The Art of Fiqh: The Political and Historical Development of Iranian Cinema

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the effects that the Iranian Revolution of 1978 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran had on the Iranian film industry. This study is not only concerned with the changes in the production process of films made both before and after the revolution, but also examines the content and subjects of Iranian films, positing that after the revolution, a unique style of film emerged among Iranian art filmmakers. Through the study of the restrictions and guidelines put on filmmakers under the Shah's regime and under the Islamic Republic of Iran, this paper concludes that filmmakers worked around the state's guidelines to portray honest stories of Iranian life in the negative space on screen.

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When you attend a large film festival such as Cannes, Sundance, or the Toronto International Film Festival, you are given the opportunity to experience a wide array of films produced across a large number of countries. You are also more likely to see Iranian films, which are now known for their presence and esteem in the community of arthouse cinema. Iranian cinema has become known for developing a unique style of storytelling that operates in the unknown and the

vague, a style that is praised by many film critics.[1] But how and why did Iranian films develop such a unique style throughout the twentieth century? One answer is that Iranian cinema has responded to the strict guidelines set out by the ruling party of Iran, ironically benefitting from heavy censorship and flourishing despite religious laws and regulations put forth by the Islamic Republic of Iran after their establishment in 1979.

To understand the transformations in Iranian cinema throughout the twentieth century it is important to study the popular media that was created in the decades leading up to the revolution, its cultural impact, and how it portrayed opposition to the Shah's rule. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought rapid adoption of communication technologies originally developed in the West that had not previously been available to the government or the general population of Iran. These included the telegraph, well-established newspapers, the telephone, and, more importantly, television and the cinema. Adopting Western communications technologies signalled an effort, on the part of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941), to both modernize and industrialize Iran. He wished to form a centralized industrial state that would take inspiration from industrial development that was seen in the West at the time.[2] This effort to modernize not only affected the technological and industrial spheres, but also the vastly changing public sphere.

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[1] Godfrey Cheshire, "Iran's Cinematic Spring," *Dissent Magazine*, accessed November 4, 2017, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/irans-cinematic-spring; Jonathan Rosenbaum,"Radical Humanism and the Coexistence of Film and Poetry in THE HOUSE IS BLACK," Jonathan Rosenbaum, accessed November 4, 2017, https://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2001/04/tradical-humanism-and-the-coexistence-of-film-and-poetry-in-the-house-is-black/.

[2] Annabelle Sreberny and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 44-49.

Institutions such as the education system saw themselves becoming increasingly secularized as the country attempted to modernize itself. Whereas schools of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were modelled to teach upper-class students of all backgrounds the ideology of Twelver Shi'ism and help establish it as the state faith, schools of the early twentieth century began to adopt secular education models found outside of Iran, specifically those found in Britain and North America. The most drastic change to the school system occurred under Reza Shah's rule, when he adopted a policy to secularize the educational system entirely, shutting down all *maktabs* in favour of schools of a secular nature. Throughout all of this apparent secularization of Iran (which many, including the future leader of Iran, Ruhollah Khomeini, saw as Westernization), the clergy were almost completely removed from politics but were given their own state institutions so they could remain autonomous and allow the *ulama* to have a way to practice their discourses.[3] At the forefront of this process was the moving image, a medium that would become widely accessible to the citizens of Iran by the Iranian Revolution in 1979.[4]

Because of this attempt to modernize Iran, cinemas began to be built across the country. Even though they had originally faced criticism and opposition from the traditional religious community, younger generations of Iranians who were being educated under the increasingly secular and Western education system embraced and celebrated going to the movies. Films were originally restricted to comply with the strict religious laws placed on media and the general public that were present in the early decades of the Shah's rule. For instance, men had to portray women due to strict gender

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[3] Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film.* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 30-31.
[4] By 1979, seventy percent of homes in Iran contained a television set (*Sreberny and Mohammadi, Small Media, Big Revolution*, 66.) and 524 cinemas would be built and in operation (*Ḥamīd Riẕā Ṣadr, Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 169.

segregation laws, and the screening of silent films required a narrator in the audience to tell the story due to the low literacy rates of the population.[5] It was not long before Reza Shah began to loosen these restrictions, replacing existing laws with ones that would often counteract the original rulings. In 1932, Iran saw the banning of two acts that would have a huge influence on later cinema: first, the banning of *ta'ziyeh*, a form of religious and historical theatre; and second, the wearing of the veil. The banning of gender segregation followed in 1936,[6] which allowed (and encouraged) more foreign media to be consumed, and also paved the way for future domestic filmmakers to imitate Western films, inspiring many to create and develop their own style.

