At the same time, Iranian cinema is irreducible to a single aesthetic. Alongside minimalist and allegorical currents, there are vital traditions of documentary, hybrid nonfiction, melodrama, and comedy; there are urban and rural cinemas, underground digital works made under duress, and transnational projects shaped across borders. Women directors, cinematographers, editors, and producers have expanded the contours of representation and authorship, even as they navigate particular obstacles. Diasporic and co-produced films complicate the idea of a “national” cinema, while revealing how identity and audience are continually remade through circulation.

Because this is a filmmaker's guide, practical concerns are foregrounded. Each historical chapter is paired with insights from production histories: how scripts are negotiated and revised; how permits, guilds, and budgets condition choices; how locations and sound are used to encode meaning; how editors and cinematographers collaborate to sustain ambiguity and rhythm; and how festival strategies—timing, world sales, co-production markets, and press materials—shape a film's path to recognition. Case studies unpack the creative decisions behind landmark works, tracing how problems on set became virtues on screen.

Readers will also find sustained attention to ethics and representation. Iranian cinema's global appeal has sometimes encouraged reductive readings; conversely, local debates can miss how films resonate abroad. We examine questions of gender, class, religion, and the public sphere not as checklists but as living contexts that influence casting, *mise-en-scène*, narrative scale, and the politics of spectatorship. The book argues for responsibility in storytelling—toward subjects, collaborators, and audiences—while celebrating the imaginative freedom that careful responsibility makes possible.

Finally, we look forward. New technologies, from lightweight digital cameras to streaming platforms and regionally specific social media, are altering production and distribution. Emerging filmmakers face fresh challenges—economic precarity, platform algorithms, transnational censorship regimes—but also new opportunities for collaboration and reach. In tracing the journey from pre-revolutionary studios to contemporary art-house success, this book invites you to read Iranian cinema as a toolbox: a set of techniques, ethics, and strategies forged in particular circumstances yet adaptable to your own. May these pages help you locate your questions, refine your methods, and find the audiences your stories deserve.

CHAPTER ONE: Early Screens to Studio System: 1900s-1968

The moving image arrived in Iran (then Persia) in 1900, a mere five years after its invention in the West. This wasn't a grassroots phenomenon, but rather a royal import. Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar, during his travels in Europe, was captivated by the cinématographe in Paris. He promptly instructed his official photographer, Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkas Bashi, to acquire a camera and document his European tour. This initial encounter with cinema firmly placed it within the purview of the centralized government, a dynamic that would shape Iranian filmmaking for decades to come.

Initially, cinema was an exclusive amusement for the royal court and the affluent. Akkas Bashi reportedly filmed royal and religious ceremonies, though these early reels are now lost to time. Public screenings, however, were not far behind. In 1904, Mirza Ebrahim Khan Sahafbashi, an antique dealer with a nationalistic bent, returned from Europe with an Edison Kinetoscope projector and a collection of films. He transformed the backyard of his antique shop into Tehran's first open-air cinema, opening its doors in 1905.

The early cinema-going experience in Iran was distinct from its Western counterparts. While in the West, cinema complemented existing forms of popular entertainment like theater, in Iran, it virtually supplanted them due to various socio-economic factors. However, social and political conditions, coupled with religious disapproval and strict censorship, hindered significant growth in the early 1900s. Women, for instance, were initially not permitted in movie theaters, though later some venues created special screenings for female-only audiences, and eventually, mixed audiences were allowed with segregated seating.

The cinematic camera, as a tool of modernization, was more widely introduced to Iran around 1929. This period also saw the emergence of figures dedicated to fostering a local film industry. Ovanes Ohanian, a Russian-Armenian immigrant, played a pivotal role. In 1925, he decided to establish the first film school in Iran, which he successfully launched in 1930 as "Parvareshgahe Artistiye Cinema" (The Cinema Artist Educational Centre).

Ohanian didn't just teach; he also made films. In 1930, he directed and produced *Abi and Rabi*, recognized as Iran's first feature-length silent film. This black and white comedy, based on a Danish series, depicted the antics of a tall and a short man and was well-received when screened at Cinema Mayak. Unfortunately, no copies of this pioneering work are known to exist today. Ohanian followed this with his second film,

Haji Agha, in 1933.