By the 1960s, Iranian filmmakers had truly begun to shape their own style of cinema, and while these films weren't being viewed globally, they were still being enjoyed throughout the numerous cinemas in Iran. These movies would often fall into two categories: those that were made to display the modernization and Westernization occurring under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941-1979), and those that were made to express a view of society not widely seen in the popular culture of Iran—that is, a view often opposing the Shah.[7] While both were often funded by the state, major criticism continued to come from the clergy and the government alike, who tended to demand that major changes be made to a film before its release, leaving some films with year-long gaps between the first screening and the second screening.

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[5] Ashghar Seyed-Gohrab and Kamran Talattof, "Politics and Persistence: The Development of Iranian Film," in *Conflict and Development in Iranian Film* ed. Ashghar Seyed-Gohrab and Kamran Talattof (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2013), 9.

[6] Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 41.

[7] Seyed-Gohrab and Talattof, "Politics and Persistence," in *Conflict and Development in Iranian Film*, 10.

Director Dariush Mehrjui directed two pre-revolution films, *Gav* (*The Cow,* 1969) and *Dayereh-ye Mina* (*The Cycle,* 1975-1978), both of which faced censorship *and* praise due to their bleak portrayals of the life of the poor and the rural in Iran. *Gav* depicts the life of a rural man who has been neglected by the industrialization of elite cities (which censors had requested be fixed by adding a title card to the film describing the events as taking place many decades before Reza Shah's rule).[8] The only thing that the rural man owns that has value to him is his cow, who he entrusts to his wife while he leaves his village for the elite city. The plot is driven by his cow dying while he is away, and the village's attempt to cover the death up before his return. Upon returning, the man discovers that his cow has "disappeared" driving him into insanity, and over time he slowly transforms into a cow, himself. Due to mass industrialization of major cities in Iran and the importance of the oil boom, his town does not have the means necessary to take care of him, so he must travel to the city to get treatment; but before he can reach the city, he dies of a broken mind.[9]

Dayereh-ye Minad also depicts the consequences of industrializing the nation, leaving the lower class behind. A young man must seek help for his dying father, both of whom are poor and live away from the large cities of Iran. When the young man discovers that he can earn money by selling blood to an underground dealer, he becomes entrenched in the black market, corrupting himself with money and women. This leads him to neglect his father, leaving him to die alone without his son even attending his own funeral.[10] Both films highlight the corruption that is found within modern society, and while not adhering to the strict guidelines that would be found in the cinema of the 1980s, they still depict the dangers of straying from a moral

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[8] Ṣadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 144.
[9] *Gav*, directed by Dariush Mehrjui, (1969; Tehran, Iran), Digital.
[10] *Dayereh-ye Mina*, directed by Dariush Mehrjui, (1978; Tehran, Iran), Digital.

life, and can easily be seen as works that promote a proper Islamic way of life.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that the reconstruction process of Iranian cinema began, bringing in the kinds of changes that make these films easily identifiable today. As with many forms of art, reconstructing the medium requires first destroying the old. Transformations in Iranian cinema paralleled the politics of the time. As the Iranian Revolution was starting to come out in full force, the cinema as an institution became one of the first casualties. Because the development of cinema was a direct consequence of the modernization and Westernization of Iran under Reza Shah, it was seen as an enemy of the revolution and as many as 180 cinemas were destroyed by 1980, culminating in the destruction of the Rex Cinema during a screening of Masud Kimiyai's *Gavaznha* (a film that ironically held a pro-revolution stance), in which the arsonists locked the exits of the theatre during the movie and torched the building, destroying both the structure and the people inside, resulting in over 300 deaths.[11] Before the fall of the Shah in 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), attributed the corruption of the people of Iran and the moral downfall of the country and its Islamic values to the cinema. To him, the Westernization of Iran along with the policies of secularization brought forth by Reza Shah, such as the banning of the veil, was another way that the West was encouraging the Iranian people to be immoral and neglect their religious obligations and the Muslim community as a whole.[12]

The ideology of the Iranian Revolution was heavily based on the separation of Iran from Western imperialism, and the need to reunite

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[11] Khatereh Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity and Film after the Revolution*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 5.
[12] Hamid Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update," in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* ed. by Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 28.

the *ulama* with the state in order to preserve Islamic thought and the Muslim community of Iran. To address both, we can turn to the speeches of Khomeini before the Revolution as he believed that the former was entirely responsible for the latter. He expresses concern and anger that the United States was essentially colonizing Iran, blaming the loss of religious governing on influence from the United States. In a speech given in 1964, Khomeini states: “They [The U.S.] have seen that the influence of the religious leaders prevents them from doing whatever they want, so now they wish to destroy that influence…If the religious leaders have influence, they will not permit some agent of America to carry out these scandalous deeds.”[13] To Khomeini, the role the West played in Reza Shah’s process of modernization was to blame for the corruption of Iranians. He (and therefore the Revolution) believed that in order to establish an Islamic state, an entirely new form of government must be established, not one based in monarchy or dictatorship, but one that is run by people from the *ulama* who are able to form laws from the writings in the *Qur’an* and the *Sunna.* He believed that rulers should not live in palaces, and that those who did were acting on errors made after the first two successors of the Prophet Muhammad.[14] Khomeini’s ideal Islamic government was, in many ways, opposed to what many of the *Shi’a ulama* believed. Although he relied on the practice of early Muslims, companions, and prophets, he did not believe that Muslims should wait for the Occulted Imam to reveal himself to find a solution for proper Islamic governance. To him, everything was secondary to the *Qur’an,* the Prophet Muhammad, and the Imams. The laws and structure of an Islamic government should be found there.[15]

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[13] Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* translated and ed. Hamid Algar (North Haledon, NJ: Mizan Press, 1981), 183-184.
[14] Ibid., 56-57.
[15] Najibullah Lafraie, *Revolutionary Ideology and Islamic Militancy: The Iranian Revolution and Interpretations of the* Quran (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 79-80.

Khomeini structured the IRI off these beliefs and his own interpretation of Twelver Shi'a Islam (*Imamiyyah)* ideology. Under the rule of the Shah, the *ulama* never truly held any formal role in government other than being granted the right to control religious departments that did not affect the public sphere other than the occasional banning of media. After the establishment of the IRI in 1979, the *ulama* gained authority in the political sphere. Khomeini introduced the doctrine of *velayat-e fiqh* (guardianship of the jurist) and appointed himself to the position of Leader for Life under the new constitution, as well as appointing much of the state positions (both those that dealt with interpretation of the law from the *Qur'an* and those that determined laws not described within the *Qur'an*) to esteemed members of the clergy.[16] The former political structure of Iran was not completely reorganized with the establishment of the IRI, but the formerly secular positions would be held solely by religious leaders and thinkers. The legal system did not see a large changes either, with only twenty-four laws changing within the first decade post-revolution, mostly to accommodate the increased power of the *ulama* and the importance of adhering to Islamic law.[17] Being well-versed and trained in the department you ran was less important now than your place in the *ulama,* an aspect that would greatly affect the process of creating films in the early 1980s.

How could film develop under Ayatollah Khomeini when both he and much of the clergy were fundamentally against the medium of cinema, with some even declaring it *haram*? It could exist because cinema itself wasn't *haram*; but it was considered *haram* by the mere fact that cinema was produced by a *foreign* influence that apparently promoted wickedness. In a speech delivered at *Bihisht-i Zahra* (a cemetery holding bodies of martyrs of the Revolution) after the end

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[16] Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 26-27.
[17] Knut S Vikør, *Between God and the Sultan: A History of Islamic Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 269,273.

of the Revolution, Khomeini clarified his position on cinema and modernization:

> Why was it necessary to make the cinema a centre of vice? We are not opposed to the cinema, to radio or to television; what we oppose is vice and the use of the media to keep our young people in a state of backwardness and dissipate their energies. We have never opposed these features of modernity in themselves, but when they were brought from Europe to the East, particularly to Iran, unfortunately they were used not in order to advance civilization, but in order to drag us into barbarism. The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but, as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth. It is this misuse of the cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our rulers.[18]

The immediate declaration on the misuse of the media under the Shah was integral to the formation of new Iranian cinema.