The arrival of sound transformed the cinematic landscape. Talkies reached Iran only a few years after their invention in the West, by the end of 1930. The first Persian talking film, *Dokhtar-e Lor* (The Lor Girl), directed by Abdolhossein Sepanta, premiered in October 1933 at Tehran's Mayak and Sepah cinemas. This film, released just a couple of months after Ohanian's *Haji Agha*, was an overwhelming success, effectively eclipsing silent films. *Dokhtar-e Lor* compared the state of security in Iran at the end of the Qajar dynasty with the Reza Shah period. Sepanta, who also worked in India, went on to direct other significant Iranian films there, including *Ferdowsi* (1935), *Shirin and Farhad* (1935), *Black Eyes* (1935), and *Laili and Majnun* (1937), drawing on Iranian history and classic love stories.

Despite these early efforts, the Iranian film industry faced significant hurdles. From 1937 to 1947, largely due to global economic conditions and World War II, not a single feature film was produced in Iran, though foreign films continued to flow into the country. The post-war era brought a resurgence, largely thanks to Esmail Kushan. Having received film training in Germany and experience dubbing foreign films into Farsi in Turkey, Kushan returned to Iran in 1947. He, along with colleagues, established Mitra Films, the first genuine film company in Tehran, marking the birth and survival of local feature film production.

Kushan, though perhaps driven more by commercial interests than artistic aspirations, was instrumental in laying the foundations of the studio system. Mitra Films' first production was *Tumultuous Life* (1948). He later established Pars Film, which operated as a major studio until 1979. The 1950s saw the nascent Iranian film industry grow, with 324 films produced between 1950 and 1965. Many studios emerged, some independent, contributing to a rapid expansion of the industry.

The films of this period, often termed "Filmfarsi" by Iranian critic Hooshang Kavooosi, were largely commercial ventures. They drew heavily on popular genres such as melodramas and thrillers, often incorporating singing and dancing sequences, a clear influence from Egyptian, Turkish, and especially Indian cinema. These films, while popular with audiences, frequently featured simplistic plots and characters, and generally had low production values.

By 1965, the infrastructure of Iranian cinema had expanded significantly, with 72 movie theaters in Tehran and 192 in other provinces. This growth in exhibition capacity further fueled the demand for local productions. The mid-1960s marked a turning point, with films that began to inject new life into the industry. Siamak Yasemi's *Ganj-e Qarun* (Croesus Treasure), released in 1965, was a significant box office success and is credited with initiating a new genre in Iranian cinema.

Following *Ganj-e Qarun*, Davoud Mollapour's *Shohare Aho Khanoom* (Madam Aho's

Husband), released in 1968, further revolutionized Iranian cinema. This film was notable for its portrayal of women's roles in Iranian society at the time and featured actresses Mehri Vadadian and Adile Eshragh as leading figures, marking a shift towards more complex female characters.

Censorship, however, remained a constant presence. From the earliest days, the government maintained a watchful eye, with regulations often preventing direct criticism of society or the government. This environment subtly shaped storytelling, forcing filmmakers to become adept at implication rather than explicit depiction. The themes permissible and the ways in which they could be explored were constantly negotiated, leading to a unique form of creative problem-solving. While often seen as a constraint, this necessity for subtlety would, in later years, contribute to the distinct aesthetic that would garner international attention for Iranian cinema.

The period leading up to 1968, while dominated by commercial studio productions, also saw the seeds of an alternative cinema being sown. Figures like Ebrahim Golestan, whose *Brick and Mirror* was released in 1965, were beginning to experiment with form and content that diverged from the mainstream. These early, more artistic endeavors, while not always financially successful, would pave the way for a transformative period in Iranian cinema. The establishment of the College of Dramatic Arts in 1963, which began producing graduates at the end of the decade, also contributed to a growing pool of trained cinematic talent, signaling a shift towards a more mature stage for the industry.

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