In the first months of the IRI's existence, Iranian citizens saw an immense amount of artistic and political freedom. Freedom of the press allowed for hundreds of publications to be distributed throughout Iran, including secular, Jewish, and feminist works. Media that was previously banned could now be publicly shown at cinemas and university campuses across the country, although these freedoms were not enjoyed for long. Khomeini's political and religious stance of *velayat-e fiqh* was enacted, and the power of the clergy was increased immensely. State departments such as the Ministry of Information had been renamed to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), a change that indicated that the department would not remain secular, but would rely instead on the clergy and their interpretation of *Shari'a*. By the end of 1979 all political parties other than the Islamic Republican Party were

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[18] Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, 258.

banned, and the state had taken a strong grip on which media could be published.[19]

Because the IRI was in its infancy, and had not developed a stable economy that would be required to fund domestic movies, foreign imports (mostly from the Soviet bloc), were shown. Films that appeared to hold an anti-imperial and pro-revolutionary stance would be granted a screening permit by the MCIG. These films would not reach the public before being passed through an editing room, leaving scenes (or whole titles) that were seen as un-Islamic on the cutting room floor.[20] The films displayed between 1978 and 1982 were left in a state of vagueness, a form of purgatory that can be summarized in the fact that there was no established state department for new media, and those who were in charge of the distribution of film (the Council for Determining the Political Direction of National Culture) had little to no knowledge of the medium, leading to confusion and difficulty in establishing which films were considered “Islamic” and which were considered “anti-Islamic.”[21] The stress on domestic filmmakers was made worse by the implementation of a permit system before a defined set of values was released, which could guide a filmmaker through the permit system to complete their film. For the MCIG, it was easier to edit a foreign or pre-revolution film (often colouring in film cells that depicted a woman’s legs with markers) to meet the foggy standards of the clergy who ran the department. By 1982, out of the 2208 films that went through the review process, only 252 were granted permits to be screened.[22]

In 1982, the act of filmmaking saw its largest and most influential intersection with Islamic Law and state control. Due to the lack of

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[19] Sreberny and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 167-168.
[20] Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture," in *The New Iranian Cinema*, 31-32.
[21] Ṣadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 169-170.
[22] Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture," *The New Iranian Cinema*, 33.

clarity and transparency surrounding the permit system, post-revolutionary directors (pre-revolutionary directors were widely banned from making films within the country) began working with, or participating themselves within the MCIG. Instead of revolting against the MCIG and their role in screening mangled messes of media in cinemas, filmmakers began working to formulate a set of regulations and codes they could follow to have their films approved by the state. By June of 1982, a codified set of regulations was released that would have to be followed to have a film approved for a permit. Examples of incidents that could result in a film being rejected included: encouraging polytheism; insulting the Prophet Muhammad; insulting any department of the IRI; encouraging racism; encouraging policies of government not found within the constitution of the IRI; and, showing violence that may upset the audience.[23] These regulations became one of the easiest ways to determine the IRI's interpretation of *Shari'a* and how it dictated the daily lives of Iranians.

Although these guidelines and restrictions hindered the artistic expression of the Iranian filmmakers, they encouraged these filmmakers to find alternate ways to tell stories, and develop a distinct style. The last thing that a filmmaker would want is for critics to see their work not as a personal piece of expression, but instead as a state-funded piece of propaganda; so the artist needed to discover ways to skirt the regulations and make statements through ambiguity. This would allow them to create films that were layered in a way that provided space for interpretation while still maintaining their artistic merit.[24] Iranian filmmakers needed to distance themselves and prove themselves better than the foreign imports that were brought into Iran (interestingly enough, *Little House on the*

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[23] Ibid., 36-37.
[24] Christopher Gow, *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places in-between: Reframing Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 55.

Prairie was one of the more popular television programmes at the time).[25] Luckily, the state provided financial help for filmmakers through tax reformation, decreasing taxes on domestic films from twenty percent to five percent, and by increasing taxes on foreign films. These tax breaks would help to publicly fund at least fifty films a year, from 1984 onwards.[26] These films were designed to fit certain genres, ranging from films that depicted the Iran-Iraq war, denouncing the Iraqi troops, to films that were designed to portray the ideal Islamic life in a society that was morally utopian. The result was the construction of film styles rarely found outside of Iran lives.[27]

Not everyone saw these restrictions as a way to develop a new genre of art. Fifty percent of the Iranian population were completely removed from films altogether. Because of the need to adhere to traditional and strict Islamic laws, it was easier to exclude women entirely from films than it was to struggle with the MCIG censors and risk the right to produce films. Women were required to wear loose fitting garments as to not show off any curves that may arouse the audience, and wear veils on screen no matter the situation. The amount and form of eye contact a woman had with others was regulated, making it incredibly difficult to portray a woman on screen in fear that her gaze may be interpreted as inappropriate by the MCIG.[28] Some directors, however, would take this as a challenge, returning to the notion that the important parts of a scene are not what is shown on screen, but what is left out of the screen or script. Examples of this could be found in *Madian* (Ali Jeckan, 1985) or in later films such as *Shayad Vagti Digar* (Bahram Bayzai, 1988), which both worked to construct complicated characters out of women on screen, using pauses in dialogue and vagueness in

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[25] Sreberny and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 176.
[26] Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture," *The New Iranian Cinema*, 39-42.
[27] Ibid., 44.
[28] Seyed-Gohrab and Talattof, *Conflict and Development in Iranian Film*, 42.

gestures to suggest to the audience the complexity and sexuality of female figures not found in Iranian film at the time. This was a far cry from the female heroines that were depicted in pre-Revolution films, but showed that strict regulations posed in a post-revolutionary Iran helped directors create a new form of art film, even under heavy censorship.

While films produced between 1983 and 1988 may be seen as shallow, without the concept of the vague social film being embraced by directors we would not develop the storytelling techniques found in the work of Abbas Kiarostami in his seminal production, *Where Is The Friend's Home?* Kiarostami's work was widely seen as capable of avoiding religious content, and portrayed ideal values without portraying them as inherently Islamic. His influence on Iranian cinema found itself in the development of a filming and writing style focusing on what is not shown and not spoken about on screen. He has stated, "my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have not written. And precisely this second part is the important one."[29] This is displayed in his first globally recognized film, *Khane-ye dust kojast?* (*Where is the Friend's House?* 1987). A young boy, Ahmad, searches for his friend, Mohammad, in order to return a notebook that he had accidentally taken from him. The film centres on Ahmad's dedication to his morals of Ahmad as he sacrifices his time and leisure to find his friend. The film is lonely, much like Ahmad's journey, with long repetition of scenes (which could be described like a poem), which, themselves, give the viewer a sense of loneliness and loss, without portraying much of anything else on screen. You never see Mohammad, but you sense a connection to him through Ahmad, whose perspective is the only one portrayed throughout the film. Kiarostami doesn't strive to show you action, but to have you experience emotion through the emptiness of the screen and

[29] Abbas Kiarostami, quoted in Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 183.

through identifying with the child, hoping that the viewer will stay captivated as Ahmad tries to fulfill his moral duty to return the notebook.[30]

As the example of Kiarostamih's *Where is the Friend's House?* shows, a unique style was formed in Iranian cinema, stemming from conflicting need to skirt regulations while still providing a piece of true artistic expression. Two elements stand out as central to this style. The first, which is easy to observe amongst Iranian films (including in *Where is the Friend's House?*), is the use of children to express the societal woes of the Iranian citizen. By using a child, the filmmaker represents a point of pure innocence and goodness, and can fashion a world around them that is unfair to the child, but not a world that is opaquely critical of the state itself. The child will act in accordance with what the state deems acceptable for a Muslim citizen, because the child is merely innocent, and being exposed to the inequality that is being put upon them by the environment in which they survive, which is a veiled commentary of the Iranian State.

The second element is the importance of silence, depicted both through sound and visually. Iranian directors learned over time that the best way to avoid having a film declined due to content was to display controversy within the silence and negative space of the film. Line breaks and characters' abrupt silences often convey a conversation in between the text, whether this is a contemplation of an ongoing personal or societal struggle, or an expression of an identity or sexuality. This silence and emptiness is integral to the effectiveness of the art, leaving both those on screen and those watching in a moment of contemplation about the world that surrounds them.

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[30] *Khane-ye dust kojast?*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami (1987; Tehran, Iran), Digital.

By examining the cinema of both pre and post-Revolution Iran it is apparent that the filmmaker was always concerned with creating a piece of work that operated both under state guidelines and was able to be artistically relevant, while finding ways to oppose the laws and regulations imposed by the state. In films made under the Shah's regime, directors of the 1960s and 1970s created morally safe films that had anti-Shah undertones, while still appealing to the state, showing proper Islamic values. After the Revolution, the focus shifted from criticizing the regime to being forced to work under strict conditions and create a new genre of art film that told stories in the negative spaces on screen. This developed a form of vague cinema that made its commentary through this emptiness. Thus, we can see that Iranian cinema has always been used to reply to the rules and guidelines that had been placed upon both the people and the filmmakers under the ruling government at the time of creation and flourished into a new genre under the strictest conditions of the IRI. The historical and cultural irony is that the need to contend with such varied political conditions gave Iranian cinema its own unique stylistic and aesthetic characteristics.

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